

Abstract

What happens if you question the presence of magic in one of Shakespeare's most magical plays? What happens if you doubt the power of one of Shakespeare's most powerful characters? These questions drive this exploratory paper which seeks to argue that Prospero, a once-powerful mage, no longer wields the magic he is credited with in *The Tempest*. Instead, it is his servant Ariel—for reasons to be investigated—who maintains the illusion of power on behalf of Prospero. This paper also develops an analogous relationship between an aging Queen Elizabeth and an aging Prospero. Each, as argued, may have a form of public relations camouflage in place toward the end of their respective lives, attempting to retain the aura of power and invincibility despite the decaying of such. Ultimately, the goal here is to suggest an alternative staging option for *The Tempest*, one that looks in the opposite direction than traditionalist approaches of the past and present.

Memoria Artium Magicarum in *The Tempest*¹

By Todd M Lidh

Discussing Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is rarely done without a mention of, if not direct focus on, his tremendous magical powers. Outstanding scholarship exists on the Act 3, Scene 3 banquet alone, and certainly a tremendous amount of time has been spent discussing the remarkable Act 5 moment when Prospero decides to "abjure" his "rough magic" and (with the opposite intent *of* and result *for* Dr. Faustus) offers to "drown [his] book." Ironically, the word *magic* appears only twice in the whole of the play (and only twelve times in all of Shakespeare's plays). Moreover, an attentive reader—not a theatre audience member, most likely—may notice that Prospero appears to effect no magic on his own.

What of those acts attributed to and claimed by him: the tempest, the banquet, Ceres' masque, and others? Each, I would argue, is performed by his servant, Ariel, who is onstage or immediately nearby for each magical moment in the play. Of course, given the history of post-colonialist scholarship and new historicist thought on *The Tempest*, my argument might appear to reinforce the notion that Prospero's subjugation of Ariel is not unlike his treatment of Caliban—that of an inferior, uncivilized and uneducated, properly dominated by a superior. Thus, Ariel's magic is "enslaved" by Prospero, denying Ariel freedom at every turn and request.

While a seemingly persuasive argument, I hope to counter it with a closer reading of those moments in the play where we the readers and audience members see the interplay between these two characters. I wish to investigate the possibility that Prospero has no magical powers in the play; it's not that he's never been a powerful wizard; it's just that by the time of the action in the play, he is no longer such. This lack of power *and* the reinforced memory of it I believe initially mirrors Elizabeth I's increased emphasis on herself as a younger *Gloriana* and victorious warrior queen toward the latter years of her reign; ultimately, this investigation will reveal why I believe that Ariel's remaining with Prospero is not a form of indentured

servitude, but an expression of loyalty and almost friendship—the patina of slavery removed from their relationship.

I quote Roy Strong here: “[S]ometime about 1594 a government decision was taken that the official image of the Queen in her final years was to be of a legendary beauty, ageless and unfading.”² “It must have been the exposure to the searching realism of [Marcus] Gheeraerts and [Isaac] Oliver [two well-known portrait painters who had depicted Elizabeth as an aging monarch, both *circa* 1592] that provoked the decision to suppress all likenesses of the Queen that depicted her as being in any way old and hence subject to mortality. The decision [was] taken at the governmental level.”³ Ostensibly during the final decade of Elizabeth’s reign, she was to be portrayed with her “mask of youth,” recalling her status as *Gloriana*, *Astraea*, the Virgin Queen, etc. Harkening back to younger days was by no means a new invention of this time period or of Elizabeth’s official portrait painter, Nicholas Hilliard; however, there does appear to have been a conscious effort to avoid the appearance of advancing age. “All the evidence points to the fact that she never sat again [for a portrait] and that . . . Hilliard . . . was called upon to evolve a formalized mask of the Queen that totally ignored reality and instead gave visual expression to the final cadences of her cult in which the poets celebrated her seemingly eternal youth and beauty.”⁴ All this happened as the 1588 victory over the Spanish Armada slowly faded and more pressing matters of state—various rebellions and the question of succession to name but two—gained prominence in the minds of many English.

I do not make the case here that Elizabeth’s popularity waned to the point of jeopardizing her rule; far from it. In fact, “[up]on her death in 1603 there was an immediate demand for her likeness” resulting in a “full-length engraving . . . destined to be the most influential portrait ever produced of her. . . [There was] an interest and a desire to immortalize the Queen as she had looked as a young woman coming to the throne.”⁵

I hope I have, over the last few paragraphs, sketched a portrait (pardon the pun) of the potential parallel I see between Elizabeth—and her public relations team and those willing artists and authors who perpetuated the *Gloriana* myth—and Prospero in *The Tempest*.⁶ Prospero’s initial discussions with both Miranda and Ariel in Act 1 center on remembering past history. Prospero asks if Miranda can “remember / A time before we came to this cell” (2.3–9) and proceeds to tell her the story of their life in Milan and their subsequent exile therefrom. Then, at the end of his story, Prospero performs his first act of magic (I will return to the tempest itself in a moment): he puts Miranda to sleep. Certainly, I could take the obvious route of explaining that magic away by noting his story of their journey to the island is well over 120 lines long and even devoted Miranda has trouble staying awake through the whole description; however, that paints a far-too cynical Miranda (and babbling Prospero), so instead, I’ll begin my questioning of Prospero’s magic at this point.

Here are Prospero’s lines at the moment Miranda falls asleep: “Thou art inclined to sleep; ’tis a good dullness, / And give it way. I know thou canst not choose” (186–7). There is nothing in those lines indicating Prospero’s direct involvement in her drowsiness; in fact, he seems to be *describing* her condition rather than

casting the spell that causes it. That these lines are followed immediately by Ariel's entrance caused me to wonder if Prospero's acts of magic are *ever* performed independently of Ariel. In the entirety of the play, I find none that are definitively so, and most are expressly done *by* Ariel at Prospero's direction. The first, and most obvious, is the great storm that shipwrecks Alonso, Ferdinand, Antonio, and the whole lot of Napoli and Milanese. Prospero assures Miranda that "I have with such provision in mine art / So safely ordered that there is no soul . . . / Which thou heard'st cry, which thou saw'st sink" (1.2.28–29, 32). Of course, the very wording of these lines makes my argument for me: "I have with such provision in mine art *so safely ordered*" (my emphasis). Prospero indicates that he himself did not raise the tempest, but his role was indirect. As we learn later in Act 1, Scene 2, the work of confounding the sailors and arranging for the various parties scattered across the island was done solely by Ariel. Prospero appears to wish Miranda convinced that *he* caused the storm (which he did only in terms of direction, not action), and this pattern of magical happenings on the island performed by Ariel but credited to Prospero begins here.

The examples of Ariel performing magic for Prospero continue with what seems like a damning moment with respect to my argument: when Ferdinand draws his sword against Prospero and is frozen in the process. Ferdinand, according to the stage direction, *Draws, and is charmed from moving*. The defense rests, your honor, and I should start thinking about dinner plans, yes? Again, let me highlight the wording of the text: "and *is charmed* from moving." Nowhere are we told Prospero does the charming; Ariel is onstage at that moment, and, not thirty lines later, Prospero says, "Thou hast done well, Ariel" (1.2.498). Surely, there is the *possibility* that Ariel does that charming just as Ariel raises the tempest, fabricates the banquet for Alonso and his crew, and invokes the Ceres masque for Ferdinand and Miranda—the list goes on and on.

Now, let me join my brief look at some of the magical moments in the play and my earlier discussion of Elizabeth and her mask of youth. The parallel seems almost striking. In *The Tempest*, Prospero is an aging ruler with a gloried past. His power was unrivaled, his ability to control the spirits unmatched. He brought the island out from under the control of Caliban and restored Ariel after imprisonment by Sycorax. Likewise, Elizabeth survived a contentious ascension to the English throne, cleverly deflected suitors and ambassadors, won glorious victories, and brought about a cultural age the like of which England had not seen previously. But, as both rulers aged, those glories faded in the light of present-day problems. Each then participates in a campaign of public relations camouflage—in Prospero's case, it is of magic's memory. I do not believe it is a coincidence that the word "remember" appears more times in this play than in any other of Shakespeare's works (including *Hamlet*, a play nearly 1600 lines longer than *The Tempest*). Prospero's first two conversations, one with Miranda and the other with Ariel, are both exercises in remembering the past. With Ariel in particular, the conversation hinges on Ariel's remembering Prospero's power in releasing the trapped spirit from the "cloven pine" (1.2.279). For the rest of the play, Ariel is ever obedient to Prospero's commands and

is repeatedly promised freedom as a result. Notably, Ariel is never actually given that freedom on stage; Prospero's closing lines to Ariel at the end of Act 5 are still conditional future, but they at least indicate that Ariel is the only practitioner of magic left on the island at the close of the play. Prospero gives a curiously-worded speech there, so let me highlight those few lines:

I'll deliver all,
 And promise you calm seas, auspicious gales,
 And sail so expeditious that shall catch
 Your royal fleet far off. My Ariel, chick,
 That is thy charge. Then to the elements
 Be free, and fare thou well (5.1.317–322).

Most editors indicate that Prospero's comments to Ariel are an aside—this would be consistent with most of his other interactions where Ariel has been invisible to everyone else. One interpretation of these lines is that Ariel's "charge," serving Prospero, is completed, and the spirit is free to go. However, in light of my approach, it is a final request on the part of Prospero — for Ariel to calm the seas and blow auspicious gales. In an aside, Prospero yet again makes his public image that of a powerful mage while privately acknowledging that Ariel is the true power (just as he does with respect to the tempest).

So, if there are no explicit moments in the play where we see Prospero as the magician and there *are* explicit moments when we see Ariel doing the magic *for* Prospero, is it not possible that Prospero never, in fact, does any magic *at all* in the play? I am in no way attempting to argue that Prospero was never a powerful wizard, but that power lies in the past, and in the present all the magic resides in Ariel.

Let me interject a note here: I am not of the party of Ariel. The purpose of this exploratory paper is not to raise Ariel's status at the expense of Prospero (exchanging one powerful magical creature for another) or to imply that Prospero is a shell of a man, a joke, or anything of that nature. As I hope to reveal, I believe the arrangement between these two characters (as I am describing it) could make for a more tender relationship rather than the harsh one often described and portrayed. Certainly there are moments of emotional pique—Ariel's "Do you love me master?" and Prospero's "Dearly, my delicate Ariel"—but many critics have seen the interaction between these two as that of slaveholder to slave.

What if you tip that description on its head? Take the situation as I have posited: Prospero, a formerly-powerful magician, has lost his magic and is dependent on his servant, Ariel, a truly powerful magical spirit, to perform those acts necessary to accomplish his goal of being restored to his "rightful" place as Duke of Milan. If Prospero is no longer able to control Ariel with his art, as he apparently once could, why does Ariel continue to serve? If Ariel is as anxious for freedom as strongly suggested in the play, why not simply leave? Prospero would be unable to stop Ariel, and surely Ariel knows that. What if, instead of *Prospero* being the one who takes care of all who live on the island, *he* is the one being taken care of?

Let me take the investigation one step further and, in so doing, unceremoniously drop my analogy to Elizabeth and her *Gloriana* efforts: what if Prospero is

unaware that his power exists no longer? His declarations of having guided the tempest, of ordering and controlling Ariel's actions, his "charming" of both Miranda and Ferdinand and later Alonso, Antonio, Gonzalo and all from the ship are, to him, actual demonstrations of his power. What if Ariel recognizes that Prospero's self-image is defined by his art and his ability to wield it? What if Ariel, a spirit who has no "feeling / Of their afflictions" (5.1.21–2), in fact fully understands that the final emotional blow to Prospero in a lifetime of such blows would be to discover that he has not only lost his dukedom, but also any means of restoration and taking Miranda away from her isolated existence on the island? What if Ariel works in the background, supplying the magic for Prospero unbeknownst to the aging magician without ever letting on? Does not this very possibility have a dramatic impact on how these two characters should be read? I consider myself far from the post-colonial/new historical critical view (Greenblatt, Barker, Hulme, and Orgel to name a few) where Prospero is demonized as an abusive, dominating figure who makes Caliban's life an ongoing punishment; who makes Miranda's life a cloistered one and then a proscribed one of marriage to Prospero's own choice of spouse; and who makes Ariel's life one of chaffing at the constraints against freedom and forever chomping at the bit of Prospero's seemingly never-ending demands. I cannot say these critics are altogether wrong, but I also can no longer believe that there is only one reasonable way to read the power dynamic between Prospero and Ariel. By looking at where the magic is located, just as the critics mentioned above have, I think there is a valid case that it is *Ariel* who maintains the ties between these two characters, and Ariel does so not out of fear or servitude but out of loyalty and almost friendship—not slave serving master.

In stark contrast to my argument stands Aime Cesaire's post-colonialist *Une Tempete*,⁷ his 1968 adaptation of Shakespeare's play, in which a troupe of black actors perform their own psychodrama *Tempest* with Prospero as a "white magic" master, Caliban as his reluctant, rebellious black slave, and Ariel as his sullen mulatto servant. Cesaire's lifelong political passion maps itself onto his Caliban character who attempts to dissipate the power of the white slave owner. And, the ending of the play is a sort of Armageddon-like *mano-a-mano* confrontation between Caliban and his former captor (who, by the way, has sent everyone else home but has chosen to remain on the island). Ariel, here a sort of man of science, unwillingly serves Prospero to enhance the latter's power but basically aligns himself with Caliban, even calling him "brother." Caliban, for his part, calls Ariel an Uncle Tom and accuses him of making the situation worse by not standing up to Prospero and disobeying his increasingly harsh demands. Ariel replies that Prospero is too strong to resist and that Caliban has some form of death-wish in fighting Prospero.

In my reading of Shakespeare, however, Ariel *chooses* to stay with Prospero, to do what he asks and to leave only when released. I also question whether this choice is a result of Ariel's ignorance or by deception or force on the part of Prospero as it is in Cesaire's version and the description of so many scholars; instead, I believe Ariel adopts Prospero's plan to leave the island once and for all and keeps the illusion of Prospero as a great magician alive so that the plan will work. Here, unlike Elizabeth,

who was a conscious actor in her self-promotional efforts, Prospero “works his magic” unaware of the actions of his “chick.” As the title of this paper states, it is magic’s memory at work in *The Tempest*. In this case, the phrase has a double meaning: recalling Prospero’s past glories to achieve a present-day agenda is the memory of magic; but, and perhaps more importantly, *Ariel* is magic’s memory personified: a being of magic with a memory and a will that hints of more humanity than most characters in the play.

If one takes my approach to *The Tempest* and plays Prospero as ignorant of his own loss of magic, how can that be staged to its fullest effect? Nothing fundamental about the actual staging need be changed; by that I mean you do not need to keep Ariel onstage longer than the text requires or replace directed actions (*Prospero waves his staff*, for example) because none exist. Rather, the greatest barrier is probably the *received tradition* of how these two characters are to interact: Prospero, the wise father/ruler; Ariel, the inhuman, resistant child/subject. Were I to attempt this on the stage or, easier in a movie, I envision Prospero in Act 5 going to give up his magic. He moves to a large wooden chest that contains his books and other objects of his art only to see, upon opening the chest, nothing but fragments of paper and dust where his books have disintegrated. In an instant, his mind flashes back to scenes in the play when he performed magic—only to realize that it was Ariel all along. (In the movie version, the flashbacks can actually occur!) For added effect (an interpolated moment), I would have Ariel at first in the shadows of the cell, partially visible to the audience but not to Prospero. Then, upon Prospero’s discovery of his “lost art,” he would then notice Ariel (who has moved downstage into full view) and, with that thunderclap of understanding, emotionally acknowledge Ariel’s unspoken loyalty/friendship/love (however you want to describe it) in allowing Prospero’s plan/wish to come to fruition.

Notes

1. This title may be loosely translated as “Magic’s Memory in *The Tempest*.”
2. Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Elizabeth I* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987).
3. Strong, 147.
4. Strong.
5. Strong, 163.
6. All quotations are from *The Norton Shakespeare—Based on the Oxford Edition*, Ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 1997).
7. Aime Cesaire, *Une Tempête*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Editions du Seuil, 1992)

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