

The Human Discourse in Shakespeare's *the Tempest*

Hussein A. Zahra Majeed

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Basrah

Two great schemata dominate human discourse, the argument and narrative. Deductive argument explains and supports a conclusion, by marshalling evidence in its favor; its purpose is to force us logically to accept a conclusion on the basis of accepted premises. It presents a temporal inferential relations among propositions. By contrast, a narrative tells a story, and takes us from the beginning, through the middle, to the end. A good narrative is both unified and complex, where the unexpected reversals and discoveries in the middle are by the end understood to flow from the conditions of the action.

It presents relations among actions that are not only temporal, but also historical. Aristotle in his *Poetics* introduces us to these two schemata for thought, and by his careful methodological taxonomy of human discourse counsels us not to confuse them (Aristotle, 1997:54-5).

In his *Rhetoric*, however, he presents a middle term, a type of discourse persuasive argument- that reinstates the narrative context of argument. The content of a rhetorical argument includes *ethos* (Moral nature) and *pathos* (Speech quality) as well as *logos* (Cosmic reason of order); thus it is made up not of propositions but of speech acts performed by an effective speaker to an attentive and affective audience (Aristotle, 1992:78). A proposition in the *Rhetoric* is an utterance, an act, an assertion by someone that will prove causally potent. Aristotle reminds us that argument drives human action, for it is the way we express and explore the moral significance of what we do- before, while and after we do it. Argument is itself an important form of action, perhaps the most important. It is important for the speaker to be publicly known as a person of virtuous character; but just as importantly, the speaker's character must be exhibited by the way he or she argues. Both speaker and audience are typically engaged in rhetorical persuasion as a response to some grave social conflict, a specific historical conflict, which requires both clarification and action. Thus, the *Rhetoric* links narrative and argument by the reinstatement of character as a term of philosophical analysis.

The arguments can be considered abstractly, i.e. independent of speaker and audience, so structuralists pretend that plots may be considered abstractly, i.e. independent of the characters who act in them- characters that hover between history and mythology, a shared cultural setting and the poet's own idiosyncratic experience (Sturrock, 1979:77).

Characters as they occur in literary works may be ranged along a continuum bounded by living people on one hand, and abstract concepts on the other. The figure of John F. Kennedy, for example, reconstructed from historical documents, letters and memoirs by Robert Dallek, is very close to the right-hand boundary, especially as he is still a living presence to many generations.¹ The figure of Venus in Vergil's *Aeneid*

lies close to the left-hand boundary, for she works more as the power of desire in that story than as an individual. She is the concept of love, a drive. To be a living person is, however, to be 'always already' caught up in narrative structure, and to understand our social roles conceptually. Moral or aesthetic notions make sense only in relation to human action, human action is constituted by narrative, and narrative- like argument- requires characters. Actors on the stage, when they talk, are really talking, though with special kind of intentionality; but when they pretend to give birth or die, kill or make love, they are only pretending. Life is not only discourse. Instead of using the word 'character' in a rather free way so far, it would be better to offer a supportive series of terms that may shed some light on the notion: Concept (Myth); Personification (Allegory); Personage (Novel); Persona (History); Person (Life) (Vickers, 2005:118).

The figure of Prospero in *The Tempest*, like the figure of Faustus in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, is presented as at once historical and conceptual. This dramatic strategy is possible because both plays are plays of character: Prospero and Faustus dominate and indeed encompass the action. The fantastic creatures in each play, including figures in a 'masque,' may be understood as aspects of the character of Prospero or Faustus, and thus as lively concepts; and even the more independent figures in the play act only in reaction to Prospero or Faustus (Lake and Ribner, 2004:37). Moreover, Prospero and Faustus speak from time to time *as* Shakespeare and Marlowe, as poets, as the creators of their own words, as agents appealing to the living audience, and thus as living presences.

The Enchanted island of *The Tempest* may be read as a projection of Prospero's own soul, as the play is a projection of Shakespeare's imagination. Prospero is the usurped Duke of Milan, who has been living for twelve years on a mysterious island where he works the natural magic elicited from his studies and raises his daughter, Miranda. The figures of Ariel and Caliban are aspects of the poet's self, one ethereal and one earthly, one invisible and one visible, though both are required for poetry.

Ariel sings throughout the play, usually to mislead the hapless characters who have strayed there from Milan and Naples, magically shipwrecked on the island's shore, as part of a plot designed to restore order in the end. One of Ariel's most famous songs persuades Ferdinand, son of the King of Naples that his father has drowned:

*Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made.
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell.
Hark, now I hear them: ding dong bell.² (Act I.2), (p. 22)*

Ariel has misled Alonso, his father; dressed as a harpy, Ariel tells Alonso that his shipwreck is retribution (which it is, though ultimately not tragic) for his unethical alliance with Antonio, Prospero's usurping brother. Alonso, overcome by guilt, immediately infers that as part of his chastisement his son has been drowned. Ariel is the power of thought, with its delicate exploration of the 'what if' and the 'if only,' of wish and regret. He is a purveyor of falsehoods that are still somehow morally essential. He is master of the *sea change* (this phrase is one of Shakespeare's coinages that has entered everyday speech) that converts the ordinary into something rich and strange, and gives it a new meaning.

Caliban also has his song, just as lovely as Ariel's but uttered from the gut, as if the body were a kind of musical instrument, a muscular sounding board for strings made of hair, or a skin tympanum. He sings to Alonso's servants, whom he incites to kill Prospero:

*I prithee, let me bring thee where crabs grow,
And I with my long nails will dig thee pignuts,
Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how
To snare the nimble marmoset, I'll bring thee
Young scamels from the rock. Wilt thou go with me? (Act II.2), (p. 45)*

Caliban expresses the fleshy handprint of reality. He sings only of the body, of food and sex and violence, but his poems are no less enchanting. Like Ariel, he wants to be free of Prospero's control; unlike Ariel, he is searching for a new master. We notice that Prospero devises a trio of mother-concepts for orphaned Miranda on the occasion of her engagement: the goddesses Juno and Ceres appear in a masque (a festive courtly pageant) with their messenger Iris, the rainbow. Ariel stages it, at Prospero's behest: the universal mother Ceres and the first wife of heaven, Juno, bless the couple. Ceres' blessing is a benevolent, domesticated version of Caliban's miscreant song, as is Iris' address to her, asking her to visit Juno and so to leave:

*Thy rich leas
Of wheat, rye, barley, vetches, oats, and peas;
Thy turfey mountains, where live nibbling sheep,
And flat meads thatched with stover, them to keep;
Thy banks with pioned and twilled brims,
Which spongy April at thy hest betrimms
To make cold nymphs chaste crowns... (Act IV.1), (p.63)*

The blessing also involves an attempt to keep at bay, at least for a while, sex and death, Venus and her fledgling Cupid, and Dis, god of the underworld. The masque is so enchanting that it almost distracts Prospero himself from the plot of Caliban and the servants to take his life, which he remembers just in time. The bloody handprint of reality asserts itself. Prospero sends his lovely mother-ideas away, intoning the most beautiful lines of the play:

*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (Act IV.1), (pp.66-7)*

When Shakespeare sets a play within a play, the fiction of the play becomes at once more and less real, because we are reminded that the actions, in which we had become absorbed, are merely dramatic; the masque in *The Tempest* makes play-acting salient, and brings to our attention the fact that we are in a theatre, not in the midst of life. More real, because we take our place beside the other characters watching the masque; Miranda, Ferdinand, Prospero, and Ariel (whom we can see) sit next to us as we all watch the same revelry, and we shiver with them at Prospero's words, which are as true of us as they are of Ceres, Juno and Iris.

In this immortal speech, Prospero is very close to the real (mortal) Shakespeare, because the speech foreshadows the Epilogue, where

Prospero becomes Shakespeare, as thoroughly, as nearly as any character in any play has ever become its author. The Prologue and Epilogue of a play typically constitute an important kind of meta-discourse about the play even in ordinary circumstances.

The Tempest was, by most scholarly accounts, the last play Shakespeare ever authored. It is a play about an old man, where the hot diversions of lovers and the heated ambitions of young men are not really important, but almost wholly subordinated to the old man's reflections. The point of the play is how Prospero comes to a moment of forgiveness, and learns to say adieu to his ethereal and terrestrial muses, to the arts of enchantment, and to life.

*Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
And what strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint. Now 'tis true
I must be here confined by you,
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
Since I have my dukedom got
And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell,
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands.*

*Gentle breath of yours my sails,
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (Act V.1), (pp.83-4)*

The stage direction reads, *He exits*. And so he does; the speech is a performative utterance: the archaic form of divorce, 'I abjure thee.' Applauding the end of the play, leaving the theatre wrapped in our thoughts, profoundly changed, we acknowledge his departure and our dismissal- which of course allows him to abide as a still insistent voice, a material witness, an effective proposition, an interruption, a disturbance, a song (Nuttall, 1983:89).

Character should be central, for the definition of virtue is the ability to choose the mean reflectively and with pleasure (Eagleton, 2012:174). We cannot infer someone's virtue from the evidence of a single action; the meaning of an act must be understood against the background of the agent's behavior, an interactions with others, over the long term. Virtue is subordinate to the end of all human action, happiness. Virtue may be a necessary condition of happiness, but because we are social and natural creatures and subject to the vicissitudes of the great world, happiness requires good fortune as well as virtue.

The features of character are what allow the poet to construct a plot that is unified yet complex: character is at once apparent and submerged in the actions and speech of the heroes and heroines of Shakespearian drama and Platonic dialogue. Character is a necessary but not sufficient condition of one's fate, which explains but does not necessitate what happens in the end.

To act is to understand what one does in terms of beginning, middle and end: one chooses to do something, carries through the intention and does or does not succeed in the doing. Yet there is no single correct narrative of what we do. At any given time, we are following out and fulfilling many intentions, revising our own understanding of the others as we pursue, anticipate and remember them. To act in a social setting is also to act according to more or less constraining roles. Yet we have many social roles. Pure concepts do not enter into moral or poetic discourse, unconnected to stories, the characters that figure in them, and the arguments those characters offer to evaluate the actions in which they are caught up.

Thus we see that in *The Tempest*, some characters live near the historical edge of the spectrum offered at the beginning of this essay, and some live near the conceptual edge. The tragic figures are more 'real' and the comedic and romance figures more 'stock,' more conceptual. A variety of dramatic effects arise from their segregation in the earlier acts, and from their unexpected, contingent juxtapositions.

Moreover, some characters change their places on the spectrum during the action. With wrenching of tragedy to comic romance, and all these vast expanses of time and place, how can Shakespeare save his play from become episodic, from falling apart into separate, unrelated pieces? And how can he salvage the probable and necessary from the fantasy of a tale that nobody would believe?

The answer lies in character that helps to drive events to their happy conclusion. A prince, as Machiavelli often tells us, must be cruel; not everyone has the stomach for it, as Prospero in *The Tempest* did not; and yet the world requires princes.

Notes

1. In *John F. Kennedy: An Unfinished Life*, (Penguin, 2006).
2. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed., Peter Holland (New York: Penguin, 1999), p.22. Subsequent references to this text will be to this edition. Number of Acts and pages will be indicated in parenthesis after each quotation.

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