

Three Epilogues in *The Tempest*: A Study of the Play's Metadramatic Structure

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Abstract:

Shakespeare's last play The Tempest has received critical attention because of the complexity of its structure and the recurrence of Shakespearean themes in it. This paper identifies three epilogues in the play and argues that these passages can be interpreted as epilogues to the theatres that preceded the dramatic romance, namely the tragic and the comic theatres. The play identifies Act IV. Scene i 148-158 and Act V. Scene i 34-57 as epilogues in addition to the epilogue spoken by Prospero at the end of the play. The first passage is spoken as an epilogue to the existing theatrical trends and ushers in a new theatrical order. The second passage, the paper seeks to prove, is an epilogue to the Shakespearean oeuvre, especially the tragedies and the comedies. The epilogue proper is a direct appeal to the audience, breaking out of the theatrical framework seeking their approbation and continued support. The Tempest can, thus, be seen as the culmination of Shakespeare's aesthetic quest.

Keywords: metadrama, epilogue, Shakespearean aesthetics, plays in miniature, new theatrical order

One of the watermarks of Shakespeare's art is that he passes from the real world to the world of drama, which in its sweep, carries the real world along with it, extending it in accordance with the requirements of his art. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare moves from the theatres of tragedy and comedy that he has already created to the world of romance, retaining those elements of these theatres which can be fitted into the new world of the play. The opening scene of *The Tempest* reminds us of the world of tragedy in which the tragic heroes drift, as it were, in a wind-swept sea and meet with their doom. Commenting upon the opening scene, Dover Wilson says, "It is as if Shakespeare had packed his old tragic vision of life into one brief scene before bestowing his new vision upon us" (quoted by E.M.W. Tillyard 49). The tragic heroes do not pay heed to the one who steers the ship of their lives, just as characters in the opening scene of *The Tempest* pay no attention to the warnings sounded by the Boatswain and so are shipwrecked; and like the tragic heroes they, too, drift and find themselves in a situation, that has potentials for tragedy, though unlike the tragic heroes they do not succumb to death. While the

characters in *The Tempest* do not die and will reappear in their physical forms, the characters in the tragedies reappear as immortal beings though, in the process of their becoming immortal, they have to shed their mortal coils. Thus what we see in the tragedies is resurrection through death whereas in the romances we are made to see the same resurrection (or a kind of meta-resurrection) in the form of reformation through repentance and reconciliation. The dramatic romances are, therefore, extended metaphors of Shakespeare's tragedies, and to show them as such he has to use tragedy as a springboard at the outset. The final theatre of the world of romance emerges as a metatheatre out of the tragic theatre. This tragic theatre, in turn, suggests a theatre already in existence – the theatre of comedy.

Miranda's statement "If by your Art, my dearest father, you have/ Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them" (I.1.1-2) is significant. The seeming tragedy of human life is, according to Shakespeare, nothing but a divine play. Shakespeare, the artist, plays the role of the Supreme Creator in his artistic world of enormous range and extent. As Prospero, the magician, elevates himself to a non-mundane or semi-divine level, so Shakespeare the artist, too, raises himself to a level where he is endowed with the capacity to conduct himself with Providential care. He is the Supreme God of his creative world, whose ways are inscrutable. Middleton Murry says. "... Prospero, is, to some extent, an imaginative paradigm of Shakespeare himself in his function as a poet; ... he does in part embody Shakespeare's self awareness at the conclusion of his poetic career" (ed. D.J. Palmer 94).

The "wild waters in this roar" portrayed by the artist is only an awesome appearance invested with the power to rouse fear and pity in the sensitive spectator, here, embodied in Miranda, who closely identifies herself with the situation as well as with the character caught up in that situation. The fear and pity roused in the actor as well as in the spectator are meant to lead both to the supreme perception of the moment at which tragic suffering attains the balance of intensity because all violent emotions are spent and the preceding calamity has acted as a mighty leveler culminating in a calm of mind. Miranda, who plays the role of the spectator, is unaware of the balance achieved by the tragic artist and also of the ensuing serenity. Miranda is not the spectator herself, but a character in the play, playing the role of the spectator. This metadramatic device is used by Shakespeare to provide his spectators/readers with the necessary clues to interpret his tragedies.

Prospero, on the other hand, plays the role of the artist indulging in the act of reflection and interpretation. Yet he, too, is essentially a character – the protagonist, to be precise – playing, for the time being, the role of the interpreter who tells the spectator that neither the brave, noble heroes of his tragedies – who have to put up a brave fight against the mighty circumstances in the wind-swept sea of life – nor even the characters who are shipwrecked in *The Tempest*, are lost forever. Instead, they are

anchored in serenity, the shipwreck being merely a symbol of laying to rest all the disturbing emotions.

Shakespeare has the capacity to see life as a divine play. "This seeing of earnest life as a playing" says V.Y.Kantak "is a source of the comic but it is also a serious mode of apprehending reality possible only to the poised... The Renaissance man, it has been said, was engaged in modifying the ceremonial conception of life to create a historical conception, and the historical view expresses life as drama. This imaging of life as a drama played out on the stage of the world has serious implications for an understanding of Shakespeare's tragedy as well as his comedy, and is something which I always felt is still to be explored and fully grasped. When we do recognize its importance in our appreciation of Shakespeare's total meaning, we also begin to realize how his comedy and tragedy are really a unity. We cannot rightly see this relationship unless we approach his comedy from a larger view point than has been commonly attempted so far" (ed. Kenneth Muir 22 13).

In *The Tempest*, apart from philosophical considerations, Shakespeare is deeply involved with aesthetic considerations as well. It is not just an apprehension of reality that Shakespeare is interested in but also the re-cognition of the play-making process. Prospero is projected by Shakespeare as a dramatist, Stage-director and an actor, who gives a suggestively comprehensive account of Shakespeare's own poetics. Prospero's statement "I'll drown my book" (IV.5.57) carries with it strong overtones of the book being the magical book of Shakespeare's poetics. One can hope to retrieve Shakespeare's book of magic by reconstructing his own ideas about poetics from reading his plays through. Northrop Frye comes very close to the point when he says, "In many tales of the *Tempest* type, the island sinks back into the sea when the magician leaves. But we, going out of the theatre, perhaps we have it in our pockets like an apple: perhaps our children can sow the seeds in the sea and bring forth again the island that the world has been searching for since the dawn of history..." (186). One is almost tempted to add that the reader can sow the seeds of poetics doled out by Shakespeare and bring back the book that Prospero drowned at the end of Shakespeare's career.

Germaine Greer in her book *Shakespeare* (1986) has devoted a chapter to a discussion of Shakespeare's poetics. She argues that among all the plays of Shakespeare *The Tempest* is a systematic exposition of his dramaturgy. She says, "The *Tempest* deals with good and bad art, useful and noxious, and takes an original position in conscious opposition to the schoolmen" (28). Shakespeare often associated his own dramaturgy with the making of dreams. A creative artist, according to Shakespeare, was a grand dreamer or an illusionist, who created a wonderful world out of his imagination (33). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, says Germaine Greer, are plays, which consistently deal with Shakespeare's

view of dramatic art. Of these, *The Tempest*, which is considered his last play can be seen as the culmination of his aesthetic quest.

Prospero is, indeed, Shakespeare who wants to explain the principles that he followed while composing his plays which are quite unlike the plays composed by his contemporaries. As any language cannot survive without its grammatical treatise in which the basic principles of structure are clearly explained so also a new species of plays, like those of Shakespeare, cannot be understood and appreciated by posterity unless he provides the audience as well as the reading world with useful hints about the poetics he put into practice in composing and presenting his plays. It is thus that Miranda is portrayed as the surrogate of the audience who is acquainted with suggestive hints regarding the typical characteristics of Shakespeare's tragedies and tragic heroes. And Prospero's mention of the time-frame within which he wants to execute his intended plan (or present the plot of his drama) is Shakespeare's indirect explanation of the three unities – a favourite concept cherished by critics during Shakespeare's time.

The Tempest, as has already been noted, suggestively contains all of Shakespeare's plays. *The Tempest* may, then, be described as all in one. Wilson Knight says *The Tempest* "repeats ...in miniature, the separate themes of the whole of Shakespeare's greater plays...it distills the poetic essence of Shakespearean Universe" (quoted in Frank Kermode lxxxiv). Therefore we should expect Shakespeare to write more epilogues than one and he seems to do so in *The Tempest*. A careful study, in fact reveals the presence of three epilogues in *The Tempest*: Act IV. Scene i 148-158; Act V. Scene i 34-57, and the epilogue spoken by Prospero at the end of the play.

The first passage:

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-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep (IV. 1. 148-158).

sounds like an epilogue to the complete works of Shakespeare in which his main intention was to provide entertainment to his audience throughout his career, which has now come to an end. Hence "Our revels now are ended". All the characters

("actors") that the master craftsman showed on the stage are the ones belonging to the past, but characters which were reinvigorated by his imagination in the plays he wrote and presented on the stage. These characters and all their belongings after their active career in the world of Shakespeare's theatre "are melted into air, into thin air". The glamour of Shakespeare's theatre was, perhaps, on the verge of disappearance as the younger playwrights started an entirely new species of plays, thereby necessitating the introduction of an altogether new theatre. Hence the dissolution of "the globe itself" which had represented Shakespeare's own idea of theatre. Gareth Lloyd Evans makes a pertinent point when he says, "*Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* may, to some extent, be regarded as a new beginning. In these plays Shakespeare seemed to be responding not merely to fecund movements in his own imagination but to changes in theatre fashion" (1). Like Prospero Shakespeare is too tired to carry on the experiment and he implies that the present play, *The Tempest*, is the last play. Lloyd Evans' comment substantiates this: "The sentimentality and theorizing which has attended critical discussion of the plays written in the last ten years of his life often presupposes that Shakespeare was aware that for generations yet unborn, they would fall into a category called 'The Last Plays' " (7).

As Shakespeare is sure that his theatre will be replaced with an entirely different type of theatre to cater for changing tastes, he announces the disappearance of the Globe Theatre. Shakespeare was almost prophetic in putting the statement into Prospero's mouth, "...the great globe itself, / Yea all which it inherit shall dissolve". Anthony Burgess says that in the "summer of 1613, the prophesy of Prospero came true. 'The great Globe itself' dissolved. The timber burned speedily, and a noble edifice became a charred nothing. 'See the world's ruins,' said Ben. Nobody was injured, though one man's breeches were set on fire and quickly doused with 'pottle ale'. But the material loss to the King's Men must have been heartbreaking. Besides the fair structure itself there were all the costumes and properties, all those play scripts. Who knows what plays of Shakespeare himself, unpublished in quarto, failed to enter the 1623 Folio because they perished with the Globe?" (228).

Prospero's immediate reference in the phrase, "These our actors", is to the characters in the Masque that he has presented and all the characters shown in the masque are non-worldly beings. But because of the phrase's connection with "the great globe itself", Shakespeare can be said to refer to the characters of all his thirty-seven plays. These characters also are non-worldly characters because as Prospero says in Act V Scene i. "...graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers, oped and let'em forth / By my so potent art"(48-50). Shakespeare dealt with themes and characters that belong to the remote past. Therefore all the characters that he

portrayed in his plays are like spirits, a term used in Elizabethan English to refer to actors.

Shakespeare also gives a representative list of stage properties in such expressions as “cloud-capp’d towers”, “gorgeous palaces” and “solemn temples”. The “great globe” may be said to refer to (i) the globe theatre, (ii) the dramatic world created by Shakespeare, and (iii) the real world, which becomes the master metaphor in his plays. Therefore Shakespeare is predicting not only the insubstantiality of the theatrical world but also, like a great philosopher, the dissolution of the whole world in the course of time. The concluding remark reinforces this idea “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life / is rounded with a sleep”. The reader may arrive at the conclusion that that he accepts the rather forced retirement of his (Shakespeare was only forty-seven years old in 1611– the date of composition of *The Tempest*) with the resignation that characterizes the end of every great tragedy.

In Act V. Scene. i Shakespeare writes another epilogue in which he suggestively evokes his achievements in both the comedies and the tragedies he wrote in the peak of his career:

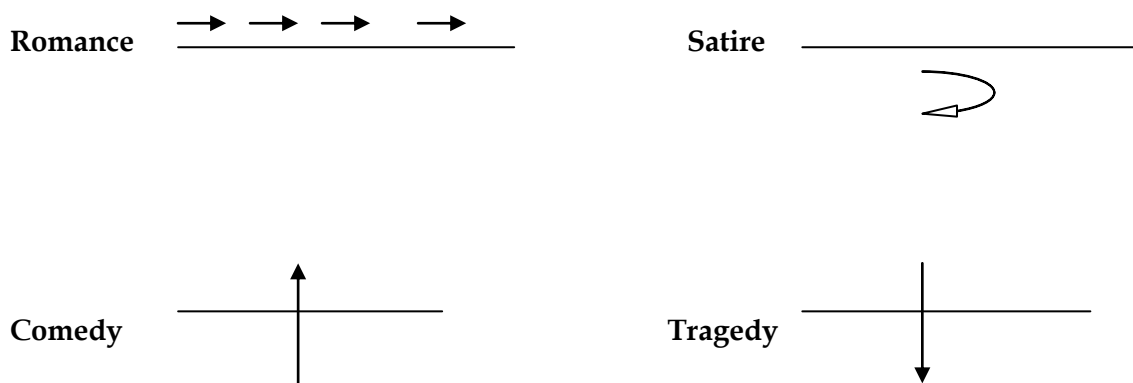
“Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves,
 And ye that on the sands with printless foot
 Do chase the ebbing Neptune and do fly him
 When he comes back; you demi-puppets that
 By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,
 Whereof the ewe not bites, and you whose pastime
 Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice
 To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid,
 Weak masters though ye be, I have bedimm’d
 The noontide sun, call’d forth the mutinous winds,
 And ‘twixt the green sea and the azured vault
 Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder
 Have I given fire and rifted Jove’s stout oak
 With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory
 Have I made shake and by the spurs pluck’d up
 The pine and the cedar: graves at my command
 Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let ‘em forth
 By my so potent art. But this rough magic
 I here abjure, and, when I have required
 Some heavenly music, even now I do,
 To work mine end upon their senses that
 This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,

Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
 And deeper than did ever plummet sound
 I'll drown my book" (V. 1. 34-57).

Lines 34-40 take the reader back to the world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("ye elves of hills"), *As You Like It* ("brooks, standing lakes and groves") *The Merchant of Venice* and so on. The tone is such that the playwright seems to be recounting all that he wrote and produced in order to entertain his audience in the Globe Theatre. Lines 40-50 review the dramatist's achievement in the world of tragedies, and the spectator / reader is prompted to visualize the way that Shakespeare composed and presented the plots of *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* ("I have bedimm'd / The noontide sun call'd forth the mutinous winds, / And 'twixt the green and azured vault / Set roaring war") and so on – plays in which the mighty heroes put up a brave fight against an adverse fate and odd circumstances and ultimately emerge with reorientations and openness. Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen says, "In *The Tempest*, the whole gamut of Shakespeare's tragic material is played in three hours. *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and the history plays are reenacted on a desert island, this time with the desire to resolve the tragedy and restore harmony and forgiveness" (4). Lines 51-57 establish a connection with the world of dramatic romances in which "music" and "airy charm" are in full play. The phrase "rough magic" may refer to Shakespeare's own art which, according to him, was in need of further refinement. Perhaps, sensing the change in taste as well as the emergence of a new theatre which, in all probability, was different from that of his earlier theatre, Shakespeare decides on retiring from the theatre which he almost dominated for nearly twenty-two or twenty-three years. This, indeed, seems to be the implication of "...I'll break my staff,/Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,/And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I'll drown my book".

The subtle transition from the world of tragedies to that of dramatic romances hinted at in this passage has its own rich overtones in so far as it has, consciously or unconsciously, prompted critics such as Lionel Abel, Richard Hornby and their followers to discuss, rather seriously, the metadramatic structure of Shakespeare's plays. The ideal theatre of romance is seen as emerging from the preceding tragic theatre, which itself is looked upon as a precondition to the final felicity and harmony that pervade the final theatre. The two theatres are inextricably bound together, and they look in retrospect to the world of comedy, which precedes the tragic theatre. In this sense the theatre of the comedies may be regarded as exposition, that of tragedies as complication, and that of the romances as the final resolution. The second epilogue thus seems to be suggestive of these important ideas.

According to C. Carter Colwell, Northrop Frye makes the following distinctions as regards dramatic plots: 1. plot in which the initial and terminal situations are both idealized, or very good – romance, 2. plots in which the initial and terminal situations are both realistic, or disappointing and undesirable – satire, 3. plots in which the initial situation is preferable to the terminal situation – tragedy, and 4. the plots in which the terminal situation is preferable to the initial situation – comedy. “Frye” says Carter Colwell “makes one additional distinction between romance and satire. Satirical plots tend to return to the initial situation, thus emphasizing the lack of improvement; romantic plots, however, involve a series of adventures and tend to be episodic since variety and novelty are aspects of the desirable world that would be negated by a return to the initial situation and an emphasis on cyclical movement. Thus satires are cyclic; romances episodic”. (7-8). Colwell gives a diagrammatic representation of Frye’s analysis of dramatic plots in the following way:



Since Shakespeare’s plays are classified by his editors Hemming and Condell as Comedies, Tragedies and Romances, it seems logical to see continuity and progression from the Comedies through the Tragedies to the Romances. If Shakespeare wrote, as D.H. Lawrence says “one bright book of Life” (ed. D.J. Enright & Chickera 289) that book may be said to consist of three theatres: 1. *theatre of Comedy*, 2. *theatre of Tragedy* and 3. *theatre of Romance* which seems to characterize LIFE according to Shakespeare. In other words, in the one theatre which Shakespeare devised for his successful career, he makes us visualize a number of theatres because each one of the theatres (the theatre of comedy, the theatre of comedy and the theatre of Romance) contains within itself a number of theatres in the form of inner plays, role-playing, ceremony within the play, literary reference, self-reference and so on – all these being kinds of metadrama identified by Hornby (32).

The third epilogue is spoken after the play ends:

“Now my charms are all o’erthrown,
 And what strength I have’s mine own,
 Which is most faint: now, ’tis true,
 I must be here confined by you,
 Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
 Since I have my dukedom got
 And pardon’d the deceiver, dwell
 In this bare island by your spell;
 But release me from my bands
 With the help of your good hands:
 Gentle breath of yours my sails
 Must fill, or else my project fails,
 Which was to please. Now I want
 Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
 And my ending is despair,
 Unless I be relieved by prayer,
 Which pierces so that it assaults
 Mercy itself and frees all faults.
 As you from crimes would pardon’d be,
 Let your indulgence set me free”

The actor who impersonated Prospero steps before the curtain to speak these lines: “And my ending is despair,/ Unless I be relieved by prayer, / Which pierces so that it assaults/ Mercy itself and frees all faults./ As you from crimes would pardon’d be,/ Let your indulgence set me free”, which, in keeping with the mood of the last plays, sound somber. They indicate cheerfulness under calamity.

Making allowance, then, for the metaphorical use of the epithet divine to describe Shakespeare the poetic genius, we might say that he adapts religious terms “indulgence”, which brings to mind Pardons granted by the Church, to suit his poetic purposes. The point that is emphasized is that Shakespeare, the dramatic poet, is not speaking of crimes committed in a religious context, instead he appeals to the viewers of his theatrical performances to pardon him if he has offended them by his topical allusions and personal references in the plays he wrote for the stage.

Shakespeare’s spectators might have included his theatrical rivals whom he offended and who offended him. But now when he is bidding farewell to the theatre he wants to have an agreeable and happy reconciliation with them. The mutual forgiveness implied in the last two lines, “As you from crimes pardon’d be / Let

your indulgence set me free” is suggestive of the reconciliatory mood in which Shakespeare could have been at the end of his career.

Shakespeare seems to be appealing to the audience to continue to see his plays enacted. Perhaps he also seems to be indirectly telling them that his art has the power eternally to enchant them. And as he is ready to ask of them to forgive him for all his offences, it is their prayer that he solicits so that he is completely exonerated. The very gesture of forgiveness in the form of approbation of his skill guarantees that he is free from all faults and he feels assured that posterity will continue to enjoy his plays. The self-assurance springs from the approval of his skill by the audience in the past. Shakespeare might also be hinting at the need for the triple bond – a close understanding among the playwright, the actor and the spectator, who must move together and think alike.

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