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REBECA GUALBERTO

UNMASKING ROMANCE IN *THE TEMPEST*: POLITICS, THEATRE AND T.S. ELIOT

Abstract

This study engages with recent postcolonial and new-historicist readings of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to reassess its exploitation and subversion of romance conventions, exploring an intertextual reading of Shakespeare's play and T.S. Eliot's modernist classic *The Waste Land*. The aim is to probe into the romance ideology enacted and arguably undermined in the play, going one step further from examining the interplay of the play with artistic, political and historiographical discourses and counter-discourses of the time. Taking as example and point of reference the prominence and reinterpretation of *The Tempest* in *The Waste Land*, this article aims to explore the arguably subversive dramatization of romance in the early-modern play as belonging in a continuum of meaning that has not only inspired but actually maintains an ongoing dialogue across literary tradition.

Key words

William Shakespeare; The Tempest; Romance; T.S. Eliot; The Waste Land; Myth-Criticism; New Historicism; Intertextuality

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to reassess the exploitation and subversion of romance conventions in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (ca. 1611), exploring an intertextual reading that, in a way, probes into "the influence of T.S. Eliot on Shakespeare" (Lodge 2011: 51). This study does not take at face value, of course, young Persse's thesis on David Lodge's acclaimed academic romance *Small World* (1984), but it does acknowledge, to an extent, the hypothesis that we cannot "hear the speeches of

Ferdinand in *The Tempest* without being reminded of “The Fire Sermon” (Lodge 2011: 52). Indeed, through an exploration of certain key aspects of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), this study will attempt to elucidate the dramatic and arguably undermining recreation of the mode of romance in Shakespeare’s play to expose the “little life” of Prospero’s world. Both unwilling and unable to disregard the enlightened postcolonial and political readings that so much have enriched in recent decades the exegesis of the text, this article will incorporate such readings to advance an intertextual and myth-critical revaluation of the label of ‘romance’ traditionally attributed to the play. This reconsideration of romance form and ideology, considering postcolonial and new-historicist perspectives, aims to untangle the interplay between Shakespeare’s drama and Eliot’s poetry to assess the ideological subversion of medieval romance dramatized in *The Tempest* and which inspires the dialogue that Eliot’s modernist classic famously established with Shakespeare’s play.

2. The label of romance

In the middle ages, English romances emerged at a time when its French counterparts – which worked as their model and source – had already diversified widely from its classic form, that is, Chrétien de Troyes’s twelfth-century chivalric romances of heroic deeds and adventures (Barron 1995: 57). Such diversification of the sources inevitably brought about a broadening of the genre, which came to include, besides the ‘classic’ romances of chivalry, the chronicles, saints’ lives, allegorical dream-visions, and lyric verses (57). This circumstance coincides with Saunders’s claim that romance is in fact “trans-historical” (2004: 1), since, across the centuries, romances have woven the widely different stories of Camelot, Troy, or the Celtic otherworld, and its recurrent motifs – the quest, the test, the knight, etc. – have come to be regarded as the “foundation stones of literature” (1). But as Saunders also notes, such pervasiveness of romance throughout literary history, along with the inherent diversity of topics described by Barron, make romance almost impossible to define as a genre (1–2), a reason why most critics have opted to follow Northrop Frye’s suggestion that romance should be regarded as the literary *mode* that “leads from a state of order through darkness, winter, and death, to rebirth, new order, and maturity” (3). In this view, romance is circumscribed by its theme – regeneration – rather than its form, a notion easily relatable to the plot of *The Tempest*.

Michael Hays has argued that one of the forces blurring the dividing line between medieval and early-modern literature in the English tradition is precisely the pervasiveness of the kind of emotionally and socially-focused romantic pattern that structures the plot of the “miraculous romances” (2008: par. 13) that Shakespeare wrote during James I’s reign. In the case of *The Tempest*, the identification of the text with the literary mode of romance seems unequivocal when regarded from Tillyard’s classic interpretation of its core meaning. As he argued, in *The Tempest*,

the main character is a King. At the beginning he is in prosperity. He then does an evil or misguided deed. Great suffering follows, but during this suffering or at its height the seeds of something new to issue from it are germinating, usually in secret. In the end this new element assimilates and transforms the old evil. The King overcomes his evil instincts, joins himself to the new order by an act of forgiveness or repentance; and the play issues into a fairer prosperity than had at first existed. (1962: 191)

Traditionally, this has been the most common interpretation of the play, which, along with the heroic portrayal of Ferdinand and the courtly love that binds him to Miranda, easily justify the classification of *The Tempest* as a romance. Alvin Kernan summarizes: “[Ferdinand] is first taught human helplessness by being frozen with his sword uplifted. Next he is put to the humiliating work of dragging in heavy logs in order that he may understand the hard manual labour necessary to keep the fires of the world burning, and the fact that the full enjoyment of anything requires that it be earned” (1975: 467–468). Only after he has completed his tasks and endured labours and tests can Ferdinand join Miranda in the chaste, courtly marriage that will bring about political restoration to Prospero’s unruly state. Subsequently, this reestablishment of political order, legitimate and qualified, must also result, mythically, in the natural and spiritual regeneration that constitutes “[the] embodiment of the romance ideal” (Hillman 1986: 148). In this view, *The Tempest* indeed presents a “complete romance pattern” (145), relating the noble marriage between Ferdinand and Miranda to natural and spiritual regeneration:

Then, as my gift, and thine own acquisition
 Worthily purchased, take my daughter. But
 If though dost break her virgin-knot before
 All sanctimonious ceremonies may
 With full and holy rite be ministered,
 No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
 To make this contract grow; but barren hate,
 Sour eyed disdain, and discord shall bestrew
 The union of your bed, with weeds so loathly
 That you shall hate it both. Therefore take heed,
 As Hymen’s lamps shall light you. (Shakespeare 2004: IV.i. 12–24)

In Prospero’s words, political restoration and natural regeneration (“No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall”) are inextricably equated. And yet, in Shakespeare’s play, the regenerative betrothal of the royal children is not executed through an actual fertility ritual, but celebrated with a masque, that is, with a *representation* of the ritual that replaces it.

3. Prospero's mythical method

In the masque that represents the fertility ritual, the union of Ferdinand and Miranda is not blessed by Venus or Cupid, but by Ceres and Juno, the goddesses of fertility and fecundity, who bless the betrothed with “earth’s increase,” “foison plenty,” never-empty barns and garner, growing vines, bowing plants and a winterless existence (IV.i. 110–115). In this manner, the chivalric plot of Ferdinand’s ordeal and his courtly love for Miranda concludes with the performance of a vegetation rite meant to ensure the restoration of the land’s fertility. The reestablishment of political order – after the chain of usurpations enacted and narrated throughout the play – is unambiguously equated with the subsequent regeneration of the natural world, and thus *The Tempest*, apparently a true romance, seems to support the hypothesis that the fundamental subject matter of romance is in fact “the victory of fertility over the waste land” (Frye 1971: 193). After the blessings of Juno and Ceres, it does not come as a surprise that Northrop Frye straightforwardly claimed that, in Shakespeare’s play, “the masque has about it the freshness of Noah’s new world, after the tempest had receded and the rainbow promised that seedtime and harvest should not cease” (Frye 1969: 63).

The marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda crystallizes the political reconciliation between Prospero and those who usurped his power, effectively bringing about the restoration of political order. In Tillyard’s words, “not only do Ferdinand and Miranda sustain Prospero in representing a new order of things that has evolved out of destruction; they also vouch for its continuation. At the end of the play Alonso and Prospero are old and worn men. A younger and happier generation is needed to secure the new state” (1962: 58). Significantly – especially, but not only, to understand the point that Shakespeare’s play will make in T.S. Eliot’s poetry – Ferdinand is completing the narrative pattern of the Waste Land myth by lawfully inheriting Prospero’s role: Ferdinand’s successful completion of Prospero’s tasks constitutes his successful completion of the chivalric quest, because as Frye notes, “the replacement of an aged and impotent king by a youthful successor is really a displacement of the theme of renewing the old king’s youth” (1976: 121) in a mythical context in which “the fertility of the land and the virility of the king who rules it have an ancient sexual magical connection” (121).¹ Hence the restoration of the Waste Land that Prospero governed as “an impotent intellectual on a desert island” (Girard 1991: 349) is apparently brought about by Ferdinand’s chivalric success. But, as will be argued, such an achievement is limited to the confinements of Prospero’s dramatic design, for it is Prospero himself who deliberately presents his own history “in terms of the typical movement from exclusion to deliverance” (Hillman 1986: 145).

Only within Prospero’s account of his own personal history he is a true mystical king, even if, like the mythical Maimed King, he is aging and usurped of his legitimate authority. As Coby realizes, in Prospero’s version of the story, he claims that after he was usurped of his power, “his city suffered an ‘ignoble stooping’ before Naples (annual tribute, homage, subjection of coronet to crown)

that it had not formerly known” (1983: 219). Yet Prospero had been a negligent duke of Milan, only to become “the consummate political man” (219) as soon as he arrives on the island, ironically becoming a quasi-divine monarch when he is governing over a desert island where the only native (and subject) that Prospero encounters, Caliban, somehow presented as less than human – “a thing most brutish” and “a thing of darkness” (Shakespeare 2004: I.ii. 356, V.i. 275) – remains rebellious and ungovernable. It may be then argued, as recent criticism has claimed, that in truth Prospero is powerless except for his capacity to fabricate a romance of restoration by means of which he is able to retell his own history. From this perspective, romance would operate in the play as the *icon* or *mythos* (White 1978: 88) that structures the events of a pseudo-historical narrative. But this *mythos* is indeed a fabrication made up to set in order a chaotic reality in which spiritual collective redemption is no longer possible. Following the principles of what T.S. Eliot would later coin as the “mythical method,” Prospero arranges his own story to fit the structure and overarching themes of romance as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance” to the chaos and anarchy of the political situation enacted in the play, effectively making his world “possible for art” (Eliot 1952: 426).

This usage of romance as *mythos*, that is, as artefact to give shape and meaning to the History of Prospero, is made evident in the masque that representationally ties in the royal marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda with vegetation rituals. Prospero himself characterizes this masque as a “vanity” (Shakespeare 2004: IV.i. 41), disclosing the performance as an *image* of ritual, a “baseless fabric” (IV.i. 152) that conceals “the absence of a profound reality” (Baudrillard 1994: 6).² In the epilogue the island remains as “bare” (Shakespeare 2004: Epilogue 8) as it was ever “most desolate” (III.iii. 80), and, as John Dover Wilson recognized in his classical interpretation of the play, “the words ‘bare island’ [...] can only mean the stage on which [Prospero] stands and from which he craves his dismissal by applause” (1936: 5), a notion that underlines the self-aware theatrically of Prospero’s words and actions. This becomes evident when the masque is interrupted:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. (Shakespeare, 2004: IV.i. 148–156).

As Zimbardo explains, “the masque which has been the jumping-off place for so many of the theories that would describe the play as a fertility celebration, is, we are told by Prospero, only [an] enactment” (1963: 55) and so, it follows, “the

theme of *The Tempest* is not regeneration through suffering, but the eternal conflict between order and chaos, the attempt of art to impose form upon the formless and chaotic, and the limitations of art in this endeavour” (50). In other words, the play enacts the mythology of a romance of regeneration – as *The Waste Land* will do three hundred years later – as an attempt “toward making the modern world possible for art, toward order and form” (Eliot 1952: 426). Prospero’s fabrication and dramatization of a romance of regeneration attempts to make life conform to the “magical and moral laws” (Kermode 1964: LIV) of mythology, but whatever form of order he achieves is as transient and fragile as the theatrically conjured up by nymphs and reapers that “heavily vanish” (IV.I.) as soon as Prospero loses concentration in his efforts as stage manager.

Barker and Hulme have famously argued that there are two dramatic levels in the text, that is, that Prospero’s play – a comedy of restoration (198) – is contained within the dramatic universe of *The Tempest* (Hulme 2004: 233) in a way that emphasizes the fictiveness of that ‘play-within-a-play’. From this perspective, Prospero designs, stages and attempts to control the characters’ actions and reactions as a priest conducting a rite, in this case meant to efface the actions that usurped him of his power. The effect is achieved by what Hulme points out as “a series of repetitions” (2004: 238). Caliban’s plot against Prospero repeats Antonio’s usurpation, but this time Prospero is in control of the actions carried out by the characters: as he has schemed it, he will discover and repress Caliban’s plot in time so that “repetition cancels out the original” (238). But he must reconfigure Caliban’s role first, because outside the limits of Prospero’s play, Caliban is not repeating Antonio’s usurpation, but being victimized by Prospero’s colonization:

This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak’st from me. When thou cam’st first
Thou strok’st me and madest much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee
And showed thee all the qualities o’ th’ isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile.
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax—toads, beetles, bats— light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king. (Shakespeare 2004: I.ii. 331–342)

As usurper, Prospero cannot restore his legitimate royal authority as he intends to do, unless he undoes first his own act of usurpation. Thus, to legitimize his authority over Caliban and the island, Prospero, in possession of the narrative authority which he has claimed as both colonizer and playwright/stage manager, fabricates a colonialist narrative of treachery to retell the history of his relation-

ship with Caliban. He counter-argues Caliban's accusations of usurpation by accusing him:

Thou most lying slave,
Whom stripes may move, not kindness. I have used thee
(Filth as though art) with humane care, and lodged thee
In mine own cell till thou didst seek to violate
The honor of my child. (I.ii. 344–348).³

The narrative of treachery that Prospero fabricates, as Hulme argues, has the effect of effacing the original relationship between Caliban and Prospero, as host and guest, by inscribing Caliban into the role of a rebellious slave (Hulme 2004: 246-247). Simultaneously, this re-characterization of Caliban makes it possible for him to act as usurper in his rebellion against Prospero, which identifies him with Antonio. As repetition cancels the original, the result should be the legitimation of Prospero's authority as the rightful, almighty king figure that he has designed himself to be. Greenblatt explains: "a crisis of authority – deposition from power, exile, impotence – gives way through the power of [Prospero's] art to a full restoration. From this perspective Prospero's magic is the romance equivalent of martial law" (1988: 156).

Prospero's art is the romance equivalent to martial law because, by means of the re-appropriation of the literary conventions of romance, Prospero's play adopts the from-Waste-Land-to-Eden pattern of romance mythology. From a situation of impotence and powerlessness, such as it may characterize the plight of the Maimed King in the medieval myth, the dramatic actions controlled by Prospero give way to a full restoration of order. Yet, such restoration defies legitimation, for order is restored temporarily and superficially. That explains, in Hulme's view (2004: 248), Prospero's anxious and deeply disturbed reaction to forgetting his own 'work', which results in the interruption of the masque and determines that Prospero's revels stop and fade when he is proven incapable of maintaining control over his own design:

Enter certain reapers, properly habited. They join with the nymphs in a graceful dance, towards the end of whereof PROSPERO starts suddenly and speaks, after which, to a strange, hollow, and confused noise, they heavily vanish.

Prospero
I had forgot that foul conspiracy
Of the beast Caliban and his confederates
Against my life. The minute of their plot
Is almost come. (Shakespeare 2004: IV. i. 139–142)

For Prospero, forgetting Caliban's plot against him entails the surrender of his "mythical method." He goes from playmaker to spectator. The world slips out his discursive control: he loses power as author and thus as legitimate king. As he

loses control over the play that he has fabricated, his powerlessness is revealed, and immediately he discloses the truth behind the masque. The climax of his play, which allegedly celebrated the rite of restoration contained in Prospero's romance, is unveiled as being "the baseless fabric of [a] vision" (IV.i. 151). As the fertility ritual it has been traditionally considered, the masque should have resulted in the renewal of all life. But instead, once the ritual is revealed as a vision made up of "baseless fabric," the life that the great globe "inherit[s]" (IV.i. 154) fades away and "leave[s] not a rack behind."

4. The king of the Waste Land

When Gonzalo, Prospero's former "old and honest councillor" (Shakespeare 2004: List of Characters 7), arrives on the island, he describes it as a paradisaical land of plenty that seems conjured up from a daydream, rather than a reflection of the island's true nature:

All things in common nature should produce
 Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,
 Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
 Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
 Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
 To feed my innocent people. (II.i. 155–160)

The description is, according to Wilders, "an objection" to Montaigne's essay "On the Cannibals", where the New World is unequivocally described as a literal Eden "with a most delightful countryside and a temperate climate, so that, for what I have been told by my sources, it is rare to find anyone ill there; I have been assured that they never saw a single man bent with age, toothless, blear-eyed or tottering" (Montaigne 1987: 84). As Wilder notes, the response to the essay in Gonzalo's words is contextualized by a set of ironies that in fact undercut Montaigne's idealistic contrast between innocent primitivism and corrupt civilization. However, such contrast remains functional in the play, as it is transformed into a representation of the dialectics "between a vision of prelapsarian happiness and the imperfect postlapsarian reality" (Wilders 2004: 129). In this view, the prelapsarian happiness is explicitly identified with life in the Garden of Eden prior to Adam's original sin of disobedience, where "all things in common nature should produce / Without sweat or endeavour" (Shakespeare 2004: II.i. 155–156). In a postlapsarian existence, however, the land has been laid waste.⁴ Like Eliot's contemporary Waste Land, the modern world of *The Tempest* is sometimes defined by "the natural sterility of the fallen world" (Frye 1971: 189) and sometimes, as in Gonzalo's description, a world in which the renewal of life is ironically contested. In *The Waste Land*, the restoration of the earth's fertility is rewritten as an act of cruelty. The iconic first line "April is the cruellest month"

(Eliot 2001: l. 1) expresses how the land will eternally regenerate, for indeed “all things in common nature should produce” (Shakespeare II.I. 155), but that eternal rebirth in the Waste Land is an act of cruelty, as it perpetuates a sick, lifeless, and deathful existence, as will be further on argued. In *The Tempest*, after the inevitable corruption entailed by civilization, there is no going back. Following Montaigne’s claim, in a civilized world, mankind cannot access nature directly, because civilization (or art) always mediates nature and “bastardizes [it] [...] by merely adapting [it] to our corrupt tastes” (1987: 83). If *The Waste Land* disconnects nature and mythology from human experience as it poeticizes post-war Europe, *The Tempest* does the same as it dramatizes post-feudal England. Marshall explains:

On Prospero’s island, we find a clearly defined ruler, his progeny, a potential royal marriage, a hierarchy of nobility, some more corrupt than others, an underclass, and even ‘revel, riot and rebellion.’ This is no mere fantasy; this is *cold reality dressed*, though very well, *in the language of the Romance genre*, but always firmly anchored to Jacobean reality. (1998: 288, my italics)

Orgel emphasizes the relevance of such Jacobean reality as he explains that James I claimed that his authority as king derived from both, God and his mother, perhaps because, as Orgel points out, “deriving one’s legitimacy from Mary Queen of Scots was ambiguous at best” (209). At a loss for an indisputable claim to the throne based solely on inheritance – as it is also the case of Prospero’s rule over the island – James I “continually asserted his divinely ordained position” (Marshall 1998: 394), which resulted in the king’s self-mythologization as being inherently divine himself.⁵ Significantly, these two normative modes of royal authority – inheritance and divinity – are split in the play, which diffuses monarchical legitimation. Caliban parallels James I’s dubious inheritance as he derives his legitimacy over the island from the authority of his (evil) mother, while Prospero is self-characterized as the lawful governor of the island because he claims to be mystically connected to it and thus capable of controlling its environment.

Indeed, Prospero’s abilities to apparently control the weather and the spirits of the island certainly give the impression that “Prospero reigns over the enchanted island as a providential deity [and that] his power and his prescience are very nearly absolute” (Coby 1983: 231). One may observe throughout the play a process of “deification of the monarch” (Marshall, 1998: 393), which characterizes Prospero as the magical king of the island, capable of controlling the rain, as he creates the tempest that sets the dramatic events in action and that eventually “leads to the restoration of order and fertility” (Williams 1978: par. 22). But this is merely an illusion.

In truth, Prospero has no real power over the natural world. He does not conjure up a tempest so much as he coerces Ariel – there is also no magic involved in Prospero’s dominion of the spirit – to create the illusion of a tempest (Egan 2006: 154) that poses no real threat to the other characters. After Prospero asks Ariel

whether he has “*performed* to point the tempest that [he] bade” (Shakespeare 2004: I.i, 194, my italics), Ariel describes to Prospero how he simulated a storm: “I boarded the King’s ship; now on the beak, / Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin, / I flamed amazement. Sometime I’d divide / And burn in many places; on the topmast, / The yards and bowsprit would I flame distinctly, / Then meet and join” (I.ii. 196-201). These circumstances, as the scene of the masque also demonstrates, allow for the argument that, in the end, the divine and God-like king who, like the king of the Waste Land, is believed to be mystically interconnected with the land that he governs, is simply an illusionist (Mowat 2004: 185).

For it is Caliban and not Prospero who is directly identified with the land. Prospero refers to his slave as “Thou earth” (Shakespeare 2004: I.ii. 314) and needs him for the land to bear fruit. At no stage can Prospero overpower nature and, in fact, his attempts to do so are often portrayed as destructive. In an ecocritical reading of *The Tempest*, Egan has suggested that that “Prospero’s main activity since his arrival on the island has been its deforestation” (2006: 155), and Fitz noted that “there is no evidence whatsoever to show that there is any kind of cultivation or domestication of animals on the island” (1975: 43). After twelve years on the island, and even though he has been traditionally considered as both embodying civilization and a divine almighty monarch, Prospero has clearly failed to take any profit from nature. The soil of the island is only “lush and lusty” (Shakespeare 2004: II.i. 52) as envisioned by Gonzalo’s idealized daydream of the island as a prelapsarian Eden, but his enraptured reveries – like the rebirth of Eliot’s April lilacs – are immediately thwarted by the reality described in Antonio’s and Sebastian’s cynical remarks:

Gonzalo
Here is everything advantageous to life.
Antonio
True, save means to live.
Sebastian
Of that there’s none, or little.
Gonzalo
How lush and lusty the grass looks! How green!
Antonio
The ground indeed is tawny.
Sebastian
With an eye of green in’t.
Antonio
He misses not much.
Sebastian
No; he doth but mistake the truth totally. (II.i. 49–56)

Explicitly, “the island is presented as a place of harsh physical reality rather than as a lush and beautiful place where all is well” (Fitz 1975: 47). But such a harsh

environment is starkly contrasted with the imagery of abundance – “Earth’s increase, and foison plenty, / Barns and garners never empty, / Vines, with clust’ring bunches growing, / Plants, with goodly burden bowing” (Shakespeare 2004: IV.I. 110-114) – that pervades the masque, which overly opposes “the sterility of the island and the fertility of the masque” (Fitz 1975: 47). The overabundant harvest imagery of the masque, which links crop fertility and marriage fecundity (43), is limited thus to theatrical performance; it has no effect upon life beyond the artificiality of Prospero’s revelries, and thus all that remains after the masque collapses is not a reborn land, but only “our *little* life” (Shakespeare 2004: IV.I. 157, my italics). The final image of the play is that of Prospero as “the mortal creature of the epilogue” (Mowat 2004: 187). Far from incarnating Providence itself, as critics such as Leech have traditionally claimed (1969: 100), Prospero lingers at the end of the play as a powerless and infirm usurper, lost in the absorbed contemplation of the vanity of his art and of the ‘littleness’ of life, in a dramatic paralysis that Greenblatt has defined as a “profession of infirmity” (1988: 145):

[...] We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on, and our little life
 Is rounded with a sleep. Sir, I am vexed.
 Bear with my weakness: my old brain is troubled.
 Be not disturbed with my infirmity.
 If you be pleased, retire into my cell
 And there repose. A turn or two I’ll walk
 To still my beating mind. (IV.I. 156–163)

5. A little life

The restoration of the old, sick king’s royal lineage in the union of Ferdinand and Miranda should entail, in mythical terms, the restoration of the physical and spiritual Waste Land that has arguably resulted from the convulsed political disputes and recurrent acts of usurpation enacted in the play. But as argued, Prospero’s art – in its reappropriation of romance myths – can only give shape and order to a chaotic reality within the limits of a fabricated enactment that is transient and that, more to the point, possesses no actual ritualistic force to permeate and transform reality. Prospero’s play, as Zimbaro notes, takes the characters away from the flux of life in order to control them, but the result of such an artistic endeavour can never be the restoration of life, for it happens outside of life (1963: 51). So Ariel sings:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
 Of his bones are coral made;
 Those are pearls that were his eyes;
 Nothing of him that doth fade,

Both doth suffer a sea-change
 Into something rich and strange.
 Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.
 Hark, now I hear them: ding dong bell. (Shakespeare 2004: I.ii. 395–402)

Zimbaro eloquently elaborates on the meaning of this song by arguing that Alonso's transformation through death into something beautiful and durable (a fake transformation, as this is one of Ariel's make-believes: Alonso has not died) "is not [a process] of regeneration into something more nobly human, and despite the interest of the Twentieth Century in Frazer's *Golden Bough*, there is nothing here that suggests fertility, rather the human and impermanent is transfixed into a rich permanence, but a lifeless one" (1963: 55). Zimbaro's comment about Frazer and the connection between early twentieth-century myth-ritualism and Shakespeare inevitably brings to mind the presence of Ariel's song here and there in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a text that cannot escape Frazerian interpretations.

Of the many Fisher-King figures traceable in Eliot's poem, one of the most relevant is the Phoenician sailor, whose death in the very short fourth canto, "Death by Water," inescapably recalls Madame Sosostris's warning to "fear death by water" (Eliot 2001: l. 55).⁶ Not in vain, the Phoenician sailor appears for the first time in the poem in one of the fortune-teller's cards, immediately followed by a direct quotation from Ariel's song: "Here, said she, / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor, / (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)" (ll. 46–48). As Eliot explains in one of his notes to the poem, Phlebas, the Phoenician sailor, "is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples" (23), an identification that initiates in the poem an elaborate system of multiple references that allows for a reconsideration of all the royal figures in *The Tempest* as Maimed-King figures.

As seen, Eliot specifies that the Phoenician Sailor reminds him of Ferdinand, but both the quotation from Ariel's song and Phlebas's drowning identify him as counterpart of Alonso, King of Naples. This double identification characterizes both royals as doubled Fisher-King figures in "The Fire Sermon," when the poetic voice, identifiable with the Fisher King that reappears at the very end of the poem,⁷ describes: "On a winter evening round behind the gashouse / Musing upon the king my brother's wreck / And on the king my father's death before him" (2001: ll. 190–192). The previous simultaneous reference to Ferdinand and Alonso is here further on complicated by the simultaneous identification of the poetic voice with Ferdinand, speaking of "the king my father's death;" and Antonio, musing about "the king my brother's wreck." Given that Ferdinand has no brothers, the identification of the poetic voice with Antonio, whose brother Prospero he believes to have died in a shipwreck, is made evident in the deformation of Shakespeare's "Weeping again the King my *father's* wrack" into "musing upon the king my brother's wreck" (Eliot 2001: l. 192n).

The multiplicity of references makes all royal figures from *The Tempest* indistinguishable once they reappear as characters in *The Waste Land* to embody the mythical Fisher King. This circumstance demonstrates the reshaping of the mode

of romance in the poem in a way that advances a reading of Shakespeare's play that denies all possibilities of regeneration, a notion reaffirmed by the leitmotif function of "those are pearls that were his eyes" in the modernist text. Conventionally, Ariel's words have been considered to characterize Alonso's death as enacting "a cycle of death and resurrection" (Booth 2015: 154), as a moment that opens "a portal into the realm of the rich and strange – a death which becomes a sort of birth" (Brooks 2001: 194). But the truth is that in Ariel's song, which presents "a corpse underwater that is not decomposing but being imaginatively fashioned into a piece of underwater sculpture" (Booth 2015: 125), Prospero's enchantments are once again proved to have no regenerative influence over the forces of life: they only crystallize life into pearls, a form of durable but lifeless beauty, a transformation from death into a state of perpetual lifelessness that explains very well the recurrence of the leitmotiv in T.S. Eliot's modernist *Waste Land*, and which, like the masque, presents Prospero – and, in the case of *The Waste Land* also Antonio, Alonso and Ferdinand – as clearly disconnected from the force and sources of life.

As previously mentioned, the failure of the fertility rite represented by the masque leaves behind only a "little life" that, by virtue of modernist intertextuality, anticipates the "little life" at the beginning of *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.
 Winter kept *us* warm, covering
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
 A *little life* with dried tubers. (Eliot, 2001: ll. 1–7, my italics)

These first lines of the poem are defined by Frank as "the 'root' consciousness vignette" (1990: 43). They open the first canto of the poem, "The Burial of the Dead," which concludes with a passage that reveals that this consciousness initially attributed to the roots that revive in the spring is, in fact, the consciousness of the self-aware, talking dead bodies that were buried in the ground after the Great War. This *Waste Land* is one in which corpses have thus become seed and the living, the survivors, plucked from the land and incapable of putting down roots, plant corpses in the ground. At the end of this first part of the poem, the poetic voice famously asks a fellow soldier whether the corpse he planted last year had "begun to sprout" and if it was finally ready to "bloom" (Eliot, 2001: l. 72). This call back to the first lines of the poem, to the dead bodies breeding lilacs as the spring rain feeds them a "little life," closes a depiction of life in the *Waste Land* in which life and death cannot be told apart. The poetic voice recognizes fellow soldier Stetson among the ghostly crowd that flows over the "unreal city" (l. 60), demonstrating that the war survivors are no more alive than the buried corpses: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (l. 62), the poetic voices

realizes looking at the London crowd. The survivors have become ghosts while the war victims cruelly remain conscious, breeding new life that is born already swollen with death, condemned to wander the Waste Land, “neither living nor death” (ll. 39–40), breathing only a “little life” (l. 7) in a putrid environment where rats rattle scattered bones while Ferdinand, Alonso and Antonio fish in the dull canal behind the gashouse (Eliot 2001: ll. 189–195).

This impossibility to separate the buried corpses from the diseased living and from the ghosts of the war survivors led modernist critic Michael Levenson to argue that the corpses’ “little life” is what allows them to rise from their graves and wander the earth in a permanent state of transit between life and death (1984: 172). But the meaning of this “little life” is paradoxical. One may think that people are either living or dead and therefore cannot be “a little” alive, and yet, this leitmotiv in Eliot’s poem that conveys the impossibility of a complete regeneration is also functional in *The Tempest*, especially when considering the weight that Shakespeare’s play carries in the network of literary references that make up Eliot’s text and which have been so far commented. *The Tempest* is the most prominent Renaissance play featuring in *The Waste Land* and it is its reinterpretation in Eliot’s poem that facilitates a new reading of the uses of romance in Shakespeare’s play. As explored so far, the effective textual presence of *The Tempest* in *The Waste Land* is tightly bound to the character of the Phoenician sailor, a polysemic figure embodying Adonis, the sacrificial god of vegetation; Mr. Eugenides, a figure of barren sexuality in the poem,⁸ and the characters of Ferdinand and Alonso, who at some point explicitly embody the mythical Fisher King. In this way the poem wrecks the order and stability mythologized in dominant discourses of royal authority by re-enacting and multiplying the diffusion of monarchical legitimation that, originally in Shakespeare’s play, had vanished along with Prospero’s revels.

This may explain why the characters of Prospero’s comedy of restoration are so prominent in taking the form of those half-living ghosts that swarm the streets in Eliot’s poem. In *The Tempest*, the characters are not corpses or ghosts. But the “little life” that remains at the end of Shakespeare’s play is not much different from the “little life” of Eliot’s Waste Land. It is the little life of the *image* of a life rite that cannot bring about regeneration, because by artistically recreating life it is in effect replacing life, and thus suppressing it. It is the little life contained in the romance mythology of regeneration once that mythology is revealed as a political artefact to write History. A “little life” is no life at all. It is the lifeless beauty of the pearls that were Antonio’s eyes, in *The Tempest* and in *The Waste Land*. It is the subversion of the dominant romance ideology of order and political restoration, and the denial of the possibility of complete regeneration through art and myth, both in Shakespeare’s play and in Eliot’s poem.

6. Conclusion

In Shakespeare's last play, as Prospero's descends from seemingly divine monarch to despairing pretender, the revelation of the vanity of his fancies exposes a crucial mythical and ideological change. Medieval myth is represented in the romance staged by Prospero: the courtly love of Ferdinand and Miranda, and the subsequent tale of political reconciliation and of spiritual and natural restoration brought about by their union in a divinely-sanctioned marriage. But medieval, feudal ideology is contested from within the play. By exposing the "baseless fabric" and the "little life" of Prospero's masque, *The Tempest* manages to actually deploy a counter-discourse that challenges the dominant discourse of the ideologically-charged mythology of romance and that, as this article has argued, remains functional in twentieth-century literature. In the play, royal authority becomes extricated from any mythical allegations of providentialism, transcendence and preternatural order. In the Epilogue, the island remains bare; "the masque's majestic vision of plenitude" (Greenblatt 1988: 144) is followed by a "sublime vision of emptiness" (145), and the regenerative movement of romance is disclosed as a temporary artefact. The "ideal structure of moral and magical law" (Kermode 1964: LV) of romance ideology is dramatically confronted with an antithetical reality, an "isle full of noises" (Shakespeare 2004: III.ii. 133) that, like a "heap of broken images" (Eliot 2001: 22), resists the ordering efforts of art and myth. And so, while representing romance, the play effectively disrupts the social, political and ideological function of the genre as a legitimizing historical discourse, which up until the early-modern period had unquestionably conveyed the naturalness and universality of the social and power structures that had organized the communal life of the ruling classes from the Middle Ages and which, at the age of Shakespeare, were beginning to visibly crack.

Notes

- ¹ In Arthurian mythology, the Fisher King is the wounded king of the Waste Land. He appears for the first time in the earliest extant version of the Grail myth, the *Conte del Graal* of Chrétien de Troyes, an unfinished courtly romance composed probably between 1175 and 1190 (Loomis, 1992: 28). The Fisher King has been wounded between the thighs, has thus been rendered sterile, and his sterility has spread to the land. In order for the land to be restored, the Grail Knight must relieve the king by either finding the Grail or the *meaning* of the Grail. In later versions of the tale, the pursued healing of the king is displaced into a narrative of dynastic succession.
- ² If this postmodern interpretation of the masque seems too jarring, perhaps it bears recalling Tillyard's now classic commentary that "when we examine the masque, we find that, through its function may be simple, the means by which it is presented are complicated in a manner we associate rather with Pirandello than with the Elizabethan drama. On the actual stage the masque is executed by players pretending to be spirits, pretending to be real actors, pretending to be supposed goddesses and rustics" (1962: 80).
- ³ Caliban responds to this accusation with an admission: "Would't had been done! / Thou didst

prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans” (Shakespeare, 2004: I.ii. 348–350). The threat conveys a sense of generative sexuality that seems to stress the contrast between the youthful reproductive capacity of Caliban and the aged impotence of Prospero, which is paralleled by Prospero’s dependency on Caliban to obtain sustenance from a land that, even though it appears to be controlled by Prospero’s seemingly supernatural powers, will not yield him any fruit.

⁴ As Vaughan and Vaughan note, this dialectic is cognate with Montaigne’s acerbic irony in asserting that Brazilian cannibals were in fact more virtuous than their French contemporaries (1993: 47). The paradox is Shakespeare’s recalling of Montaigne’s natural world lies precisely in its identification of the island not with the natural world of cannibals, but with contemporary western civilization.

⁵ Marshall explains: “In his 1605 speech to parliament James claimed such an elevation ‘since Kings are in the word of God it selfe called Gods, as being his Lieutenants and Vice-gerents on earth, and so adorned and furnished with some sparkles of the Diuinitie’. In his speech to parliament in 1609 he again emphasized that ‘Kings are not only God’s lieutenants vpon earth and sit vpon God’s throne, but euen by God himselfe they are called Gods’” (1998: 394).

⁶ As Brooks notes, Madame Sosostri’s card-reading represents Tarot paradoxically (2001: 209): it is presented as devoid of any trace of mysticism, as most of the cards are made up. And yet, the fortune-telling – including the clairvoyant’s warning of death by water – is revealed as true when the reader realizes that her seemingly ludicrous cards do in fact correspond to the characters and episodes in the poem.

⁷ “I sat upon the shore / Fishing, with the arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (Eliot 2001: ll 423–425).

⁸ The Phoenician sailor may be identified with the old Phoenician god Adonis, as effigies of this god were thrown to the seas during the celebration of fertility rites in Ancient Greece (Weston 1993: 47). This raises expectations of regeneration that are immediately thwarted when in a note Eliot indicates that “the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor” (2001: 23). As Weston explained in her myth-ritualistic classic *From Ritual to Romance*, one of the key sources of *The Waste Land*, Syrian merchants introduced in Europe the esoteric mysteries she establishes as the source of the Grail legend (1993: 169). However, in the poem, the fruitful introduction of such mysteries is replaced by an unwanted homosexual sexual offer when the eastern merchant “asked me in demotic French / To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel / followed by a weekend at the Metropole” (Eliot 2001: ll. 212–214).

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