Authority and Illusion: The Power of Prospero's Book

In act 3 scene 2 of *The Tempest*, conspiring with the ambitious drunkards Stephano and Trinculo to seize power from Prospero, Caliban warns them: "Remember first to possess his books, for without them/ He's but a sot as I am, nor hath not/One spirit to command" (3.2.95).[1] Monstrosity that he is, Caliban never fails to assess power shrewdly—that is, power as brute force. He believes that Prospero's magic power derives from books. Destroy the books, destroy the power; destroy the power, and Prospero equals Caliban, the "salvage and deformed slave" (*Dramatis Personae*, 10). Caliban here poses a riddle: what is the role of Prospero's books? By conflating two equations—Prospero plus books equals invulnerable power; Prospero minus books equals Caliban—Caliban states a kind of paradox. What he says is both true and false. Other evidence in the play indeed suggests that Prospero learned his magic art from books and relies on them to continue practicing it. "Rapt in secret studies," he found that his library was "dukedom large enough" (1.22.109). Preparing more works of magic, Prospero tells us, "I'll to my book/For yet ere suppertime must I perform/Much business appertaining" (3.1.94). To abjure his rough magic, Prospero must break his staff and drown his book (5.1.57). Books appear both to contain and symbolize Prospero's art. Why else would he declare—in present tense—that the volumes Gonzalo stole for him "I prize above my dukedom" (1.2.168)?

If, however, we assent to Caliban's first equation, we must deny the second (that Prospero minus his books equals Caliban); the whole play reaffirms the kind of hierarchical vision that would preclude such an equation and therefore justifies Prospero's power as moral and intellectual superiority. But if the play insists that Prospero without his books is still Caliban's superior in every way, we are left with a problem: are the books the essence of Prospero's power or only its ornaments?

If Caliban is wrong, the magic books and the power they confer serve to ornament Prospero's superiority, to make it visible, but do not define

the essence of his superiority. Without the books Prospero is still a duke, Caliban still "a salvage and deformed slave." But we must recall here that Prospero blames the loss of his dukedom on his devotion to book learning and "secret studies." Prospero's final renunciation of the book completes the riddle: why must Prospero drown the books that empowered him to recover the dukedom which devotion to books cost him in the first place?

To try to answer this question, I want to suggest that Shakespeare exploits two different symbolic values of the book. The old proverbial equation of books with authority—as in Stephano's ironic "Kiss the book" (2.2.135)—becomes tinged with a new association: books as bearers of fictions, illusions. In the newer—we might say post-Baconian—view, books create powerful illusions but separate us from the business of the real world. Prospero's books are granted no force in the courtly world but nevertheless give him power over the court when it enters the realm of his magic illusions.

Here, then, the play's attitude toward Prospero's books becomes most paradoxical: if Prospero without his books is still a figure of authority, his authority derives not from magic power but from the civilized order which he stands atop. Shakespeare, however, carefully and insistently subordinates that civilized order and its authority to magic power: thus the separation of the two realms (island/civilization) appears to deny the transference of the very authority (civilized values) that makes Prospero ruler, Caliban slave.

I will argue that this apparent paradox emerges as the play's definition of how power should represent itself: as authoritative while displayed but *as an illusion when the display is over.* As a meditation on the masque tradition, *The Tempest* poses Caliban's riddle in broader terms: what is the essence of authority stripped of the fictions that display its power? In answering this question, Shakespeare aims to validate theatrical representations of power by revealing them as ornaments to authority. Thus the ability to renounce the power of such fictions demonstrates the authority such fictions empower. For this reason Caliban is unable to distinguish between a display of power and the prior authority that commands it—to him, the magic is always real. Only the aristocratic characters—and the audience—emerging from the enchanting power of an illusion can understand the powerful display such an illusion creates.

The image of the book comments on the best way for power to display itself—by revealing its fictional apparatus. Clemency, the generous renunciation of power, thus becomes the final display of power. Only authority in absolute control can allow for forgiveness. Clemency becomes a kind

of persuasion strategy that seeks to distinguish the Calibans from the courtly audience capable of awakening from the illusion.

How would the attitude toward books in Shakespeare's day have figured in this position? Why doesn't Prospero use a magic glass or a philosopher's stone? The book imaged authority—usually interpretive authority. Shakespeare's use of "book" proverbs suggests that he deploys them almost exclusively in this sense, not with the connotation of fictions or superseded authority.[2] To read someone like a book is to see through pretense to the central identity. In *Troilus and Cressida* Hector aims this proverb at Achilles: "O, like a book of sport thou'lt read me o'er;/But there's more in me than thou understand'st" (4.5.239). Another common proverb is "without book"—that is, wrongly, not according to the authorized version. Romeo's servant asks him if he can read; when Romeo responds, "Ay, mine own fortune in my misery," the servant retorts, "Perhaps you have learned it without book" (1.2.59).

Other current proverbs extend the same sense. "To be in one's book" is to be in favor with someone; in *Taming of the Shrew* Petruchio implores Kate, "O! Put me in thy books" (2.1.224). To "act beside the book" is to act out of order, not according to prescribed rules. Perhaps the most apposite proverb is "the book of nature." The soothsayer in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when asked "is it you that know things?" responds, "In nature's infinite book of secrecy, a little can I read" (1.2.9). This image of knowing—as divination, reading in nature's book—brings us directly to the connection between books and magic in *The Tempest*.

As critics have noticed, Prospero's magic is meant to be taken seriously as magic before it becomes a metaphor for something else.[3] What kind of world could associate divination and secret studies with the highest forms of knowledge? Michel Foucault has best described the *episteme* which made such a connection possible. To the Renaissance mind, nature was above all *written*.[4] The world of the Renaissance magus was

> covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know must therefore be to interpret: to find a way from the visible work to that which is being said by it and which, without that mark, would lie like unspoken speech, dormant within things.[5]

In this view writing has absolute authority: the natural world itself is conceived of as a text. To read a book and to read nature are essentially

the same activity. The theoretical magic tracts of the period repeat this point over and over. Della Porte, for instance:

> But I think that Magick is nothing else but the survey of the whole course of Nature. For, whilst we consider the Heavens, the Stars, the Elements, how they are moved, and how they are changed, by this means we find out the hidden secrecies of living creatures, of plants, of metals, and of their generation and corruption.[6]

The doctrine of signatures as found, for example, in Paracelsus, portrays a nature that functions like a text: "the hidden character of things is to a certain extent expressed in their outward forms."[7] These forms are the signatures, outward marks of things' invisible essence. As Foucault argues, the Renaissance *episteme* admitted no discontinuity between words and things; the two are related by resemblance.

Clearly, magic, both popular and intellectual, was viewed as a textual art. Keith Thomas, in his massive study of European magic, points out that the clearest intersection of intellectual and popular magic traditions appears in "the conjuring of spirits"—the very branch of magic in which Prospero specializes:[8]

> But for some kinds of popular magic, books were essential, and in them the direct influence of contemporary intellectual speculation can be seen. The most obvious was the conjuring of spirits. Since classical times, it had been believed that, by following the appropriate ritual, it was possible to get in touch with supernatural beings so as to employ their superior resources for earthly purposes. Many such rituals were extant during the Middle Ages, and their numbers multiplied under the stimulus of Renaissance Neoplatonism. It would be a long and separate task to trace the evolution of these different formulae and to establish the precise genealogy linking the many different essays in 'the notary art'—the *Key of Solomon*, the *Constitution of Honorius*, the *Liber Spirituum*, and the others.[9]

The notion that ancient magic texts preserved powerful secrets fitted easily with the more general belief that the works of the ancients transcribed the mysteries of nature and encoded them graphically. The study of hieroglyphics and ancient symbols became linked with magic, due largely to the widespread availability of printed texts on the subject.[10]

The appearance in the 1590s of two medieval alchemy texts (*The Compound of Alchymy* and the *Mirror of Alchymy*) fueled contemporary interest in the occult arts. In the thought of John Dee, a major alchemical figure of the period, hieroglyphs and natural magic figure prominently. His *Monas Hieroglyphica* aims to demonstrate that mastery of alchemical transformation begins with an understanding of ancient characters. Thus magic power originates in a secret hermeneutic skill, which makes no important distinction between investigating words and things; both function as signs referring to truths of the invisible world.[11]

Perhaps the most extreme statement of the view that ancient works encode all natural wisdom appears in Henry Reynolds' *Mythomistes* (1633), which joins a controversy that was current in Shakespeare's day and would later be labeled "The Battle of the Books." Reynolds argues that contemporary scientific investigation is superfluous because all the secrets of nature are hidden and preserved in the classics of antiquity. "It is the firme opinion of ancient writers, that the full and entire knowledge of all wisdome, both divine and humane, is included in the five bookes of the Mosaicke law."[12]

At this point the identification of ancient biblical prophets as magicians follows logically. The most prominent ancient magician of legend was Solomon, a wise king who burned his books and magic staff to keep them out of evil hands. As E. M. Butler points out, Solomonic echoes in Prospero are unmistakable.[13] (And, as Stephen Orgel has noted, James I was regularly represented as Solomon in masques.)[14] Shakespeare carefully aligns Prospero with an intellectually respectable strain of the magic tradition.[15] Shakespeare accomplishes this partly by stressing Prospero's book learning. Prospero also fits the popular image of the learned magician, which includes both Solomon and a figure from English lore—Friar Bacon, the scholar magician based on the actual philosopher Roger Bacon.

Robert Greene's 1592 play, *Frier Bacon and Frier Bungay*,[16] and the 1597 translation of the French prose romance, *The Legend of Fryer Bacon*, both popularized the Friar as a triumphant figure of English national pride who vanquishes his rival foreign magicians. Butler notes another precedent for Prospero in Friar Bacon's tendency (in the romance version) to so overpower his enemies as to feel pity for them and thereby grant clemency. Like the Solomon of legend, Friar Bacon's humane wisdom leads him finally to abjure his magic powers. "What hath all my knowledge of natures secrets gained me? Onely this, the losse of a better knowledge, the losse of divine studies, which makes the immortall part of man (his soule) blessed."[17] Friar Bacon then dies alone in his cell, "a true Penitent Sinner and an Ancorite."[18]

While this religious moral of popular romance is at odds with the intellectual defenses of magic (Raleigh wrote, "The art of magic is the art of worshipping God"[19]), both insist on the connection between learning and magic power. As Butler notes, this image of the magician aims a deliberate counterstatement to the Faust tradition. Friar Bacon *earns* his power through learning, not by making a diabolic pact. Thus Prospero as an image of Solomon, and therefore King James, arrives carefully distinguished from the demonic tradition, toward which James's unflagging antipathy is well-documented.[20]

Shakespeare also departs from the Friar Bacon romance by dropping its religious moral. Prospero's act of drowning his books is an act of clemency, not penitence. Nor was Friar Bacon ever associated with illusions; his magic power is always felt as real. Prospero's breaking of his own powers by drowning his book introduces a twist to the literary topos of the "magic book." The book is renounced not as an act of religious supplication, but as an act of restoring the social order. As I suggested earlier in glancing at the proverbs, the association of magic books—and by synecdoche all books—with fiction and illusion adds something new to traditional magus portrayals.

This twist brings us to the epistemic shift Foucault describes in *The Order of Things*. In Foucault's terms this change occurs when words no longer mirror things but serve at best merely to denote them. Knowledge can no longer value books and experience on the same level.

> Writing has ceased to become the prose of the world; resemblances and signs have dissolved their former alliance. . . . Magic, which permitted the decipherment of the world by revealing the secret resemblances beneath its signs, is no longer of any use except as an explanation, in terms of madness, of why analogies are always proven false. The erudition that once read nature and books alike as part of a single text has been relegated to the same category as its own chimeras: lodged in the yellowed pages of books, the signs of language no longer have any value apart from the slender fiction which they represent. The written word and things no longer resemble one another.[21]

Some of the earliest uses of the word *fiction* to mean "deception" or "untruth" occur in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. Originally the word referred to the act of making or fashioning; in Bacon it means dissimulation: "A man of the purest goodness, without all fiction or af-

fectation''; ''Hee that will easily beleeue . . . will as easily augment rumors . . . so great an affinitie hath fiction and beleefe.''[22] By no coincidence, Bacon advances the first systematic critique in English of the ''nature as text'' metaphor. In Bacon's thought we see the metaphor's meaning change: ''Books must follow sciences, and not sciences books'' (*Proposition Touching Amendment of Laws*). Bacon's nature is still textual—but its writing belongs to a different order from books. He is the first to distinguish ''the works of God'' from ''the words of God'' (*Novum Organum*). ''Bacon's revolution'' has been described as reversing the belief that books ought to guide direct observation. This view, however, like Bacon's subordination of books to science, already assumed the truth of the *episteme* Foucault describes. In the older view the resemblance between reading words and reading things precluded any such priority. The earlier sense of ''book of nature'' depends on this resemblance. The shift in the metaphor's meaning assumes the separation of books from nature in its very comparison. Thus Robert Boyle could say later in the century, ''I could be content the world should think I had scarce looked upon any other book than that of nature'' (*Collected Works*).

Books in this view became either containers of information or else fictions. The standard of language assumed is clarity, not copiousness. Words serve either to catalog or obscure things, not to mirror their secret configuration or significance. The florilegium tradition assumed that all known information on any subject was pertinent—myths, legends, fables, artists' renderings, descriptions, etc. The florilegium metaphor—a collection of flowers, a garden—is applied to all manner of books from the Middle Ages through the late Renaissance, from rhetorical treatises (Peacham's *Garden of Eloquence*) to botanical catalogs (John Gerard's *Herball or General Historie of Plantes*), which announces, ''therefore in three Bookes, as in three Gardens, all our plants are bestowed.''[23]

Bacon repudiates this tradition. No longer should the arrangement of the text be credited with any expressive resemblance to its subject matter. Prescribing how to write natural history, Bacon admonishes:

> And for all that concerns ornaments of speech, similitudes, treasury of eloquence, and such like emptinesses, let it be utterly dismissed. Also let those things which are admitted be themselves set down briefly and concisely, so that they may be nothing less than words. For no man who collecting and storing up materials for shipbuilding or the like thinks of arranging them elegantly, as in a shop, and displaying them

> so as to please the eye; all his care is that they be sound and good and that they be arranged so as to take up as little room as possible in the warehouse.[24]

The change from *book* of nature to book of *nature* could not be more accurately imaged than in the change from "florilegium" to "warehouse." The new attitude is clearly anti-poetic, anti-rhetorical; it shares deep affinities with the Puritan hatred of theater and stylistic display in general. Books, then, should no longer resemble the truths they contain. Such resemblance places books in the realm of deceit, of fiction. Such displays as are contained in illuminated manuscripts or ornate histories can only obscure the truth, which words must serve to mediate clearly. One can see here the emergence of a print mentality, which demands that the textual surface be transparent to permit unhindered access to things or ideas denoted within. The marriage of science and plain style that would beget Bishop Sprat begins here in English with Bacon.

No surprise then that the library could become associated with delusion and madness. Prospero's description of his own isolated existence in his library recalls the madness spawned in the library of his contemporary, Alonso Quijano, alias Don Quixote. Foucault identifies the newer attitude toward books with the figure of Don Quixote, whose madness lies in his inability to distinguish between book fictions and the real world. "The fact that he wishes to be like [the chivalric romances] means that he must put them to the test, that the (legible) signs no longer resemble (visible) people."[25]

Foucault sees in Cervantes' satire a powerful nostalgia for the older worldview in which books resembled things. In the world of *Don Quixote*, to see such a resemblance indicates only madness. Magic therefore is reduced to the only explanation a madman can use to account for the divergence of books from reality. I am not arguing for a case of literary influence here; it is unlikely that Shakespeare had read *Don Quixote* at the time he composed *The Tempest* (the first English translation appeared in 1612). The fact that such nostalgia could exist in 1605 attests to the currency of the shift Foucault describes.

Like Don Quixote, Prospero immolates himself in his library, neglects his public office, and loses his property. Unlike Don Quixote, however, Prospero's magic, acquired from book learning, empowers him to recover the dukedom it caused him to lose. We thus return to Caliban's paradox. Prospero's book is cast in two different lights: as an image of authority, and as an image of delusion.

How then does this doubleness affect *The Tempest*'s portrayal of power? And why would Prospero associate his book so clearly with a view of books that labels them as bearers of fiction and untruth? First, *The Tempest*, by imaging Prospero as Solomon, allegorizes the king and the poet in the figure of the magician. All command players and create illusions. Prospero's power to do so comes from magic books; the king's, from his position to command the writing of books (and plays). Both the poet's and the king's displays, the play tells us, serve ultimately to ornament the authority each figure wields. Therefore the voluntary abjuring of such power itself serves as a further display of power.

In this way Shakespeare exploits the anti-theatrical "book as fiction" attitude by turning it to his advantage. Prospero's act of drowning his book becomes the ultimate display of absolutist power—forgiving one's enemies when one's power over them is supreme. This is accomplished by assuring them that illusions created using the book have been renounced, and that what remains is truly real—Prospero standing as the restored Duke of Milan. The king (in the play and watching the play) is thus taught something about the most effective display of power: a display which suggests that his authority prevails most after the display is over.

Prospero's book encapsulates the play's meditation on the boundary conditions of royal power. In Prospero's storm the king is powerless, and thus the magician/poet claims for himself a special authority. The older image of the book as a source of power finds authority in the art of interpreting the vast ornament-essence relation that inheres in all things, i.e. the act of magic. This art is both verbal and hermeneutic. This art appears most clearly in the contrast between Caliban's cursing and Prospero's incantations. Caliban's curses are powerless, devoid of the hermeneutic art needed to cause what he wills to happen. Thus when Caliban inveighs, "All the infections that the sun sucks up/From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall, and make him/By inchment a disease!" (2.2.1), we can be sure none of it will happen. By contrast, when Prospero routs the lowly conspirators Trinculo and Stephano, we watch spirits respond to his command: "Go, charge my goblins that they grind their joints/With dry convulsions, shorten up their sinews/With aged cramps, and more pinch-spotted make them/Than pard or cat o'mountain" (4.1.258).

The poet thus figures himself as a special interpreter of the ornament-essence relation that galvanizes action, and thus in ornamenting the king's power slyly suggests that such ornamentation feeds that power. The understanding reached at the logical limits of such special interpretation concludes, however, that it must cease such interpretation because the power

it creates is felt by its audience as an illusion. Thus Prospero, to convince Alonso and his court that he is truly Prospero, must break his powers and drown his book. Likewise, to present a display of the king's power to command players, the playwright dismisses the cast. Here stands the doubleness of Prospero's book. The power it creates is perceived accurately as power (contra Caliban's perception) only when the display is ended. The fiction of Prospero's power lies in its suggestion that it merely ornaments true authority. In this sense Caliban was right—no book, no magic. But the power of Prospero's fiction lies in its ability to enchant its audience by rousing them from their enchantment.

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NOTES

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1. All quotations from *The Tempest* refer to ed. Frank Kermode, *The Arden Shakespeare* (London, 1954).

2. All other quotations from Shakespeare refer to ed. G. Blakemore Evans, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston, 1974).

3. A good discussion of this idea appears in Alvin Kernan, *The Playwright as Magician* (New Haven, 1979), ch. 7.

4. *The Order of Things* (New York, 1970), ch. 1.

5. Foucault, 32.

6. John Baptiste Porta, *Natural Magick* (London, 1658; rpt. Washington, D.C., 1957), 2.

7. Franz Hartmann, *Life of Paracelsus* (London, 1896), 55. Hartmann quotes here from *De Peste*.

8. Kernan notices this on 156.

9. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), 268.

10. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Eng., 1979), 1:279.

11. Charles Nicholl, *The Chemical Theatre* (London, 1980), 41–51.

12. "Mythomistes," in *Critical Essays of the 17th Century*, 2 vols., ed. J. E. Spingarn (London, 1908), 1:144–79.

13. *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge, Eng., 1948), 35–43.

14. *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1975), 73.

15. Walter Clyde Curry, *Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery* (Lexington, Ky., 1968), 84.

16. *The Life and Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Robert Greene*, 15 vols., ed. Alexander Grosart (New York, 1964), 13:1–110.

17. *Early English Prose Romances*, 3 vols., ed. William J. Thoms (London, 1858), 1:249.

18. Thoms 1:250.

19. Thomas, 268.

20. A good treatment of this subject appears in Ronald Holmes, *Witchcraft in British History* (London, 1974, especially chapter 8, "The Volte-Face of James I"), 107–17.

21. Foucault, 47–8.

22. All quotations are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1971).

23. London, 1597; rpt. Amsterdam, 1974, 2.

24. *Advancement of Learning and Other Writings* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1937), 353.

25. Foucault, 46.