

**‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on:’**

**Ideological Self-Deception in *The Tempest*.**

In her essay ‘Imagination and the Age of Reason,’ Joanne Harris explores why we tell stories, especially those set in fantasy worlds where ‘physics and magic collide.’<sup>1</sup> The springboard for this essay, published in her blog and followed up in the national press<sup>2</sup>, seems to stem from a fundamental disagreement with Richard Dawkins, namely that children should not be encouraged to believe in the supernatural. His attack, as interpreted by Harris, centred on the magical world of the fairy-tale; such ‘irrational’--- that is to say creative, inventive or imaginative thinking --- is a backwards step towards the Dark Ages, when men were governed by superstition, fear and emotions, rather than reason developed through the experience of the senses.<sup>3</sup> Dawkins later complained that his words had been taken out of context, and tweeted: ‘Fairy tales, as well as charming, can be good training in critical thinking. Children learn to see through a certain class of falsehoods.’ (@RichardDawkins, 5 June 2014). So for Dawkins, reading magical fiction becomes a learning experience, whereby the plausibility of a given scenario is critically evaluated using reason and balanced against experiences stored in the memory. Which seems perfectly fair and justifiable, especially if applied to Utopian Literature. Fiction is the ideal magical carpet ride into a utopian world. A story can transport the reader to another place or time; it can deliver a world that is more exciting, more liberating, more harmonious, more satisfying, and more beautiful than our own. Conversely, the fictional world where we find ourselves may encourage an appreciation of what we already have; fictional

---

<sup>1</sup> Joanne Harris, ‘Imagination and the Age of Reason’, *Joanne Harris*, 3 July 2015. <<https://joannechocolat.tumblr.com/post/123107045386/imagination-and-the-age-of-reason>> [accessed 22 November 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Weaver, ‘You Can Call Me A Big Bad Wolf But Not A Bore, Says Richard Dawkins’, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2014. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/05/richard-dawkins-fairytales-not-harmful>> [accessed 22 November 2020].

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Harris is referring to Dawkins’ appearance at the 2014 Cheltenham Festival of Science. In Weaver’s article in *The Guardian*, he is quoted as saying: ‘I think it’s rather pernicious to inculcate into a child a view of the world which includes supernaturalism – we get enough of that anyway.’ In the same article he is quoted as having debated whether a ‘diet of supernatural magic spells might possibly have a detrimental effect on a child’s critical thinking.’ He continued, ‘I actually think there might be a positive benefit in fairy tales for a child’s critical thinking ... Do frogs turn into princes? No they don’t. But an ordinary fiction story could well be true ... So a child can learn from fairy stories how to judge plausibility.’

worlds distance us from what we reasonably and empirically know to be true, which does allow a reader the space to consider the wider possibilities of ideas presented in them. However, according to Harris, the reader needs to fully engage in a fictional world for this evaluation to take place. They need to *believe*.

Belief, for Virginia Woolf, is ‘the greatest of all pleasures.’<sup>4</sup> The reader engages their own imagination in order to uncover the truth - that is to say *believing* in the real possibility that a story could be true.<sup>5</sup> Emma Smith, writing on *The Tempest*, likens the skills of the writer, in this case Shakespeare, to that of a magician. She argues that both manipulate their audience as easily as their characters:

We have been as much the victims of Prospero’s magic as the pinched and cramped Caliban or the bereft King Alonso, made to believe his son is drowned. The difference is that theatre patrons are willingly deceived, participating in their own delusions.<sup>6</sup>

Woolf concurs. The reader should seek to be whisked away from ‘all the mixed and ambiguous feelings of which we may be possessed at the moment.’<sup>7</sup> This ‘irrational’ faculty, confirms Harris, is ‘an integral part of the engine that drives it; the creative imagination that overcomes all obstacles in its attempt to fulfil its dream.’<sup>8</sup> The workings of the mind and its ability to conjure works of art has long been a topic of philosophical and psychological debate. Both the terms ‘fancy’ and ‘imagination’ arose from these attempts to pin down the sense of the creative spirit and have been traced, according to R. L. Brett, to the earliest of literary critics,

---

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Phases Of Fiction’, in *Granite and Rainbow*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> In ‘Phases of Fiction’, Woolf equates **truth** with **reality**. The imagination, for Woolf, is a sense awakened by an absolute belief in the world a writer has created. Fiction should be judged, according to Woolf, on whether the *truth* floods into the imagination of the reader, and the fictional world is believed with all the senses.

<sup>6</sup> Emma Smith, ‘Prospero: Magician And Artist’, *The British Library* (2016) <<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/prospero-magician-and-artist>> [accessed 22 November 2021].

<sup>7</sup> Woolf, ‘Phases Of Fiction’, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Harris, ‘Imagination And The Age Of Reason’, *Joanne Harris*, 3 July 2015. <<https://joannechocolat.tumblr.com/post/123107045386/imagination-and-the-age-of-reason>> [accessed 22 November 2021].

Aristotle (circa 384 – 322 B.C.). Brett does stress, however that Aristotle was more interested in the finished text and its structure rather than the creative process behind its production. Aristotle's thoughts on the production of texts were scientific, believing that learning as a child takes place through the natural process of *mimesis* (or the art of imitation, the cornerstone to artistic creativity according to classical convention, which continued through medieval times until the Renaissance).<sup>9</sup> Plato (circa 428 – 347 B.C.), who had Aristotle under his tutelage, considered the art of poetry to be gifted through 'divine ecstasy'.<sup>10</sup> The Muse, being the daughter of memory, had enabled earlier writers such as Homer (late eighth century B.C.) to exploit images imprinted in this part of his mind, as well as carrying on the collective memory of past events in his poetry. Homer carried the responsibility of history in his art. For Plato, the imaginative power and its effect on the audience was due to a 'mysterious attraction',<sup>11</sup> which allowed the audience to become *spellbound*.<sup>12</sup>

Renaissance thinkers such as Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626) were keen to harness the power of this internal sense and to direct its energy in creating rhetoric, poetry and visual art, as the power of the imagination to recall images and create new ones played an important role in these areas. Katharine Park<sup>13</sup> explains that Bacon fixed on three internal senses within the brain – the imagination, memory and reason, but believed that poetry especially opened up the mind, whereas reason and logic placed restrictions upon it:

...because it doth raise and erect the Minde, by submitting the shewes of things to the series of the Mind, whereas reason doth buckle and bowe the Mind unto the Nature of things.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> R.L Brett, *Fancy And Imagination*, (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1969), pp. 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Brett, *Fancy And Imagination*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> In the present day, magical terminology is widely used – or overused - in film and theatre reviews, such as 'a theatrical marvel', 'spellbinding', 'enchanted.'

<sup>13</sup> Katharine Park, 'Bacon's "Enchanted Glass"', *Isis*, 75.2 (1984), 290-302  
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/231827>> [accessed 23 November 2021].

<sup>14</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning, Book II*, 1605. Quoted in Brett, *Fancy And Imagination*, p. 9.

Bacon believed that the imagination could be employed beyond poetry in the realms of enterprise and science precisely because of its capacity to join up the dots. By contrast, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) saw the reigning in of the imagination as paramount. He dismissed the idea of 'divine ecstasy', instead seeing the imagination as simply a tool to 'clothe the thought in attractive language.'<sup>15</sup> Thus the imagination fulfils a rhetorical purpose and its role is 'moving the hearts and minds of men'.<sup>16</sup> Without judgment, which provides a steadying hand, imagination (or fancy, as Hobbes doesn't distinguish between the two<sup>17</sup>) could run amok as it does in dreams. Therefore, the imagination should not be employed without its alter ego, judgment.

Hobbes was an empiricist. For him, knowledge entered the mind through the sense organs and was stored in the memory, where it can be reordered to solve problems. The mind can create associations but cannot create something entirely new. John Locke (1632-1704) shared Hobbes' belief in the imprinted memory, but was wary of the idea of free association and poetic ornament, preferring instead a more rational, logical, and scientific ordering of the thoughts:

...all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment.'<sup>18</sup>

This dangerous misdirection of the faculty of reason, according to the twentieth century French Marxist thinker Louis Althusser, can lead to the 'condition of possibility for ideological self-deception',<sup>19</sup> such as is suggested by the line in *The Tempest* - 'We are such stuff / As dreams

---

<sup>15</sup> Brett, *Fancy And Imagination*, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>17</sup> Hobbes in fact uses the term *fancy* and not *imagination*. Brett uses the two terms interchangeably in his discussion of Hobbes' theory: 'Hobbes does not distinguish between them.' Brett, *Fancy And Imagination*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> Brett, *Fancy And Imagination*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Richard T. Gray, *Inventions Of The Imagination Romanticism And Beyond*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), p. 7.

are made on.’(4.1.156-7).<sup>20</sup> Althusser’s definition of ideology is that it is a representation of the imaginary relationship of an individual to the real world, not a reflection of the real world itself.<sup>21</sup> Thus Prospero can be viewed as partaking in some ‘ideological self-deception’ as he has been transported by his dreams far away from court, to a lonely island where he can practise his magic and rule by virtue of it. In essence, he imagines an alternative existence, and his magic becomes a symbolic representation of the power of the imagination. Just as Harris claims, the imagination is ‘a power so great that, in stories, it often translates as *magic*.’<sup>22</sup>

Smith asserts that magic had not quite been replaced by science at the time that Shakespeare was writing. In fact, the two existed side by side.<sup>23</sup> According to Jerome Mandel, the line between reality and the supernatural was fluid in Renaissance times. As regards dreams, these were attributed to a disturbed imagination: ‘The spirits which served the senses retained some images when they returned to the heart (or brain) during sleep, and, through the hidden channels that unite mind and body, these bodily spirits offered images to the imaginative faculty and produced dreams.’<sup>24</sup> If Prospero is living inside his own imagination, in a world created by it, Mandel’s ‘spirits which served the senses’ become tangible in Prospero’s world through Ariel, described by William Hazlitt as the ‘swiftness of thought personified.’<sup>25</sup> Ariel serves as Prospero’s eyes and ears as he follows the shipwrecked characters around the island, interfering and influencing, reporting back on what he sees. Ariel not only acts out Prospero’s wishes, but also seems capable of acting independently. For example, Ariel intervenes to save Gonzalo

---

<sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, *The Tempest* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1999). All subsequent quotations from this edition are placed in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Dino Felluga, *Modules On Althusser: On Ideology. Introductory Guide To Critical Theory* (2011) <<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/marxism/modules/althusserideology.html>> [accessed 12 December 2021].

<sup>22</sup> Harris, ‘Imagination And The Age Of Reason’.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, ‘Prospero: Magician And Artist’.

<sup>24</sup> Jerome Mandel, ‘Dream And Imagination In Shakespeare’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 24.1 (1973), 61–68 (p. 61) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2868739>>.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in ‘Introduction’, in *The Tempest*, p. 87.

from Sebastian and Antonio - 'My Master through his art foresees the danger / That you, his friend, are in, and sends me forth / (For else his project dies) to keep them living.' (2.1.298-300) - and then reports back to Prospero about the turn of events: 'Prospero, my lord, shall know what I have done' (2.1.328). This demonstrates that Prospero's magic is sometimes not under his control, just as he cannot not always keep a grip on his imagination. 'His art foresees the danger' refers here, I believe, to Ariel as the representation of Prospero's magic. This is both a strength and a weakness.

Up until the time of Shakespeare, the imagination continued to be seen intrinsically as unearthly, being the bridge between heaven and the natural world - a link that was believed lost after the Fall of man and the expulsion from Eden. Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested that the physical form of Ariel was created out of the space between heaven and the natural world: 'In air he acts; and all his colours and properties seems to have been obtained from the rainbow and the skies...He is neither born of heaven, nor of earth; but, as it were, between both.'<sup>26</sup> The imagination is therefore located in a 'no place', a utopian space, from whence Ariel grows as an embodiment of the imagination. But is this space also a utopian 'good place'? In the Dark Ages, people believed that it was possible to inflict injuries on another through thought alone. 'For imagination,' declared the physician Paracelsus (1493 – 1541), 'can cause disease, can cause dreadful disease, as joy can cause health. Imagination may be good or evil, so may it make whole as well as sick. From this it follows that imagination is more than nature and rules it.'<sup>27</sup> It is not important to ascertain if Shakespeare himself subscribed to this theory, only that he playfully makes use of this commonly held belief to build upon the idea of a world created through thought alone.

---

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge also identified Prospero with Shakespeare. Coleridge saw the imaginary possibilities in *The Tempest*, finding that the play addressed itself 'entirely to the imaginative faculty.' ('Introduction', in *The Tempest*, p. 88).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Park, 'Bacon's "Enchanted Glass"', p. 293.

For the Romantics Hazlitt and Coleridge, Ariel is conjured from the ‘no place’ of the imagination and is between heaven and earth. However, Mandel suggests, like Paracelsus, that the characterisation of the imagination requires both goodie **and** villain, which doesn’t allow for any fence-sitting. He explains how it was believed that both benign and evil spirits could influence a man’s thinking by invading his senses and imagination. These spirits could be overruled by reason, but nonetheless:

Dreams from spirits could lead man either to damnation or salvation. By playing upon his personal desires they could delude him; by anticipating future events they could warn him. If the active spirit was benign, the dream was propitious and anticipatory, sent to encourage the dreamer; if the active spirit was malign, the dream deceived the dreamer’s imagination, beclouded his reason, and led him to destruction.<sup>28</sup>

If Ariel, the ‘goodie’, comes from the sky, Caliban must grow out of the ground.<sup>29</sup> Caliban represents the ‘bad place’, evil spirit or flipside of Prospero’s imagination – ‘A devil, a born devil’ (4.1.188) - and he is controlled or punished through the power of the mind. As Prospero declares:

For this, be sure, tonight thou shalt have cramps,  
Side-stitches, that shall pen they breath up; urchins  
Shall forth at vast of night that they may work  
All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinched  
As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging  
than bees that made ‘em.

(1.2.326-331)

This raises the question as to whether it is the imagination that inflicts punishment and pain, as was believed, or whether this is an example of reason limiting the excesses of the imagination.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Mandel, ‘Dream And Imagination In Shakespeare’, p. 63. Mandel gives the example of a spirit offering the dagger to Macbeth. Another example would be the ghostly visitations in Hamlet.

<sup>29</sup> Vaughan and Vaughan (‘Introduction’, in *The Tempest*, p. 87.) describe the pairing in the following terms: ‘As an airy spirit, Ariel can be seen as one pole in a neo-Platonic dualism: air as opposed to Caliban’s earth. Thus Ariel is usually portrayed in illustrations as airborne, sometimes with wings, and is often attached to ropes or wires in stage performances. Caliban, in stark contrast, is usually hunched and close to the earth, often, in illustrations and stage productions, emerging from a rocky or subterranean cave.’

<sup>30</sup> Vaughan and Vaughan (‘Introduction’, in *The Tempest*, p. 30.) point out that Ariel should not be seen simply as the ‘virtue’ to Caliban’s ‘vice’. Prospero calls Ariel a ‘malignant thing’ (1.2.257), which in fact highlights that both sides of the imagination, or the imagination as a whole, shouldn’t be allowed free reign.

Again, Shakespeare is playing with these beliefs for dramatic effect and does not subscribe, in my opinion, to a school of thought. He does, however, acknowledge the role of reason in the path that a man chooses to take. The island space, whilst a fiction within the imagination for Prospero, is real for the audience (as long as the audience wishes it to be so, and the craft of the playwright facilitates this belief with a clever and convincing script) as well as for the characters created in his imaginative scenario. The important thing is that within this space alternative scenarios can be acted out, and Prospero can debate (or reason out) his place within society; a kind of 'try before you buy.' As Beth Lord summarizes in her discussion of Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, (1670), 'the activity of fictioning (or feigning) involves holding up certain ideas for scrutiny and critique until the truth becomes clear.'<sup>31</sup>

Prospero's dream contains, as dreams do, not just conjured spirits but also faces from Prospero's past, even if these are distorted by the dream. According to Medieval scientific thinking, Prospero's fantasy has grown out of an imbalance:

Any disturbance in the normal balance of the bodily humours - blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy-any mental upheaval, poor digestion, hunger, nervousness, or fear following distracting physical and mental experiences affect the Imagination and are released in the form of dream.<sup>32</sup>

But it was also acknowledged at the time that the dreamworld grew out of experiences in the real world, a thought equally present in the line - 'We are such stuff / As dreams are made on.'(4.1.156-7). At the very end of the nineteenth century, almost three hundred years later, Sigmund Freud begins to write his book on the theory of the sub-conscious and the interpretation of journeys taken within the mind in dreams. He writes: 'On my way to discovering the solution of the dream all kinds of things were revealed which I was unwilling

---

<sup>31</sup> Beth Lord quoted in Gray, *Inventions Of The Imagination Romanticism And Beyond*, p.41 'In this work, Spinoza introduces a tool that helps us to use our imagination to increase our reason: this is our ability to produce fictions.'

<sup>32</sup> Mandel, 'Dream And Imagination In Shakespeare', p. 62.

to admit even to myself.’<sup>33</sup> One of the outcomes of his investigation is the view that dreams are the fulfilment of wishes. As no wish exists without a ‘want’ and a ‘prohibition,’ dreams may reveal desires that the dreamer is afraid to acknowledge. In Freudian terms, Prospero’s island dream betrays a discontentment and a desire to change his life for the better. To Freud, all dream elements are symbolic and have meanings particular to the dreamer, linked to memories, past experiences and the associations made between them in the mind. This task of association falls to the imagination, particularly in the case of daydreams, as the dreamer can often gently encourage the direction these take.

Smith points out how Prospero controls each character’s narrative, both past and present, just as the fate of fictional characters is held within the pen of the author.<sup>34</sup> Smith’s comment about *The Tempest* mirroring the creative process of staging a theatrical production also fits with the scenario that Prospero is imagining the whole story: ‘It’s as if Prospero is inventing all the other characters – and fleshing out their past lives to develop the force of his creation.’<sup>35</sup> Prospero tells us that he had retired from political life into the world of his books and spent much of his time alone in study. This sets up the premise for the tale of his abdication from his political duties and the betrayal and exile from his kingdom (1.2.53-168). However, as this is part of the play, and it is Prospero that tells us this, we must assume that this story also falls within the dream sequence. Prospero is the sole reteller of Miranda’s, Caliban’s, Ariel’s, and his own story. Admittedly, Miranda confirms that she has memories of the time prior to the arrival on the island, but we only have Prospero’s word that these are true recollections:

---

<sup>33</sup> Freud Museum London, ‘Wish Fulfilment’ (2018)  
<<https://www.freud.org.uk/education/resources/the-interpretation-of-dreams/wish-fulfilment/>>  
[accessed 1 December 2021].

<sup>34</sup> Smith, ‘Prospero: Magician And Artist’.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

**PROSPERO**

Can'st thou remember  
A time before we came unto this cell?  
I do not think thou canst, for then thou wast not  
Out three years old.

**MIRANDA**

Certainly, sir, I can.

**PROSPERO**

By what? by any other house or person?  
Of any thing the image tell me that  
Hath kept with thy remembrance.

**MIRANDA**

'Tis far off  
And rather like a dream than an assurance  
That my remembrance warrants.

(1.2.38-45)

Prospero also retells Ariel's story and berates him for forgetting: 'I must / Once in a month recount what thou hast been, / Which thou forget'st.' (1.2.261-263). Prospero's retelling of the tale reasserts the power that he holds over Ariel, and he insists on doing so despite Ariel's assurances that he has not forgotten.<sup>36</sup> Of course, it is the job of the playwright to fill in the backstory for his audience, but usually the characters are aware of their own narrative and have some part to play in the voicing of them. Here, seemingly only Prospero is aware, and that gives rise to questions about his reliability as a narrator and the reality of what is presented. Of course, if the island were uninhabited, the play would become a monologue and much of the drama would be lost if retold rather than re-enacted. Instead of talking to himself (or an imagined audience), Prospero invents a world populated with people from his past and present. These characters become his sounding board, a mirror for his self-reflection. 'All physical nature, relationships, emotions, art itself, are reflections of oneself, as the experiencer of

---

<sup>36</sup> Not forgetting that Ariel represents his own imagination, so he is keeping himself in check, just as he does by controlling Caliban through pain. The fact that Ariel keeps asking for his freedom and Caliban plots to betray Prospero both signal that the imagination is a force which is difficult to control, and that the balance between the benign and malign is a constant battle. Both Caliban and Ariel represent doubt and self-questioning: Prospero failed to nurture and educate Caliban, and the attack on his daughter showed this failure. Ariel constantly seeks reassurance that he is loved.

them,<sup>37</sup> as John Blades points out in his discussion of Coleridge's theory of the imagination. There is no truth which is independent of oneself, it is purely subjective.

The characters of Miranda and Gonzalo are clearly very different, but both offer a largely positive vision of the future. Miranda is the personification of faith in humanity (which Prospero has lost), renewed hope and harmony within his lands. With her marriage to Ferdinand (and the union it brings with his usurpers), alongside her fresh and unsullied vision of courtly life, she is his happy ending:

O, wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,  
That has such people in't!

(5.1.181-184)

Gonzalo is presented as a wise soul, akin to a moral philosopher. Ariel's lines - 'Him that you term'd, sir, 'The good old lord Gonzalo; / His tears run down his beard, like winter's drops / From eaves of reeds' (5.1.15-17) - shows Prospero's respect and affection for him. He is introduced earlier as a 'noble Neapolitan' (1.2.161), who had provided food and fresh water 'Out of his charity' and other 'stuffs and necessities, / Which since have steaded much' (1.2.162-165). In addition, Prospero speaks of Gonzalo's 'gentleness' (1.2.165), the kind act of saving Prospero's prized books. It is almost as if he is asking himself, 'what would Gonzalo do?' It is in his mouth that he places the words which lay out the possibility of a new way forward. Gonzalo talks of the benefits of this land compared to their own. 'How lush and lusty the grass looks! How green!' (2.1.55). Here, Prospero debates what he would do if had the chance to start afresh and how he would choose to rule, harking back to a kind of prelapsarian society in which all inhabitants have equal rights and an equal share in the gifts of the land: 'but nature should bring forth, / Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance, / To feed my innocent

---

<sup>37</sup> John Blades, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 63.

people' (2.1.163-165). He concludes, 'I would with such perfection govern, sir, / To excel the golden age.' Prospero's musings (voiced by Gonzalo) are mocked, however, by Sebastian and Antonio in this scene (2.1.144-169), who claim he would not rule wisely, for example:

Had I plantation of this isle, my lord,--

**ANTONIO**

He'd sow't with nettle-seed.

**SEBASTIAN**

Or docks, or mallows.

(2.1.144-145)

Sebastian and Antonio voice Prospero's real view of his country, his people, and his self-doubt as ruler. As Sebastian concludes, there are contradictions in his argument:

**GONZALO**

I' the commonwealth I would by contraries  
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic  
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;  
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,  
And use of service, none; contract, succession,  
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;  
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;  
No occupation; all men idle, all;  
And women too, but innocent and pure;  
No sovereignty;--

**SEBASTIAN**

Yet he would be king on't.

**ANTONIO**

The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the  
beginning.

(1.2.148-159)

This powerful scene is Prospero's self-examination and self-recrimination, and evidently, he is presently in a state of despair, which has instigated the retreat into his imagination.

Gonzalo's utopic speech is followed directly by the scene where Antonio and Sebastian seize upon the opportunity to kill Alonso and steal the crown, which echoes Prospero's own story. The idea of plot, counterplot and usurpation occurs four times in all in the play, as this theme is also present in the story of Caliban's loss of the island through Prospero's colonisation and

in his plot with Trinculo and Stephano. That Prospero's imagination repeats the same story multiple times (like a recurring dream) highlights his deep anxiety. It also leads me to the conclusion that the story he tells Miranda in Act 1 Scene 2 is part of the dream sequence, not a catalyst for it. 'The government I cast upon my brother / And to my state grew stranger, being transported / And rapt in secret studies' (1.2.75-77). This led to his brother's ultimate betrayal and in Prospero's exile from Milan. I suggest that, when Prospero disengages himself from his dreamlike state, that he will return to a Milan which predates this usurpation, possibly before he even confers any power to his brother. The scenario whereby he loses his throne and is exiled is another strand of narrative that Prospero follows to decide upon a course of action. Is he spending too much time with his study of the liberal arts, and is his country suffering as a consequence?

Mandel interprets the play as a dream, with the actors manipulating the dream as the playwright manipulates reality in creating the play:

By presenting the play as dream, Shakespeare insisted that the audience grant to the play - his imaginative construct - the same serious response, the same awareness of importance for their lives, that they would grant to their own imaginative construct, their own dream.<sup>38</sup>

However, unlike the illogical ordering of events that can occur in dreams, the play has a structure, which is necessary for the enjoyment of the audience. The poet has taken an imaginary world and applied logic to bring the story into a coherent form, which again demonstrates the necessity of reason in balancing the imagination. If the actors are creating a dream world, a world of fiction, then another layer is added if the character of Prospero, played by an actor, is also creating a dream world. Rather than a play within a play, a tool used by Shakespeare in other works such as *Hamlet* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest* is a dream within a dream. The outer layer is the fictional nature of the play, the inner layer the

---

<sup>38</sup> Mandel, 'Dream And Imagination In Shakespeare', p. 68.

imagined nature of the fiction. The inner layer enables Prospero to act out different scenarios.<sup>39</sup>

However, as Richard T. Gray points out, both Spinoza and Kant warned of the dangers of too much belief in the fictional world:

One must take care not to attribute material, positive existence to these fictions, for when this occurs, they cease being productive illusions and instead become potentially dangerous delusions. In short, in order for these fictions to function properly as instruments that solidify the philosophical system, their imaginary character must constantly be acknowledged.<sup>40</sup>

Rather than retreating into his imagination to dream up a new and better life, arguably, Prospero does so to face his demons. He acknowledges his torment in these lines spoken to Miranda and Ferdinand:

Sir, I am vex'd;  
Bear with my weakness; my, brain is troubled:  
Be not disturb'd 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.

(4.1.158-162)

Ultimately, Prospero has the choice either to return to Milan, not physically but mentally, and to refocus his mind and attention back to the matter of his dukedom, or to remain confined inside his own mind, a prisoner of his imagination. In the final speech of the play, Prospero

---

<sup>39</sup> Throughout this essay I have used the terms imagination and dream as interchangeable. Strictly speaking this is not accurate. Charles Ryecroft, in his 1979 essay for the New York Review 'Freud and the Imagination' clarifies that Freud identified two functions of the imagination, one which concerned itself with being awake, another with being asleep. 'The primary processes, in Freud's terminology, are condensation, by which mental images tend to fuse with one another, and displacement, by which they tend to replace and symbolize one another; these processes ignore opposites and the categories of space and time and are wish-fulfilling. The secondary processes, on the other hand, respect the differences among images, obey the laws of grammar and formal logic, take cognizance of opposites and of the categories of space and time, and are adapted to the "realities" of the external world.'

(Charles Ryecroft, 'Freud and the Imagination', *The New York Review Of Books* (1979)

<<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/04/03/freud-and-the-imagination/>> [accessed 10 December 2021].)

It could be said that by structuring Prospero's dream in this way, *The Tempest* becomes a product of the imagination. But then it is a literary work, which shapes any imaginative thinking. I would argue that in a state of anxiety, any imaginative thinking, or rationale for that matter, is muddled in the first instance until a conclusion is reached, until the narrative is written.

<sup>40</sup> Gray, *Inventions Of The Imagination Romanticism And Beyond*, p. 9.

concludes that he should not hide inside the 'you' of his imagination, but find the strength to act:

Now my charms are all o'er thrown,  
And what strength I have's mine own,  
Which is most faint. Now, 'tis true  
I must be 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.

(Epilogue: 1-9.)