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Music as a dramatic device: A Textual Reading of *The Tempest*

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Abstract:

The Tempest is one of the most brilliant achievements of Shakespeare's last plays. While composing this play, Shakespeare was inspired by the masques that were frequently staged during the Stuart and Tudor eras. In this play, music occupies a discernible position in engineering the action of the play. The story of this play revolves around Prospero, the Duke of Milan who was supplanted twelve years ago by the conspiracy of his brother Antonio and Alonso, the king of Naples and his attempt to restore his dukedom. He is the principal figure who rigorously controls the course of events with the help of his magic. His plan to restore his dukedom brings no violence; rather it calls forth a happy reconciliation at the end of the play. To achieve this aim, the dramatist has employed music as an integral thread that runs simultaneously with the action of the play.

Keywords: *The Tempest*, Music, dramatic device, Prospero, Ariel, masque.

The Tempest, being an exquisite creation of the Shakespearean oeuvre, belongs to the last phase of the esteemed playwright's career. William Shakespeare has employed his mastery to make it an outstanding achievement. The play belongs to the genre of neither tragedy nor comedy, but tragicomedy. According to Matthew Hansen,

The Tempest is far from a straightforward comedy or even a straightforward Shakespearean comedy. Coming as it does near the end of Shakespeare's career as a London playwright, the play reflects not only Shakespeare's growth and maturity as a writer but also reflects current trends in popular taste for drama and entertainment. These popular tastes include an interest in what was considered, in the early seventeenth century, a new form of drama: *tragicomedy*. (Hansen17)

Many scholars identify Shakespeare with the character of Prospero, the magus. He is the central character who exercises his authority throughout the play with the help of magic. In order to make this dramatic composition a thriving one, Shakespeare has drawn from pastoral romances that were frequently performed as lavish forms of entertainment on the stages after James I acceded to the throne of England in 1603. This art form constituted of opulent spectacle, rich landscape, expensive dresses, music, and dancing. Shakespeare also borrowed from the masques that were a familiar form of entertainment during that time. The present paper will try to locate how music has been employed as an intrinsic thread to make *The Tempest* a consummate one.

Music plays a very integral function throughout *The Tempest*. Shakespeare has used music as a dramatic device to develop the plot, to portray the characters and to forward the course of action. While discussing about Shakespeare's handling of music in his plays, John H. Long comments,

By the term "dramatic device" is meant the use of music as an aid not only to the intensification of the impact of the language, but also to the forwarding of the action, the portrayal of character, the delineation of settings, and the creation of an appropriate atmosphere, such as a mood of mystery or awe. Also included in the term "dramatic device" is the use of music in solving problems of stage production in instances where music covers the sound of stage machinery, denotes a lapse of time, or indicates off-stage action. (Long ix)

In this play Shakespeare has implemented the device of music to boost the action that has helped to its consistent development. However, incorporating music as dramatic device was not a conception of Shakespeare; it had already been a fashion during the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. John H. Long further says,

The dramatic functions of the songs in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays were many and diverse. Songs were used to portray character, to establish settings, to foreshadow and to forward action, and to solve various mechanical problems such as indicating a lapse of time, creating an illusion of action taking place offstage, or covering exits and entrances...(Long 8)

Shakespeare's purpose of introducing music in *The Tempest* is accomplished predominantly by Ariel. He is introduced to the reader/audience as "an airy spirit", in the appellation section of the play. The setting of the play is an enchanted island- "...To the audience (the island) it is the stuff

that dreams are made on, an imaginative world of words and music.”(Vaughan16) Here Prospero, the great magician exercises his own skill in magic. Ariel is his compliant subject whom he has done favour by freeing him from a “cloven pine”. Prospero’s dictation to Ariel to provide music according to his will in various situations as devised by his own is precisely executed by Ariel as he is grateful to Prospero. Caliban, on the contrary, is the defiant and “deformed slave” who boldly resists the authority of Prospero on the island. He is the creature whom scholars often associate with nature/earth as starkly opposed to the civility of Ariel. Prospero himself calls him, “Thou earth...” (Act1, Scene2, 1.314) He, being an offspring of Sycorax, the witch, cannot sing so charmingly as Ariel, but is astounded by the music of the island. He assures his companions Stephano and Trinculo:

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 sometimes voices,
That if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again...” (Act3, Scene2, 1.135-40)

Virginia Mason Vaughan opines, “Caliban’s perspective is shaped by physical responses to night and day, moon and stars, emptiness and fullness, silence and music...” (Vaughan16)

Ariel is endowed to sing four songs throughout the play. He makes his first entrance in Act1, Scene2 and sings according to the will of his master. Prospero wants the course of action to proceed which he will control in a rigorous manner. He wants his daughter married happily to a prince and to restore his dukedom. Ariel, counseled by Prospero, remains invisible and his song along with his fellow spirits (“Ariel and all his qualities”-1.193) helps to the meeting of Ferdinand and Miranda, William Hazlitt opines, “It has been observed that there is a peculiar charm in the songs introduced in Shakespeare, which, without conveying any distinct images, seem to recall all the feelings connected with them, like snatches of half-forgotten music heard indistinctly and at intervals. There is this effect produced by Ariel’s song, which (as we are told) seem to sound in the air, and as if the person playing them were invisible.” (Hazlitt 86) Ariel sings:

Come unto these yellow sands,
And then take hands;
Curtsied when you have, and kissed
The wild waves whist;
Foot it featly here and there,
And sweet sprites bear
The burden.

(Act 1, Scene2, 1.376-87)

The aim of Prospero is fulfilled here; Ferdinand is instantly caught in the maze of the song. He grieves the shipwreck and the demise of his father, but the sweet music brings an embalming impression on his bereaved mind. He thinks that it is appeasing both the violent sea and his aggrieved mind. He is now perplexed to discover the source of the music, and admits that he is moved by the “sweet air”:

Where should this music be? I'th'air, or th'earth?
It sounds no more, and sure it waits upon
Some god o'th'island. Sitting on a bank,
Weeping again the King my father's wreck,
This music crept by me upon waters,
Allaying both their fury and my passion
With its sweet air. Thence I have followed it
(or it hath drawn me, rather)...

(Act 1, Scene2, 1.388-95)

That the tempest is apparently a mere storm, intended not to harm anybody and that Prospero will be successful in his mission to restore his dukedom through reconciliation with his rivals are conveyed and anticipated respectively in the following song of Ariel. Ferdinand as well as the audience is informed that Alonso, Ferdinand's father who had supplanted Prospero is safe and sound after the wild tempest. Ariel tries to relieve Ferdinand that his father, Alonso is unhurt in the tempest:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made;
Those were pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell.

(Act1, Scene2, 397-403)

Here the upshot of Ariel's song is conspicuous; Ferdinand takes Miranda as a "...goddess/ On whom these airs attend! ..." (l. 423-24) He is moved by the music and both he and Miranda are attracted to each other at the very first meeting. Here Prospero is contended that everything is happening "As my soul prompts it" (l.421) as the encounter between Ferdinand and Miranda will contribute to the reconciliation between Prospero and his enemies. Now pleased, he assures Ariel that he will be freed within two days as he is executing his master's orders proficiently.

Ariel makes his next entrance in Act2, Scene1, "playing solemn music". Here he has to play a very crucial office to avert Antonio and Sebastian's conspiracy to murder Alonso. Thus

Shakespeare's intention to design a tragicomedy, in which there will be elements of probable tragedy but there will be "no harm done" (Act 1, Scene2, 1.14), is consummated. Ariel, "with music and song", alerts Gonzalo with his song-

While you here do snoring lie,
Open-eyed conspiracy
His time doth take.
If of life you keep a care,
Shake off slumber and beware.
Awake, awake!
(Act 2, Scene1, l. 301-)

Gonzalo, the "Honest lord" (Act3, Scene3, 1.34), now awakened, unknowingly compliments Ariel- "good angels preserve the King!" (Act 2, Scene1, l. 307)

In Act 3, Scene3, "solemn and strange music" is again exploited with a grand intention. Here Prospero allows "several strange shapes, bringing in a banquet, and dance about it with gentle actions of salutations, and inviting the King etc. to eat..." The impression of the musical and magical banquet on the viewers is obvious; Gonzalo is really charmed by the "Marvellous sweet music" (1.19), Alonso is also moved by its "harmony". (1.18) To Sebastian, it is "A living drollery" (1.22) Sheri Metzger, regarding this banquet scene, says,

This banquet scene illustrates the deep disparity between what is real and what is imagined. The disappearing banquet was never real, although it briefly appears so to the hungry captives. Ariel appears briefly as a harpy, a mythical creature with a vulture's wings and claws and the face of a woman, yet it is not Ariel's voice that speaks but deep voice that seems to come from the heavens. Neither the harpy nor the voice is real. None of this is real, and all of it is carefully staged, a theatrical spectacle designed to frighten and punish Prospero's enemies. Prospero is the puppet-master, carefully pulling the strings and manipulating the action. But he remains unseen and, like the deep voice and the banquet, even this scene is illusory. His victims cannot know that Prospero waits, unseen in the wings. All that is real is the madness that this confrontation has evoked in the three sinners. (Metzger 40)

Shakespeare inserts a masque full of music in Act4, Scene1 performed by Iris, Ceres and Juno. Bibhash Choudhury observes, "The masque is an interesting dramatic development in an age when theatrical production saw various experiments. It was a form that exigencies of the plot, and the way machinery was utilized here suggests how stylized the whole process was..." (Choudhury114) This spectacular masque, planned by Prospero functions to consolidate the action of the play- it is presented before Ferdinand and Miranda- the two young lovers for their

recreation and pleasure. He commands Ariel, his “industrious servant” (1.33) to “bring the rabble” (1.37), i.e., his “meaner fellows” (1.35) so that he can “Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple/ Some vanity of mine art” (1.40-41) or his illustrious magic.

The masque owes much to classical mythology. It is assisted by spectacle and music. Ariel’s minion who first enters the stage is Iris. She appears in the form of a rainbow. Her apparel is like a rainbow- she is the “many-coloured messenger”. (1.76). She is a messenger to the gods (particularly Juno) and sister to the harpies. In Greek and Roman mythology, the rainbow represents the serene ambience and calm after a storm. Virginia Mason Vaughan observes,

“Shakespeare might have been influenced by the Italian commentator on ancient myths Vincenzo Cartari’s *The fountain of Ancient Fiction* (translated 1599) where Iris is described to be responsible for “the changes and alterations of the aire, making it sometimes faire, sometimes tempestuous, rainie, and cloudie, and some other times sending down haile, snow, thunder, and lightning”. (Vaughan 71) Her “airy qualities and relation to the harpies associate her with Ariel, (while the wonder evoked by her rainbow colours is reminiscent of Miranda” (Vaughan 71) Iris calls Ceres, the “most bounteous lady” to attend Juno, “queen o’ th’ sky” (1.70)

Ceres is the goddess of harvest, whose “leas” is enriched with “wheat, rye, barley, vetches, oats and peas” (1.61) “She presided over the labours of ploughing, tilling, planting and harvesting, and was known as a maternal fertility goddess”. (Vaughan 71) Ceres is symbolic of fertility and regeneration.

“Great Juno” (1.102), the “Highest queen of state” (1.101) is the goddess of light and childbirth in Roman mythology. She is the sister and wife of Jove, and appears as the moon. Ceres is her “bounteous sister” (1.102) whom she elicits “To bless this twain that they may prosperous be/ And honoured in their issue.”(1.104-105) The young lovers are blessed by Juno and Ceres. The masque stops abruptly as Prospero suddenly remembers the conspiracy against him plotted by Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban. He acknowledges the spirits’ performance and “they heavily vanish”.

Music as a dramatic device has been exploited in this play from another aspect also. There are songs that are far from the kind of Ariel and his fellow spirits. They are sung by Stephano and Caliban in Act 2, Scene 2. Unlike Ariel, they are people of the earth, and sing after being drunk. Their songs are not as lofty and sweet as that of Ariel. They speak in prosaic language as per their lower position and hence cannot sing in a gratifying manner as Ariel. This shows that in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, as John H. Long comments,

“Songs in the plays were usually assigned to secondary characters, although songs were something sung” within” or from the music room by singers not included in the cast. Clowns sang, rustics sang, tradesmen sang, but characters of exalted stations seldom sang. The stage thus reflected the customs and attitudes of the time. The etiquette of the period forbade a gentleman to

perform musically to public; to do so would have been as unmannerly as to sell one's sonnets to a printer." (Long 3)

Caliban, along with Stephano and Trinculo plot to assassinate Prospero and inherit the island. Stephano sings while drinking. He is dreaming that the island "will prove a brave kingdom to me, where/ I shall have my music for nothing." (Act3, Scene2, l.144-45) Stephano is actually a butler and not a sailor and it is expected that he would act as a steward of a ship. In his song, as Richmond Noble points out, "...the tailor, who is no sort of a man in a sailor's eyes, is made to illustrate the contemptibility of Kate's preference." (Noble102) He also opines that "A modern dramatist would have put into Stephano's mouth a landsman's song of the sea, but Shakespeare, with his usual artistic truth, provides us with the genuine article- a song which a sailor might sing and his fellows would relish". (Noble102)

Caliban, on the other hand, promises his two companions- Stephano and Trinculo that he will serve them to his best- he will collect them "crabs" and "pignuts", show "a jay's nest", bring "clust'ring filberts" and "sometimes...Young scamels from the rock." As his grudge against Prospero grew out of the loss of his liberty at the hands of Prospero that resulted to his dispossession of the island, he is now eased that he has found a new master in Stephano and will be free from the slavery of Prospero. He dreams of an idyllic island where he will be free enough from his toil. He is swayed by the thought of freedom and "Sings drunkenly"-

No more dams I'll make for fish,
No fetch in firing at requiring,
Nor scrape trenchers, nor wash dish.
'Ban, 'ban. Ca-caliban,
Has a new master, get a new man.
Freedom, high-day; high-day freedom; freedom high-
day, freedom.
(Act2, Scene2, l.176-181)

Richmond Noble comments on Caliban's song-

"An interesting feature of the song is the 'Ban Ban Caliban', which, as we know, a characteristic of the triumphal chorus among aboriginal savages in its emphasis and repetition of parts, a study of music more searching than he has hitherto been credited with, it does at any rate illustrate the minute care he bestowed on his characters at crucial dramatic moments. It is highly improbable that Shakespeare had knowledge of the music of man in a primitive state, but it is evident he had observed the impromptu musical efforts of young untrained boys, who like savages make a chorus by emphasizing and repeating parts of a name, and with an

instinct unerring in its judgment he thought fit to invest Caliban's ebullition of defiance with the same peculiarity." (Noble 103)

From the above study we find that Shakespeare's competent handling of music in *The Tempest* has made the play a successful one. Ariel, the executor of Prospero's commands, the banquet scene, the masque, and, though different in nature, Caliban and Stephano contribute to the development of the plot through their songs. Combining all these into a single one to realize an aim proves the genius of the playwright himself. Richmond Noble eulogizes Shakespeare in the following lines, "*The Tempest* is a dream, though a wonderfully prophetic dream, on his part of the effect which music drama was to achieve. Even as it is, he came nearest in this play, that ever dramatic artist did, to making a musical play natural and free from absurdity." (Noble 99-100)

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