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### Body And Spirit, Stage And Sexuality In *The Tempest*

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## BODY AND SPIRIT, STAGE AND SEXUALITY IN *THE TEMPEST*

BY NORA JOHNSON

### I.

Writing *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* in 1582, Stephen Gosson encounters a momentary setback in his condemnation of stage plays. After all, he admits, Gregory Nazianzen once wrote “a Playe of Christe.” But, Gosson asks, “to what ende? To be Plaid upon Stages? neither Players nor their friendes are able to prove it.”<sup>1</sup> Nazianzen’s play is morally acceptable because it cannot conclusively be linked to actual performances. This distinction between a written text and a fully-embodied theatrical production becomes crucial for Gosson as he details the abuses to which theater is prone in early modern England:

If it should be Plaied, one must learne to trippe it like a Lady in the finest fashion, another must have time to whet his minde unto tyranny that he may give life to the picture hee presenteth, whereby they learne to counterfeit, and so to sinne. Therefore whatsoever such Playes as conteine good matter, are set out in print, may be read with profite, but cannot be playd, without a manifest breach of Gods commaundement. . . . Action, pronuntiation, apparel, agility, musicke, severally considered are the good blessings of God, nothing hurtfull of their owne nature, yet being bound up together in a bundle, to set out the pompe, the plaies, the inventions of the divell, it is abhominable in the sight of God, and not to be suffered among Christians. (C, 178)

Although Gosson wants to demonstrate his respect for action and pronunciation—for embodiment—it is clearly the participation of actors as they “give life” to an author’s words that makes plays intolerable. In the process of making an author’s words into a physical spectacle, players are both corrupted and corrupting.

As Gosson himself points out, embodying an author’s words is especially damaging morally when it requires that men or boys play women’s roles on stage. What Gosson here calls “tripping it like a Lady” he elsewhere condemns in more detail, famously invoking divine authority to bolster his sense that “garments are set downe for signes

distinctive betwene sexe and sexe”(C,175). This lack of sexual distinction troubles other writers in the period as well, so that when J. Cocke wants to characterize “A common Player,” he has easy recourse to images of sexual chaos:

[An actor] if he marries, he mistakes the Woman for the Boy in Woman's attire, by not respecting a difference in the mischiefe. But so long as he lives unmarried, hee mistakes the Boy, or a Whore for the Woman; by courting the first on the stage, or visiting the second at her devotions.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly gender distinctions break down in this description, but Cocke's conflation of transvestite performance with marital sexuality leads to another more surprising claim: courting a boy on stage becomes analogous to “mistaking” a whore for a woman, a formulation which powerfully connects sexual anxieties with worries about performance and economic gain. Prostitutes and players are troubling not only because of their sexual promiscuity, but because of their very professionalism. After all, both can be counted on to produce a facsimile of marital relations for money. Moreover, as has often been remarked, both sexual display and paid impersonation have the power to break down the categories upon which identity is founded, so that apparently stable notions of masculinity, femininity and even authenticity itself are threatened by the work of the professional actor.<sup>3</sup>

The distaste for professionalism implied by Cocke's conflation of acting and prostitution resonates, of course, with another set of complaints about players, lodged this time by poets whose engagement with theater companies threatened to compromise their (already precarious) social status. As is well testified by the works of Robert Greene, university writers who composed stage plays had a tendency to depict players as parasitical “puppets” and “taffeta fools” who gained wealth at the expense of their social betters. Greene himself even traces the despicable character of the player to the profession's classical origins:

Now so highly were Comedies esteemed in those daies [after Menander began to write moral Comedies], that men of great honor and grave account were the Actors, the Senate and the Consuls continuallie present, as auditors at all such sports, rewarding the Author with rich rewards, according to the excellencie of the Comedie. Thus continued this facultie famous, till covetousnesse crept into the qualitie, and that meane men greedie of gaines did fall to practice the acting of such Playes, and in the Theater presented their Comedies but to such onely, as rewarded them well for their paines . . . yet the people (who are delighted with such novelties and

pastimes) made great resort, paid largely, and highly applauded their doings, in so much that the Actors, by continual use grewe not onely excellent, but rich and insolent.<sup>4</sup>

In Greene's etiology, the very profession of the player grows out of a usurpation of the moral work of playwrights. Their skill at representing a playwright's text is innately a misrepresentation of the playwright's purpose, a commercialization of his more ennobling exchange with "men of great honour and grave account." Like Gosson, Greene imagines that the professional staging of plays involves a loss of purity, a moral compromise.

This conflict between players and playwrights shapes our earliest sense of Shakespeare's reputation. Greene's famous attack on the "upstart Crow"—in addition to whatever claims it may be making about Shakespeare as a plagiarist—firmly couples playing with betrayal and usurpation:

To those Gentlemen his Quondam acquaintance, that spend their wits in making plaies, R. G. wisheth a better exercise, and wisdom to prevent his extremities. If wofull experience may moue you (Gentlemen) to beware, or unheard of wretchednes intreate you to take heed: I doubt not but you wil looke backe with sorrow on your time past, and indeuour with repentance to spend that which is to come. . . .

Base minded men all three of you, if by my miserie you be not warned; for vnto none of you (like mee) sought those burres to cleaue: those Puppets (I meane) that spake from our mouths, those Anticks garnisht in our colours. Is it not strange, that I, to whom they all haue beene beholding: is it not like that you, to whome they all haue beene beholding, shall (were yee in that case as I am now) bee both at once of them forsaken? Yes trust them not: for there is an vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute *Iohannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a cuntry. . . .

Trust not then (I beseech ye) to such weake staires: for they are as changeable in minde, as in many attyres.<sup>5</sup>

Greene represents Shakespeare as a player, as another parasite speaking from his mouth, doubly the usurper because he is not from the universities and not an author in the way that Greene imagines himself to be.<sup>6</sup>

Greene's response to the instability of his own life in the theater is to distance himself from the figure of the player, and especially from the player who dares to supplant him by writing plays. He characterizes Shakespeare in particular and players in general in ways that summarize the perceived dangers of stagecraft. If players have taken Greene's

words and left him financially and socially bereft, Shakespeare, by himself becoming a playwright, has usurped Greene's financial and professional prerogatives and has become the ultimate example of the untrustworthiness of "those Puppets who speak from our mouths." Similarly, by claiming that players are "as changeable in mynde, as in many attires," Greene registers the power of players to "falsifie, forge, and adulterate," to break down the distinctions between themselves and the roles they play, just as they break down the distinctions "betwene sexe and sexe" when they wear women's clothing. In fact, Greene's reference to Shakespeare as having "a Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde" subtly incorporates just such an awareness of the player as a figure for gender's instability; the quotation is adapted from Shakespeare's *3 Henry VI*, in which that hide belongs not to a player, but to a woman, to Queen Margaret (1.3.137). On some level Shakespeare is playing the woman at the moment that Greene casts him in the part of the upstart player who usurps the role of playwright. His imagined crimes are very much one with the sexual and ontological impurity for which theater was famous in early-modern England.

I offer this passage from Greene as an introduction to *The Tempest* because it positions Shakespeare solidly in the middle of early-modern debates about theatrical practice, not merely as one member of the theatrical milieu but as the specific focus of a personal attack. In fact, if the work of Henry Crosse is any indication, this was also an influential attack; writing *Virtues Common Wealth* in 1603, Crosse repeatedly echoes both Greene's sentiments and his language, calling players "weak staies," "Anticks and Puppets," and, as Greene calls them in a passage not quoted above, "buckram gentlemen":

To conclude, it were further to be wished, that those admired wittes of this age, Tragaedians, and Comaedians, that garnish Theaters with their inventions, would spend their wittes in more profitable studies, and leave off to maintaine thos Anticks, and Puppets, that speake out of their mouthes: for it is pittie such noble giftes should be so basely employed, as to prostitute their ingenious labours to inrich such buckorome gentlemen. . . . he that dependeth on such weake staies, shall be sure of shame and beggerie in the ende: for it hath sildome bene seene, that any of that profession have prospered, or come to an assured estate.<sup>7</sup>

Even Crosse's comment that one seldom hears of any playwright who comes to a good end seems to invoke the ghost of Greene and his highly publicized departure from a life of penury. Eleven years after Greene's death and after his initial representation of Shakespeare as an upstart

player, one hears Henry Crosse speaking from out of Greene's mouth, reiterating in general terms the mistrust of players by which Shakespeare was judged at the beginning of his career.<sup>8</sup> What looks like a purely moral objection on Crosse's part to the theatrical "prostitution" of a writer's potentially wholesome powers is in fact deeply influenced by the efforts of Greene and his peers to distinguish themselves from base players. Sexual and ontological anxieties about theater are in fact inseparable from more quotidian concerns about professional reputation.<sup>9</sup>

Specific as Greene's attack on Shakespeare was, what Crosse's rearticulation in 1603 makes clear is that the concerns I have outlined here are part of a larger cultural suspicion about theater. They are so much a part of the vocabulary of theatrical practice in early-modern England, in fact, that when Shakespeare turns most famously to consider questions of theater in *The Tempest* he demonstrates, paradoxically, considerable sympathy with Greene's complaints in *Groats-worth of Witte*. Although there is a long tradition of reading Prospero's renunciation of magic as Shakespeare's renunciation of the theater, the anxieties reflected at least in Prospero's initial ruminations upon stagecraft could as easily belong to a Nashe or a Greene.<sup>10</sup>

It is with this larger sense of the reputation of theater—and especially of players—that I begin looking at *The Tempest*. I want to consider the past that Prospero imagines for himself, the political usurpation that he casts as a theatrical problem, a problem of the physicality and the parasitism of the brother who speaks from out of his mouth. As *The Tempest* represents theatrical practice, working and reworking the question of theatrical reputation and the status of the player, it registers precisely the complaints I have enumerated above. Skill at representation becomes inseparable from a kind of sexual impurity. Moreover, the play's theatrical self-consciousness extends, I will argue, not merely to the staging of Prospero's renunciation, but to his implicit refiguring of theatrical reputation. What the play begins by imagining as a uniquely theatrical form of usurpation by an actor—ultimately a loss of identity for the author of that actor's words—becomes, in the last analysis, an articulation of theatrical selfhood, an incorporation of the problems of theatrical production into a sense of a theatrical "I."

## II.

Prospero talks about Antonio's usurpation of the Dukedom in terms that suggest both the ontological and the sexual impurity of theater. He categorizes Antonio's ambition as a case of theater run amok; "To have

no screen between this part he played / And him he played it for," says Prospero of his brother's plot, "he needs will be / Absolute Milan."<sup>11</sup> He speaks of the usurpation not merely as a confusion of the actor with the part played (Antonio would have no screen between actor and part), but as the rising up of a fictional representation to overtake its own author. Prospero invents the role of "Prospero," Antonio plays that role, and Antonio then becomes the role's inventor. Moreover, when Antonio takes on Prospero's role, he begins behaving as if he were staging life in the court of Milan; Prospero says that Antonio

Being once perfected how to grant suits,  
How to deny them, who t'advance, and who  
To trash for over-topping, new-created  
The creatures that were mine, I say, or changed 'em,  
Or else new-formed'em. (*T*, 1.2.79–83)

Antonio's insidious performance of the role of Prospero includes usurping the power to stage, create, and change the creatures that were Prospero's. He rewrites Prospero's play.

Prospero's version of Antonio's treason, then, points toward the kinds of usurpation that seem characteristic of actors in the period. As a result of playing Prospero, Antonio has become Prospero before the public. At the same time, Prospero figures this political and theatrical mutiny as a strange and troubling sexual experience. He notes that his own trust in Antonio "begot" upon his brother the "falsehood" he enacted, and he says that Antonio became "the ivy which had hid my princely trunk / And sucked my verdure out on't" (*T*, 1.2.94–95, 86–87). Although I am not suggesting any particular erotic bond between Antonio and Prospero, I do want to register the eroticization of the language; Prospero imagines his usurpation as a conjunction of the sexual and ontological impurities that inhere in theatrical practice.<sup>12</sup>

The image of ivy covering a tree is, in fact, a fairly standard image for marriage and sexual coupling. See for example Titania to Bottom:

the female ivy so  
Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.  
O, how I love thee! how I dote on thee!<sup>13</sup>

Adriana expresses her devotion to her husband in terms that are especially evocative in this context:

Thou art an elm, my husband, I a vine  
Whose weakness, married to thy [stronger] state

Makes me with thy strength to communicate:  
If aught possess thee from me, it is dross,  
Usurping ivy, brier, or idle moss,  
Who, all for want of pruning, with intrusion  
Infect thy sap, and live on thy confusion.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever else drives this play, the logic of theatrical practice—its particular relation to the status of the self in early-modern England—suggests itself to Prospero as the logic of his own usurpation.<sup>15</sup> Prospero is obscured, he implies in part, by the sexuality of staging, the sexual parasitism of the image he has erected before the public. By making use of the theatrical, he has essentially allowed himself to be locked in a public act of fellation that drains him of his manhood and flourishes upon his own “expense of spirit.” Like Daphne, who became an image for the poetic—a laurel tree—because she was pursued sexually by Apollo, Prospero’s association with theater is an association with lawless and overpowering sexuality.

If Prospero’s new theatrical enterprise—what he will do as he stages his own return to power—is to answer Antonio’s crimes, it will apparently need to dislodge theater from its association with illicit sexuality and from its power to call into question the stability of individual identity. It looks as though one task of *The Tempest* will be to weaken the associations between theater and impurity—whether sexual or ontological—and thus to put Prospero back in control of theatricality before he abjures his art altogether. Indeed, much of the play proceeds upon this agenda, as I will outline below. I will argue ultimately, however, that the play does not answer Antonio’s crimes. The association of theater with illicit desire and with the undoing of identity are, I will argue, the very tools Prospero uses in his final act of self-representation.

The suggestion that Prospero wants to purge his own art from the impurities of Antonio’s usurpation begins with the very tree-and-ivy image that Prospero uses to condemn Antonio. If that image suggests a kind of entrapment within the stigma of the theatrical, after all, it also resonates strongly with another of the island’s famous entrapments. Prospero reminds Ariel

[Sycorax] did confine thee,  
By help of her more potent ministers,  
And in her most unmitigable rage,  
Into a cloven pine; within which rift  
Imprison’d thou didst painfully remain  
A dozen years; within which space she died,



And left thee there, where thou didst vent thy groans  
As fast as millwheels strike. (*T*, 1.2.274–81)

The language Prospero uses to describe this confinement suggests that this is an imprisonment within the womb, a torture inflicted by the island's only real motherly presence (she is an absence, of course, but a more vivid one than the mother of Miranda, whose only function in the play is to have been chaste).<sup>16</sup> Prospero celebrates his power over that womb almost ritually, by repeating his story to Ariel once a month:

It was mine Art,  
When I arriv'd and heard thee, that made gape  
The pine, and let thee out. (*T*, 1.2.291–93)

Prospero locates the maternal in “the damned witch Sycorax” and distinguishes himself from it. He seems here to be saving Ariel the delicate theatrical spirit from enslavement to the “earthly and abhorred commands” of woman and matter.

By the same token, Prospero's blatant strategy of distinguishing Ariel from Caliban suggests a desire to protect theater from association with the physical. Prospero continually associates Caliban with his mother Sycorax, so that Caliban becomes the embodiment of a kind of physicality that seems to have no place in Prospero's new stagecraft. True, Caliban acts for Prospero, bringing him wood and reluctantly obeying orders, but it is Ariel who performs real theater in the play, who stages tempests and provides musical interludes. Ariel is the shape-shifter here, and his status as pure spirit sounds like the ideal solution to the problem of eroticized theatrical role-playing. He is a long way from the concerns of a Gosson or even from the eroticized confusion of identities that allowed Antonio to “suck the verdure” from Prospero's princely trunk.

Prospero's description of Antonio's usurpation has made it plain that an actor's body is dangerous to a playwright. If a “spirit theater” is the answer to Antonio's theatrical usurpation of Prospero's power, then surely the masque of Juno and Ceres is the spirit theater's finest hour. Prospero stages the masque (with Ariel's help) as an antidote to premarital sexuality, offering Miranda and Ferdinand the spectacle of marriage (in the person of Juno) and fertility (in the person of Ceres) but decidedly not desire; Venus and Cupid will not appear. Fertility is acceptable in Prospero's theater after all, it seems, but only as long as it has no connection with actual bodies or sexuality. Venus and Cupid fail to appear in this masque, it is noted, because Miranda and Ferdinand are too chaste to be tempted by them:

Mars's hot minion is returned again;  
Her waspish-headed son has broke his arrows,  
Swears he will shoot no more, but play with sparrows,  
And be a boy right out. (*T*, 4.1.98–101)

Spoken by boy actors dressed as goddesses and performing in a masque, boys whose very presence on stage is an enticement to desire, this description of Cupid's return to "natural" boyhood implies the de-eroticizing of theater—and specifically the de-homo-eroticizing of theater, an emptying out of the intrinsic sexual content of plays that would regularly present boys in the guise of women both mortal and immortal.

Note, too, that Ceres refuses to participate in the masque if Venus and Cupid do because, she says, "they did plot / The means that dusky Dis my daughter got" (*T*, 4.1.88–89). Ceres's reference to the rape of her daughter suggests that Prospero's art is being purified of more than just homoeroticism. For Dis stands in here, in a sense, for all of the play's dark men, including both Caliban and the dark King of Tunis, all of whom represent sexual threats to daughters, be they Proserpina, Claribel, or Miranda. This masque is designed as a kind of prophylactic, then, against extramarital sex, miscegenation, rape, homoeroticism, and, perhaps, the threat of incest that accompanies Miranda's status as the only female on her father's island. In a way, this masque is undoing a whole catalogue of sexual crimes that the romances have bodied forth, including the attempted rape in *Cymbeline* and the incest in *Pericles*.

So Prospero's return to power—his return to being "absolute Milan," accomplished in part through this marriage and thus through this masque—seems to depend in part upon his ability to construct a theater devoid of sexual provocation; the eroticized destruction of identity implied in Prospero's having been "played" by Antonio necessitates a clearing away of the sexual component of play-acting. Prospero also seems to clear away the troublesome necessity of relying upon actors as he had relied upon Antonio; he interrupts the masque to muse upon the final unimportance of his own theatrical endeavor:

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. (*T*, 4.1.148–56)

Having a spirit theater is perhaps not enough; Prospero wants to imagine even those spirits melting into air. However ringing a conclusion this speech may seem to provide to Shakespeare's play—and his career—it is not the epilogue to *The Tempest*; the play is not over. Prospero has inserted this fantasy of theater's insubstantiality awkwardly into his own dramatic production. It comes at the height of Prospero's powers, not at the moment he throws away his books.<sup>17</sup> The positioning and the content of the speech suggest that there is an authorial motive for unweaving the fabric of drama, that somehow this negation of drama bolsters the playwright as he practices his craft.

Most notably, the fantasy that "our actors are all spirits" would seem to expel the image of Antonio as the actor who replaced his own playwright; we have progressed here from Prospero's dismay at his brother's negative capability—Antonio's aptitude for impersonating and finally becoming someone else—to his defensive and absolutizing vision of a world in which everything is negated. In exchange for a willingness to contemplate his own mortality, Prospero has gained freedom from the need to contemplate his own replacement by Antonio. He acknowledges that he will one day disappear, but he is intent, it seems, upon taking "the great globe itself" with him. In Prospero's own mortality is the comforting notion that the great Globe theater will end, and with the end of theater will come the end of the troubling theatrical selfhood that allows Prospero to be supplanted by the brother-actor who represents him.

Moreover, the speech's very power as a rhetorical set piece becomes an assertion of Prospero's control over his medium: "These our actors / (*As I foretold you*) were all spirits." Prospero sees past the apparent liabilities of theater and is able to use them for his own ends. The destruction of the individual self associated with theatrical practice has itself become an authorial effect manipulated by Prospero and therefore implicitly tamed to meet his needs. As Prospero dwells upon the possibility of melting "into air, into thin air," he has in fact ensconced himself within the gorgeous palace of his own rhetoric, tempting audiences to forget that the real difficulty for Prospero lies not in melting into air but in melting so easily into his brother. Even Prospero's confession that "our little life / Is rounded with a sleep" implies that our little lives are rounded (*T*, 4.1.157–58). The image is of containment, *gestalt*, and the container is Prospero's belief in the dream-like quality of his own life. A fantasy designed to suggest acceptance becomes in Prospero's hands a fantasy of freedom from his ruling anxieties.

### III.

One can trace in Prospero's speech, then, an effort to move away from the instability of the self that his language initially associated with theater. There is as well a movement away from the sexuality of theatrical representation traceable in the intensity of Prospero's fantasy about the insubstantiality of an actor's body; *our actors are all spirits*.<sup>18</sup> But this false ending to the play actually works to establish Prospero more firmly as a theatrical author, since it adds "relinquishing authorial control" to his bag of authorial tricks. In a sense, Prospero is preparing us for his real renunciation, helping to ensure that we recognize that final leave-taking not as a failure of power but as a chosen authorial effect. With its assertion of the insubstantiality of the actors who represent Prospero, its erasure of the sexuality of theater, and its defense against the intermingling of identities that theater occasions, this speech looks like an answer to Antonio's crimes.

But the effort to cleanse playing of its more troubling aspects accounts for only a portion of this text's evident self-consciousness about theater. As suggested above, there are important ways in which *The Tempest* does not finally undo Antonio's eroticized destruction of the individual self. There are indications, for instance, that this staging by Prospero of authorial control over the very conditions of theatrical practice that seem to militate against the idea of an authorial self obscures the extent to which Prospero's art has been allying itself with illicit sexuality all along. Prospero stages his anti-sexual masque for Miranda and Ferdinand, which seems to maintain the split between a bodiless theater and Caliban's too-physical presence, a split that seems to be reinforced by the fact that awareness of Caliban interrupts this scene. Nevertheless, theater in *The Tempest* never gets too far away from Caliban and his material necessities.<sup>19</sup> It is Caliban who chops wood for the island, and wood is importantly associated with the stage, the "wooden 'O'"—and of course the trees that Prospero uses to describe his own confinement in the theatrical.<sup>20</sup> So Caliban and the physical remain an important part of Prospero's stagecraft. The other great moment of spirit theater in this play, moreover, suggests that spirit-actors sometimes play the part of Caliban, that Prospero sometimes models his own theater on his encounter with Caliban. The Caliban-Ariel split is not an absolute split after all.

When Prospero's spirits provide an illusory banquet to Alonso's courtiers, Gonzalo speaks for them all in remarking upon the spirits' apparent courtesy:

If in Naples  
I should report this now, would they believe me?  
If I should say I saw such islanders,—  
For certes these are people of the island,—  
Who, though they are of monstrous shape, yet note,  
Their manners are more gentle, kind, than of  
Our human generation you shall find  
Many—nay, almost any. (*T*, 3.3.27–34)

These are particularly elegant monsters, but they bear more than a passing resemblance to Caliban, who, we have learned, used to have pretty good manners himself:

and then (he says to Prospero) I lov'd thee,  
And showed thee all the qualities o'the'isle,  
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile.

(*T*, 1.2.338–40)

There is the passing suggestion that Prospero is restaging his own experience of Caliban, here, the only real person of the island, employing the very monster of physicality who was so rigorously kept out of the marriage masque.<sup>21</sup>

This suggestion that Prospero relies more upon Caliban for his stagecraft than he likes to admit accords, I think, with another of the play's puzzling moments. As Prospero readies himself to stage his final scene of reconciliation, he makes a speech that casts him in the role of Caliban's mother Sycorax. I mean here the speech that Prospero borrows from Ovid's *Medea*, the passage that begins

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves,  
And ye that on the sands with printless foot  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune. (*T*, 5.1.33–50)

This is the speech that goes on to claim that Prospero can bring dead people back to life; it generally sounds unlike Prospero's other speeches in its incantatory power, as is appropriate, since it borrows so heavily from *Medea's* words in Ovid.<sup>22</sup>

That Prospero should give a speech that reminds the play's audience of witchcraft, and thus of the abhorred Sycorax and the physicality Prospero seems to want to escape, comes as no great surprise if we have gone back for yet another look at those images of entrapment with which this discussion began. For just after Prospero celebrated his power to release Ariel from Sycorax's tree, he threatened to return Ariel to that confinement:

If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak  
And peg thee in his knotty entrails till  
Thou hast howled away twelve winters. (*T*, 1.2.294–96)

Even at this early point in the play the distinctions between Prospero and Sycorax break down.

Even the initial act of rescuing Ariel from the pine tree turns out to be a more ambiguous statement about physicality than my argument had originally acknowledged. As Brad Johnson has noted, Prospero's reference to Ariel as a "spirit too delicate / To act [Sycorax's] earthy and abhorred commands" raises questions about what those commands might have been.<sup>23</sup> "Abhorred" suggests the possibility of "whoring," and the word "spirit" is a well-known Shakespearean euphemism for semen, as in "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action" (Sonnet 129). Under the guise of freeing spirit from matter, Prospero hints that he may also be rescuing male spirit from its unhappy heterosexual employment. This secondary meaning opens up the possibility that there is a kind of physicality, a recuperation of sexual stigma, employed in Prospero's art, for in pulling spirit from out of a tree he duplicates the actions of the ivy that sucked the verdure from his own princely trunk. Prospero positions himself as Antonio, in the sense that Antonio is the figure for theater gone awry with terrible sexual implications. Prospero's rescue of Ariel, then, while it may work to separate his art from a feared sexuality that he associates with women, also rejoins his art with the illicit desire Prospero has seemed to want to purge from his theater.

In fact, as Jonathan Goldberg has suggested, Prospero's possession of Ariel is itself an occasion for erotic display.<sup>24</sup> In act 1, scene 2, Prospero issues a command to Ariel that makes no real sense:

Go make thyself like a nymph o'th'sea;  
Be subject to  
No sight but thine and mine; invisible  
To every eyeball else. Go take this shape,  
And hither come in't. (*T*, 1.2.301–5)

Ariel is commanded, essentially, to go offstage and change clothes, and his return in the costume of a water-nymph twelve lines later is pointedly gratuitous. Prospero calls him "Fine apparition," and whispers commands in his ear. Then Ariel leaves. The point here, apparently, is to let Prospero and the audience enjoy a costume change, even though there is no reason—except pleasure—for an invisible nymph to dress up.

Of course Ariel's cross-dressing implicates him, and Prospero, in more than just an excess of sartorial imagination. Nor are his female roles confined to this one pleasing display. Ariel appears as a Harpy in act 3, scene 3, to Prospero's evident delight: "Bravely the figure of this Harpy hast thou / Perform'd, my Ariel; a grace it had devouring" (*T*, 3.3.52–53). For all that Prospero's actions have registered the urgency of escape from the physical, and coded that escape as a rejection of an abhorred and earthy femaleness, the pleasure he takes in his own ravishing spectacle suggests a different set of priorities. Ultimately, the theatrical breakdown of signs distinctive between sex and sex is neither as complete nor as threatening as Gosson's condemnations would indicate. As long as there is an "actual" woman—in this case a Sycorax—whose sexuality can be disavowed, femaleness itself can be performed with a devouring grace. Prospero's spirit theater is neither a utopia of spiritual purity nor a utopia of free gender play, but is instead a carefully crafted representation of the theatrical, responsive both to cultural pressures that mandate gender difference and to the pleasures of breaking that difference down. If, by allowing himself to be played, Prospero has been trapped in a realm of eroticized spectacle that usurps him on some profound level, both public and subjective, it seems puzzling and significant that his return to "himself" should incorporate both erotic spectacle and the ontological blurring that was such a scandal for Gosson and his peers. As troubling as it was in early-modern England for authors and players to be feminized—prostituted—by their employment, *The Tempest* nevertheless models a form of self-staging that renders even feminization powerful.

#### IV.

I have argued that Prospero's gestures toward purifying his art of illicit desire and of the destruction of the individual self have been accompanied by gestures that reconnect theater and illicit desire, and that the autonomy of his self-presentation collapses as he cites Medea. The last moment I want to consider in *The Tempest* reconnects Prospero very powerfully with the confusion of self and self-representation that have seemed to drive so much of his subsequent theatrical practice.

In the play's Epilogue, Prospero steps forward claiming that his charms have all been overthrown, and he makes an interesting statement about his dependence upon the audience:

now, 'tis true,  
I must be here confined by you,

Or sent to Naples. Let me not,  
Since I have my dukedom got,  
And pardoned the deceiver, dwell  
In this bare island by your spell;  
But release me from my bands  
With the help of your good hands. (*T*, Epi.3–10)

Who exactly is talking to us here? Prospero the character cannot address the audience without ending the theatrical illusion that makes him real. The actor who plays Prospero, however, cannot be stuck on that island once he steps out of his part. For a character who began this play meditating upon the excesses of his own implication in the theatrical—regretting the power of his actor Antonio to step out of theater and overtake him—this is a strange resolution. Prospero ends up in a predicament very like the one he seemed to be trying to escape; now we see on stage the problem—or the impossibility—of telling the difference between Prospero and the actor who plays Prospero.

Moreover, Prospero's strategy of differentiating gross physicality from his theatrical practice has been predicated upon his ability to keep Ariel and Caliban in separate categories. We have already seen that strategy compromised severely, since Ariel has more to do with the homoerotic than Prospero's strategy of scapegoating Caliban makes immediately obvious, and since Caliban has more to do with theater than the play readily acknowledges. But here the distinctions between Ariel and Caliban break down entirely, as both of Prospero's employees seem to collapse back into Prospero. Remember that Prospero has two last pieces of work to complete; he must pardon Caliban and his companions, and he must set Ariel free. We see neither event take place, but as this new version of Prospero steps before us here he has two requests: set me free and forgive me for my crimes. I am suggesting that as the actor/Prospero steps forward from *The Tempest* to present the "real"—or actually the unreal—Prospero, he seems not to mind being associated with any of the various sexual or ontological possibilities that Ariel and Caliban have represented. He seems to be Ariel, longing to be freed, and he seems to have become Prospero's image of Caliban, needing to be forgiven.

If the "revels are ended" speech melts the great Globe theater into thin air, here the theater itself takes a kind of revenge. This time it is Prospero who becomes ephemeral when he is shown to depend upon an actor's body in a more radical way than even his earlier language admitted. For all his efforts to control the physicality of staging and the parasitical nature of the image he has erected before the public,



Prospero stands before us, ultimately, as merely an effect of the theater, a flickering possibility evoked by the professional skill of the “rich and insolent” actors that Greene had inveighed against.

This final staged version of Prospero complicates not only Prospero’s approach to early-modern theatrical practice, but our own as well. In response to the antitheatrical writing of its day, *The Tempest* articulates what I have called a theatrical “I,” a representation of a mode of selfhood that is made up of the very factors that would seem to militate against a sense of the self: theatrical role-playing, illicit desires that confuse gender categories, the perceived parasitism of the successful actor. It seems to me that this response adds a layer of complexity to our contemporary discussions of early-modern selfhood, sexual identity, and authorship. Before copyright law, before the notion of sexual subjectivity that Foucault traces to the nineteenth century, in a period that many of our theoretical discourses mark as prior to the invention of these concepts, *The Tempest* demonstrates that sexuality and authorship are nevertheless bound up in compelling ways with the question of identity on the early-modern stage. These are, finally, questions that play themselves out in the body of the actor.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), E5v in *Markets of Bawdrie: The Dramatic Criticism of Stephen Gosson*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literature, 1974), 177. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated C.

<sup>2</sup> Cocke elaborates upon the actor’s participation in an unacceptably protean selfhood: “Take him at the best, he is but a shifting companion; for he lives effectually by putting on, and putting off. . . . His own [profession] is compounded of all Natures, all humours, all professions” (1615, repr. in E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923], 4:256–70). “A Common Player” is attributed to Cocke by Chambers, who reproduces the text from two variant editions included among the essays of John Stephens.

<sup>3</sup> Accounts of sexuality and theater in this period include Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981); Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983); Laura Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing: Antitheatricality and Effeminization, 1579–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994); Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theater* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), ch. 1–3; Meredith Anne Skura, *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), ch. 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Greene, *Francesco’s Fortunes, or The second part of Greene’s Never too late* (1590), in *The Life and Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Robert Greene*, M. A., ed.

Alexander B. Grosart, 15 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 8:131. See similar sentiments expressed by Thomas Brabine, “in praise of the Author,” in his prefatory poem to Greene’s *Menaphon*, and in Nashe’s commendatory letter “To the Gentlemen Students of both Universities,” in the same text (ed. G. B. Harrison [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1927], 17–20).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Greene, *Groats-Worth of Witte, bought with a million of Repentance: The Repentance of Robert Greene* (1592; London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1923), 43–47. For a summary of scholars’ attempts to explain the precise nature of the charges Greene is making here, see D. Allen Carroll, “Greene’s ‘Vpstart Crow’ Passage: A Survey of Commentary,” *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 28 (1985): 111–27. Carroll includes a discussion of the nature of Henry Chettle’s apology for Greene’s attack, which may possibly indicate that Shakespeare or his friends took steps to respond to Greene (115–17).

<sup>6</sup> At a late stage in the preparation of this essay, I discovered Scott Cutler Shershow’s wonderful *Puppets and “Popular” Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995). Shershow cites this passage in chapter two, “Authorship and Culture in Early Modern England,” which traces the uses of puppets and puppet imagery in the construction of theatrical authorship, both in *The Tempest* and *Bartholomew Fair* (43–108). His insights regarding the deployment of puppet theater add tremendously to the questions I have considered here. Although we consider many of the same moments in this play, ultimately I see *The Tempest* as more willing to own aspects of theatrical practice that mark it as “low” than Shershow’s argument suggests.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Crosse, *Virtues Common Wealth: Or the Highway to Honour* (London, 1603), Q4v.

<sup>8</sup> See Carroll for a discussion of the influence of Greene’s descriptions, along with those of Nashe, whom Greene may be echoing, upon Samuel Rowlands and the second *Return of Parnassus* (120).

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, after studying at length the financial circumstances of playwrights in the period, Bentley concludes that although it was true that dramatists during this period were beholden to the acting companies for their financial and professional well-being, which might explain some of their complaints, “the professional playwrights made more money than other literary men of their time, and more than they could have made as schoolmasters or curates—professions which might have been open to many of them. Not only do the extant accounts of payments show very respectable incomes for the time, but unrecorded payments . . . certainly added to the income of most professional playwrights” (Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Professions of Dramatist and Player in Shakespeare’s Time, 1590–1642* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984], 108–9). Ultimately, neither the alleged sexual excess of the player’s craft nor the financial arrangements that governed a playwright’s profits can be the entire cause of the occasional antagonism between players and playwrights in this period. Instead, both factors must work together with anxieties about authorial control.

<sup>10</sup> For examples of commentary on the extent to which it is possible to read Prospero as a figure for Shakespeare, see Stephen Orgel, “Prospero’s Wife,” in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 220; and David Sundelson, “So Rare a Wonder’d Father: Prospero’s *Tempest*,” in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), 51.

<sup>11</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Methuen, 1962) 1.2.107–9. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated T.

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Richard Wheeler for this suggestion. See also David Sundelson, who says that the passage highlights Prospero's androgyny and implicit impotence (35).

<sup>13</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Methuen, 1979), 4.1.41–43.

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Comedy of Errors*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Methuen, 1962), 2.2.174–80.

<sup>15</sup> The questions of “self” and “identity” in this period have been debated at length in recent years. To Stephen Greenblatt's early study other critics and historians have added a range of observations. Catherine Belsey, Francis Barker, and Jonathan Dollimore see the concept of subjectivity as anachronistic, as does Peter Stallybrass, who traces the uses of the word “individual” in this period. Recently, Katherine Eisaman Maus has articulated a powerful critique of such theories, noting that the evidence of what she calls “inwardness” is widespread, and arguing against historical difference as a privileged tool for dislodging the hold of the bourgeois subject. My own sense of the question runs parallel to Maus's; something like a self seems to me very much at stake in this text and in the period generally. That selfhood should ultimately remain illusory is inherent in the concept itself, rather than a mark of absolute historical difference. See Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Routledge, 1985); Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1984); Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980); Peter Stallybrass, “Shakespeare, the Individual, and the Text,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 593–612. Maus is careful to note that what she calls “inwardness” is not identical with subjectivity, and that subjectivity itself is a set of constructions that varies by speaker and instance (*Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996], 1–34).

<sup>16</sup> For a variety of approaches to this image and to the problem of mothers in this play, see Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 236–38; Marianne L. Novy, *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), 184–87; Orgel, 217–30; and Sundelson, 39.

<sup>17</sup> This implies, interestingly, that actors' bodies become most dangerous precisely when Prospero is at the height of his powers.

<sup>18</sup> Leah Marcus notes that the performances given at Prospero's command are all the more reflective of his pure intention because they involve no actual play-texts. She sees this disembodied theater as granting Prospero complete control at the expense of “monumentality,” or the opportunity to establish authorial reputation in a written artifact (*Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988], 49).

<sup>19</sup> See Mary Loeffelholz, who argues that because Prospero's masque encourages Miranda to see herself as Proserpina and Ceres as her long-lost mother, it implicitly positions Prospero as her “raptor,” and thus as Caliban (“Two masques of Ceres and Proserpine: *Comus* and *The Tempest*,” in *Re-membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson [New York: Methuen, 1987], 29).

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Janet Adelman for this suggestion.

<sup>21</sup> Shershow powerfully connects the “islanders” performance with both the question

of theatrical playing and the problem of colonial “othering,” citing Rachel M. Kelsey’s “Indian Dances in ‘The Tempest,’” (*Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 13 [1914]: 98–104; Shershow, 93–96).

<sup>22</sup> See Frank Kermode’s Introduction, (*T*, 147–50).

<sup>23</sup> See Bradley William Johnson, “Birthed Effects: Shakespeare’s Generation of Monsters,” diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1995. See especially ch. 5, “The Politics of Pregnancy: Maternity, Monstrosity, and Making a Man in *The Tempest*.”

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992), 143.