

«For thou must now know farther» Representation, Illusion, and Unstable Perspectives in *The Tempest*

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Abstract Scholars in the last few decades have pointed out the manifold relations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* with the increasingly sceptical frame of mind of early modern English culture. As Robert Peirce argued in 1985, different forms of sceptical thought may be identified in the play. Along with the philosophical background which saw the revival of Pyrrhonism and of Sextus Empiricus' thought, the article examines *The Tempest* in the light of recent investigations of early modern visual culture, a period in which the reliability of human vision was deeply undermined by the new discoveries in the fields of medicine, science, technology and art theory, as well as by the controversial debates on the illusions of magic, demonic deceptions and witchcraft. Different forms of ethical and epistemological scepticism in *The Tempest* are explored, taking into account a variety of structural features which include the weaving of multiple 'narrative' voices in the opening act; the condition of the shipwrecked crew «in troops [...] dispersed [...] 'bout the isle» (I, 2, 220), in which each group is ignorant of the truth about the others; and the role of Ariel, who reflects all the characters' conflicting views as a moving mirror. Prospero's island, whose circular space introduces a sort of 'unstable perspective' allowing virtually infinite viewpoints all around it, is examined in the light of the far reaching ideological implications of early modern theories of linear perspective (Panofsky) and of the «unresolvable contradictions that structure the Western discourse on vision, representation and subjectivity» (Massey).

1

In the last few decades scholars have underlined the manifold relations between Shakespeare's plays and the increasingly sceptical frame of mind of early modern English culture. Deriving from a long academic tradition¹ (Robertson 1897; Taylor 1925; Harmon 1942; Ellrodt 1975), Stanley Cavell's prominent 1987 epistemological reading of the playwright's great tragedies as a «response to the crisis of knowledge inspired by the crisis of the unfolding of the New Science in the late 16th and early 17th centuries» (Cavell 2003, p. xiii) already offered ample testimony of the intrinsic

¹ The first investigations on Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare date back to Edward Capell's *Notes and Various Readings to Shakespeare* (1781) where the scholar pointed out a parallel between *The Tempest* and Florio's translation of Montaigne's essay *On Cannibals*.

relationship between Shakespearean theatre and the crucial philosophical issues of his age. The scholar went so far as to argue that «the advent of scepticism as manifested in Descartes' *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare in the generation preceding that of Descartes» (Cavell 2003, p. 3). In those same years, Graham Bradshaw noticed how the playwright's 'radical scepticism' «turns on itself - weighing the human need to affirm values against the inherently problematic nature of all acts of valuing» (Bradshaw 1987, p. 7).

Read against the background of the social and political transformations of sixteenth-century England, insightful analyses of Shakespeare's plays have more recently investigated the ideological conditions that lie beneath the playwright's modes of thinking as «verging upon nihilism» and especially the great tragedies' attempts at destabilizing notions of a ruling cosmic order and political legitimacy, thus undermining «all ideal conceptions about [...] the ordained hierarchy of nature and society» (Bell 2002, p. 168). Attention has been paid to the intricate cultural context that not only saw the revival of Pyrrhonism and of Sextus Empiricus' doctrines, that called into question the trustworthiness of human perceptions (Hamlin 2005; Cox 2007), but also witnessed the development of print culture, where the individual interpretation of texts increasingly destabilised any notion of authority, to the point that even moral certainty could no longer be located dogmatically (Caldwell 2009).

A variety of events - ranging from theologically threatening revelations in astronomy to plagues or eclipses - have been likewise related to the pervasive sense of uncertainty that underpins Shakespeare's plays with their invitation «to question, from moment to moment, the inherited, standard truths of his time [...] and to view fearfully the results of abandoning the props of such beliefs» (Bell 2002, p. 5). Significant relationships with early modern scepticism have also been discerned in the legal uncertainties arising from the sixteenth-century conflict between common law and equity (Carpi 2003, Cormack, Nussbaum, Strier 2013) and in the economic effects of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist society (Sebek, Deng 2008).

Set within such a multifaceted debate, this essay investigates *The Tempest's* scepticism in relation to the specific background of European visual culture which «suffered some major and unprecedented shocks to its self-confidence [...] between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries» (Clark 2007, p. 2). It was an exceptionally complex period in which the reliability of human vision was called into question by new discoveries in the fields of medicine, science, technology and art theory (Edgerton 2009; Massey 2007) as well as by controversial debates on the illusions of magic, demonic deceptions and witchcraft (Clark 1999). As Robert Peirce already argued in 1986:

The Tempest is surely a sceptical play. The characters are perplexed with ambiguities of seeing and judging, and we as audience are invited to share their perplexity [...] But the kinds of scepticism in the play need to be distinguished. There is a playful scepticism based on the incompleteness of human perception, like the scepticism of Montaigne about his cat. There is a hierarchy of misperception dependent on the moral and intellectual qualities of the perceivers. And there is a deep-seated lack of illusion in Prospero, which modulates into a philosophical resignation based on seeing the world as evanescent. (Peirce 1986, p. 173)

Different expressions of epistemological and ethical scepticism will be thus explored in *The Tempest* starting from the weaving of multiple 'narrative' voices in the opening act, where the centrality of Prospero's vision is undermined by alternative reconstructions of the past. The condition of the shipwrecked crew «dispersed [...] 'bout the isle» (1.2.220), so that each group is ignorant of the truth about the others, and the role of Ariel, who reflects all the characters' conflicting views like a moving mirror, will also be investigated along with the play's persistent references to the instability of human perceptions. Finally, Prospero's island, which appears differently to different characters, and whose circular space functions as a paradigm of the 'unstable perspective', allowing virtually infinite viewpoints and vanishing points, will be examined in the light of Shakespeare's ambiguous response to the courtly aesthetic of the Stuart Masque and in relation to the «unresolvable contradictions that structure the Western discourse on vision, representation and subjectivity» (Massey 2007, p. 5).

2

Prospero's long narration in the second scene of the opening act has gained prominence in critical readings of the play as a remarkable instance of Shakespeare's skillful dramatic use of narrative devices (Lindley 2002; Bigliuzzi 2014). Dealing with a time period which covers twenty-four years, from Caliban's birth on the island to the arrival of the shipwrecked crew, Prospero cleverly manipulates the chronological order of the events and constructs his 'plot' proceeding backwards. Arranging the events according to his own criteria of relevance, he starts by 'telling' Miranda the story of his brother's usurpation («'Tis time | I should inform thee farther. Lend thy hand | And pluck my magic garment | From me», 1.2.22-24); then he summons Ariel to shed light on the period before his arrival on the island, and he finally calls for Caliban, thus moving the narrative back to an earlier past, when Sycorax was queen of the isle «Then was this island - | Save for the son she did litter here, | A freckled whelp hag-born - not honoured with | A human shape» (1.2.281-283).

Interestingly, attention is increasingly shifted away from the events reported to the very process of recalling, reconstructing and interpreting them. As Holderness has argued, «the processes of storytelling, and the means by which representations of the past are constructed, are made so obtrusively explicit» at the beginning of *The Tempest* «that the relativities of memory and interpretation become insistently foreground» (Holderness 1990, p. 175). The focus on the potential and, above all, on the limits of memory, in the first part of the long scene deserves particular attention in the light of the theoretical background of early modern culture where «the art of memory becomes [...] an art of doubt» (Sherman 2007, p. ix) and, on the other hand, «it must be defended both against its own tendencies to slide into disorder and against the onslaughts of other minds and competing memories» (Tribble 2006, 153).

The long scene bears traces of a cultural context in which, under the influence of Aristotle's cognitive theory, memory was supposed to be inherently related to the process of vision (Clark 2007, p. 43), thus accordingly bearing all the marks of its unsteadiness and restrictions, as the references to Miranda's 'mental images' and uncertain 'visions' testify:

Prospero: Obey, and be attentive. Canst 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.
 [...]
 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.
 Prospero: [...] But how is it
 That this lives in **thy mind**? What **seest** thou else
 In the **dark backward and abyss of time**?
 If thou **remember'st** aught ere thou cam'st here,
 How thou cam'st here thou mayst.
 (1.2.38-41, 43-46, 48-52; my emphasis)

The sensible qualities of objects in the visual field were supposed to «produce *species* [...] which radiated out from these objects into the surrounding medium, usually the air» (Clark 2007, p. 15) before being stored in memory. As Aristotle stated in *De Memoria et Remiscentia*:

we must conceive that which is generated through sense perception in the sentient soul, and in the part of the body which is its seat - viz that affection the state whereof we call memory - to be such thing as

a picture. The process of movement (sensory stimulation) involved in the act of perception stamps in, as it were, a sort of impression of the percept, just as persons do who make an impression with a seal [...]. (3.449a-450a)

'Mental impressions' and the 'objective things' from which they derived appeared therefore as essentially related to each other, like wax being 'impressed' with an image, as the Zwinglian theologian Petrus Martyr Vermigli explained in his *Loci Communes*, a text translated and published in English in 1583:

[W]e must know that of those things, which by sense are conceived, there arise certaine images, and doo come unto the senses, afterward are received unto the common sense, then after that, unto the phantasia; last of all unto the memorie; an there are preserved: and that they be imprinted and graven in everie of these parts, as it were in waxe. Wherefore when these images are called backe from the memorie unto the phantasies, or unto the senses; they beare backe with them the very same seales, and doo so stronglie strike and move affection, that those things seem even now to be sensible perceived, and to be present. (cited in Clark 2007, p. 133)

The instability of memory gains a sharper focus when Prospero addresses Ariel: «Dost thou **forget** | From what a torment I did free thee?», 1.2.250-251; «Hast thou **forgot** | The foul witch Sycorax, [...] hast thou **forgot** her?» 1.2.257-258; «I must | Once in a month recount what thou hast been, | Which thou **forget'st**» (1.2.261-262; my emphasis). It is Caliban's arrival that marks however a climax in the play's attempt «to give space, if not necessarily clear endorsement, to alternative, unauthorised constructions of the past» (Thorne 2000, p. 214), thus shedding light on the partial and selective accounts that both memory and interpretation of reality may produce. Caliban's views, that are «partial, occlusive or skewed by the beholder's temperament or self-interest», definitely undermine the belief in a shared narrative of the past and they are «consistent with the play's practice of foregrounding the relativity of perception» (Thorne 2000, p. 214). Although Caliban's report of Prospero's usurpation of the island and of his cruel conduct towards him is dismissed as the outrageous fabrication of a «most lying slave» (1.2.344), it is unquestionable that Prospero's hegemonic vision is eventually destabilised by the interaction with his slave's competing viewpoint:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,
Thou strok'st me and made much of me, wouldst give me

Water with berries in't, and teach me how
 To name the bigger light, and how the less,
 That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee,
 And show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,
 The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
 Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
 Of Scyrorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
 For I am all the subjects that you have,
 Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
 In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
 The rest o' the island.(1.2.332-346)

Significantly, true discrepancy between their different views never really occurs. Prospero does not deny having found Caliban on the island on his arrival («I have used thee, | Filth as thou art, with human care, and lodged thee | In mine own cell», 1.2.347-349), neither does Caliban deny trying to violate Miranda («O ho, O ho! Would't had been done! | Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else | This isle with Calibans», 1.2.351-353). What they cannot share is the meaning they give to the two facts. While certainly testifying to Prospero's unwillingness or inability to assimilate cultural differences, thus situating the play in the context of early English colonialism, as influential readings have pointed out (Barker-Hulme 1985; Brown 1985; Vaughan 1991; Loomba-Orkin 1998; Zabus 2002), Prospero's and Caliban's different views of the past increasingly call attention to the elusive quality of historical truth. More specifically, they acquire further relevance in the light of intriguing forms of convergence that recent scholarship has identified between early modern ethnographic inquiry and the Renaissance revival of philosophical scepticism, two «seemingly disparate discourses» that curiously «intersect and interact with one another» (Hamlin 2000, p. 366).

Caliban's persistent references to a previous period, long before Prospero's arrival («When thou cam'st **first**»), when he lived alone on the island («which **first** was mine»; my emphasis), deserve indeed particular attention in the context of early modern ethnographic reportage, where the destabilising discovery of 'other worlds' was often associated to the equally disturbing discovery of an 'earlier past', which seriously undermined the reliability of European historical narratives. As William Hamlin has claimed, such discoveries introduced a threateningly relativistic perspective into the Europeans' hitherto unwavering frame of cultural, ethical and religious values and contributed to producing an increasingly sceptical frame of mind (Hamlin 2000, pp. 361-363). Significant evidence of such implications is provided by many influential documents of those years. Most notably, in his attack to atheists, in *Christs Tears Over Jerusalem* (1593), Thomas Nashe argued that contemporary accounts of the discoveries con-

cerning the 'Indians', testifying to an hitherto unknown 'earlier past' of the Indian subcontinent, were persistently employed by atheists as 'proof' in their attacks against the Biblical certainties (p. 362). The atheists, Nashe argued, «followe the Pironicks, whose position and opinion it is that there is no Hel or misery but opinion. Impudently they persist in it, that the late discovered Indians are able to shew antiquities thousands before Adam» (cited in Hamlin 2000, p. 361). Likewise, in his famous *Note* (1593) containing a list of accusations against Christopher Marlowe's heretical views, Richard Baine relates Marlowe's «damnable judgement of religion, and scorn of God's word» to the recent discovery of an 'earlier past', long before the Bible's account of creation: what proved particularly destabilizing was the fact that «the Indians and many authors of antiquity have assuredly written about 16 thousand years ago, whereas Adam is proved to have lived within 6 thousand years» (Cole 1995, p. 157).

To ascertain whether and to what extent *The Tempest* might actually bear traces of early modern ethnographic reports and of the «relativistic crisis» (Hamlin 2000, p. 363) they engendered, is beyond the scope of this essay. It is indisputable, however, that the undermining of Prospero's authoritative master narrative at the beginning of the play is part of an extremely intricate context in which representations of cultural differences were not only instruments to legitimise the colonialist project: they also led European readers towards «a process of questioning their own values and behaviours [and] played a part in the generation and sustenance of [...] skeptical habits of mind» (Hamlin 2000, p. 365). This process was significantly affected by the Ten Modes of Pyrrhonist philosophy that enjoyed a revival in the Renaissance, following the publication of the first modern edition of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (1562) by the French publisher and scholar Henry Etienne. It was one of the most influential texts of the age that «shaped the course of philosophy for the next three hundred years» (Annas-Barnes 1985, p. 5). As the tenth mode of Pyrrhonian doubt argued, «customs, laws, beliefs, etc. appear differently and incompatibly to humans of different persuasion; i.e. they appear not only to differ but to be incompatible in terms of their value, intrinsic merit, ethical status, etc.» (Annas-Barnes 1985, p. 160). Analogous expressions of cultural relativism were largely exemplified by Montaigne's well-known conclusion that «chacun appelle barbaries ce qui n'est pas de son usage» [«men call that barbarisme which is not common to them»] in *Des Cannibales*, one of the prominent sources of *The Tempest* (Taylor 1925; Harmon 1942). Almost in the same years, he wrote meaningfully ironic observations upon his encounter with three Tupinamba natives at Rouen in 1562:

Once I saw men brought here from overseas. We could understand nothing of their language; their manners, features, and clothing were far different from ours. Who among us did not take them for brutes and savages? Who

did not attribute their silence to stupidity and bestial ignorance? They spoke no French, after all, and were unaware of our hand-kissing, our serpentine bows, our bearing, our behaviour. Don't these things serve as a pattern for the human race? (cited in Hamlin 2000, p. 373)

3

If Prospero's account of the past appears inconsistent and largely controversial, the opening scene of the storm introduces equally unreliable and conflicting perspectives of the present. As Robert Peirce has pointed out, «we watch a shipwreck which we recognize by all the conventions of Elizabethan drama, whatever the precise details of the staging [and] there is nothing in the text as we have to suggest any doubt about what we are seeing» (Peirce 1986, p. 168). We directly experience the unsettling doubtfulness of our perceptions and knowledge as soon as Miranda's opening words convey her own uncertainties about what she sees and hears: «**If** by your art, my dearest father, you have | Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them» (1.2.1-2; my emphasis). It is tempting to read her experience of the inconsistency of human perceptions as an example of 'visual paradox', the visual equivalent of the long Renaissance tradition of logical and rhetorical paradox (Colie 1966, p. 312) which implied, as Stuart Clark has illustrated, «an intrusion into ordinary visual experiences of features that cut completely across normal cognitive expectations and, potentially at least, subvert them», thus producing in the beholder «ambiguity (even duplicity) of image and meaning, indeterminacy of appearances, irresolution between certainty and uncertainty [...] both of which are asserted simultaneously» (p. 107).

Furthermore, as soon as Prospero's explanation of the illusory nature of the 'direful spectacle' of the storm expresses his «stable, privileged view as the artist of the shipwreck» (Peirce 1986, p. 169), other viewpoints are meaningfully introduced by the group of sailors on the king's ship and the rest of the fleet. The latter, as Ariel says:

Which I dispersed, they have met again
And are upon the Mediterranean float,
Bound sadly home for Naples,
Supposing that they saw the king's ship wrecked
And his great person perish. (1.2.233-237)

The former have been left asleep («The mariners all under hatches stow'd; | Who, with a charm join'd to their suffer'd labour, | I have left asleep», 1.2.230-232), as the Boatswain confirms in the last act:

[...] We were dead of sleep,
 And - how we know not - all clapped under hatches,
 Where but even now with strange and several noises
 Of roaring, shrieking, howling, jingling chains,
 And more diversity of sounds, all horrible,
 We were awaked; straightway, at liberty;
 Where we, in all our trim, freshly beheld
 Our royal, good and gallant ship; our master
 Cap'ring to eye her: on a trice, so please you,
 Even in a dream, were we divided from them
 And were brought moping hither. (5.1.230-239)

Being «in troops [...] dispersed [...] about the isle» (1.2.220) and thus prevented from knowing the truth about the others, the different groups of the crew who have reached the island offer a further manipulation of viewpoints, so that the play becomes a «virtuoso piece of different seeings, all of which we are asked imaginatively to share» (Peirce 1986, p. 169). Ferdinand is thus sure of his father's death («Sitting on a bank, | Weeping again the king my father's wreck», 1.2.392-393) and, alone on the shore, is himself believed dead; while Francisco thinks that he may have reached the island («Sir, he may live: I saw him beat the surges under him, | And ride upon their backs; he trod the water»; «I not doubt | He came alive to land»; 2.1.109-110, 117-118), Antonio is certain that «it is impossible that he's undrowned | As he that sleeps here swims» (2.1.231-233). Even Trinculo and Stephano contribute, in the form of parody, to the multiple viewpoints that the storm allows:

Trinculo: I took him to be killed with a thunder-stroke. But art thou not drowned, Stephano? I hope now thou art not drowned. Is the storm overblown? I hid me under the dead moon-calf's gaberdine for fear of the storm. And art thou living, Stephano? O Stephano, two Neapolitans' scaped! (2.2.109-114)

Powerful similarities are also discernible between the conflicting accounts of the tempest, as reported by the characters involved, and some of the Ten Modes of Pyrrhonist philosophy. The fifth Mode, in particular, stressed how different positions produce dissimilar perceptions of the same thing:

[...] based on positions, distances, and locations; for owing to each of these the same objects appear different. For example the same porch when viewed from one of its corners appears curtailed, but viewed from the middle symmetrical on all sides; and the same ship seems at a distance to be small and stationary, but from close at hand large and in

motion; and the same tower from a distance appears round but from a near point quadrangular. (Hetherington 2014, p. 405)

The eighth Mode more overtly emphasised the absolute relativity of all human perceptions depending on a variety of conditions:

We may conclude that, since all things are relative, we shall suspend judgment as to what things are absolutely and really existent [...] Indeed we have always argued that all things are relative – for example with respect to the thing which judges, it is in relation to some one particular animal or man or sense that each object appears, and in relation to such and such a circumstance: and with respect to the concomitant percepts, each object appears in relation to some one particular or mode or combination or quantity or position. (Hetherington 2014, p. 405)

It cannot go unnoticed, in this perspective, how Prospero's island itself appears different to different characters: it is the ideal location for establishing Gonzalo's utopia («Had I plantation of this isle, my lord [...] And were the king on't, what would I do? [...] I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries | Execute all things», 2.1.139-144) but, paradoxically, also the best place for murdering Alonso, in Antonio's and Sebastian's ambitious minds (2.1.275-284). It is the setting Prospero has chosen for his final forgiveness (5.1.130-132), but also the stage on which the never-ending struggle for power, which underlies the history of mankind, is performed over and over again, thus staging «an act | Whereof what's past is prologue» (2.1.247-248).

Not just the initial storm, but everything that occurs on the island thereafter, displays the utter instability and unsteadiness of human perceptions. Scholars have frequently underlined the auditory ambiguities of Prospero's isle, where the complete spectrum of sound, including noise, music, and silence is explored and related to the supernatural quality of the place. In this island «full of noises» (3.2.133), Ariel's song leads Ferdinand to Prospero's cell, his celestial music lulls Gonzalo and Alonso to sleep at the climax of dramatic tension in the third act, but remarkably has no power over Antonio's and Sebastian's murderous minds which are out of tune with the cosmic order. As Andrew Gurr has pointed out, the sonic environment of the indoor space of the Blackfriars theatre largely accounts for the play's «unique exploitation of instrumental music as well as song, and of the plethora of magic and stage effects dependent upon the music» (p. 93). More recently, drawing on seventeenth-century anatomical theory, the auditory imagery of the play has also been related to Renaissance cultural interest in «competing models of audition [...] as both a voluntary and involuntary process that can be restorative, destructive, and even ineffectual» (Deutermann 2010, p. 175).

The unreliability of visual perceptions in the play deserves however no minor attention in light of early modern discourses on cognition that considered «the senses as objects of inquiry and analysis» (Gallagher-Raman 2010, p. 7). That all the senses, and above all vision, are in themselves far from neutral and, accordingly, unable to provide access to the truth of things, was eloquently expressed by Montaigne's famous sceptical stance: «[...] I make a question, whether man be provided of all naturall senses, or no. I see divers creatures that live an entire and perfect life, some without sight, and some without hearing; who knoweth whether we also want either one, two, three or many senses more: For if we want any one, our discourse cannot discover the want or defect thereof» (Florio trans. [1603] 1906, vol. 4, p. 263). The equally sceptical conclusion that the nature of the world remains unavoidably obscure, owing to the differences in the sensory organs of different species, was also supported, on the other hand, by the biological studies of those years, as reported by Sir Walter Raleigh's posthumously published *The Sceptic*:

If then one and the very same thing to the eye seem red, to another pale and white to another [...] [then what] they are in their own nature I cannot tell. For why should I presume to proffer my conceit and imagination in affirming that a thing is thus and thus, before the conceit of other living creatures, who may well think it otherwise to them that it doth to me. (Raleigh 1651, pp. 11-12)

If Miranda is «pushed to the limits of her perceptions and held there» (Peirce 1986, p. 168) at the beginning of the play, all the characters experience in different ways the untrustworthiness of their visions and they often fail to interpret what they think they see. Ferdinand is, for instance, unable to understand Miranda's real nature («my prime request, | Which I do last pronounce, is, O you wonder! | If you be maid or no?», 1.2.427-429) and she too mistakes him for a spirit («What is't? a spirit? | Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir, | It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit», 1.2.412-414). Trinculo does not recognise his mate Stephano («What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? a fish: he smells like a fish», 2.2.25) and Caliban believes that they both are spectres («The spirit torments me: - O!», 2.2.62). The appearance and the sudden vanishing of a banquet served by 'strange shapes' in Act 3 is likewise entirely misunderstood and related to false beliefs about the New World by Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian, who fail to recognise that the apparitions are punishments meant to drive them mad:

Alonso: [...] What were these?
Sebastian: A living drollery. Now I believe
That there are unicorns; that in Arabia

There is one tree, the phoenix' throne, one phoenix
At this hour reigning there. (3.3.20-24)

Trinculo and Stephano equally fail to understand that the rich garments that attract their attention are but a bait in Prospero's trap:

Trinculo: [...] O worthy Stephano!
look what a wardrobe here is for thee! [...]
Stephano: Put off that gown, Trinculo: by this hand, I'll have that
gown
Trinculo: Thy grace shall have it
Caliban: The dropsy drown this fool! What do you mean
to dote thus on such luggage? (4.1.226-231)

Such visual deceits which abound on the island have many equivalents in the surveys of those years on the techniques of sight deception, as described in Reginald Scot's *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584). Writings on visual magic in particular were filled, as Stuart Clark's enquiries have amply testified, «with human torsos without heads (or heads without torsos), flying men, men transformed into animals, bodies dismembered and reassembled, and disappearing banquets» (p. 82).

Also Ariel's invisibility and his appearance in a variety of shapes, ranging from nymphs («Go and make thyself like a nymph o' th' sea: I Be subject to no sight but thine and mine: invisible I To every eyeball else», 1.2.301-303) to harpies («Enter Ariel like a Harpy; claps his wings upon the table; and with a quaint device, the banquet vanishes», 3.3.52) bear traces of a cultural context that was fascinated by visual errors, illusions and other fallacies of sight (Nelson 2000; Hendrix, Carman 2012). They became the principal object of enquiry of the long and complex explorations of demonology, on which «European intellectuals embarked from the 1430s onwards» and which played an essential role in disrupting inherited confidence «in the relation between human being and what they observed» (Nelson 2000, p. 2). As Stuart Clark further illustrates:

They discussed the power of demons to intervene in the not just spiritual but physical world [...] Among these powers, mostly granted, although always challenged and eventually refuted, were some that radically undermined any attempt to maintain human cognition on a secure basis - the power, for example, to suddenly displace objects so that they seemed to become invisible, the power to adopt any bodily form or shape whatever, the power to create simulations of people and events.[...] In effect, the devil could control (and subvert) each of the stages of Aristotelian cognition - manipulating the world of perceived objects, tampering with the medium through which visual *species* trav-

elled, and altering the workings of both the external and the internal senses. (Clark 2007, p. 3)

Ariel's 'airy' nature («thou which art but **air**», 5.1.21; my emphasis), which allows his quick movements, thus enabling him to appear and disappear rapidly and perform his master's tasks up until the end of the play («I drink the **air** before me, and return | Or ere your pulse twice beat», 5.1. 103-104; my emphasis), particularly bears echoes of early modern investigations into prestiges and other demonic deceptions where 'air' was mentioned more frequently than the other three elements of Renaissance cosmology (Habicht 1990). As Clark explains: «A demonic prestige resulted either from the real presentation to correctly functioning eyes of nevertheless false 'similitudes' of things, made of air (and therefore having no real substance) or from an interference with the humours or other dispositions of the eyes themselves» (p. 126). Widely circulating theories on the devil's alteration of the physiological process of vision, such as those reported in Prieur's *Dialogue de la lycanthropie ou transformation d'homme en loups* (1596), argued that «new bodies are made by Satan from *air*» (Clark 2007, p. 139), and that demons were able to form the shapes of objects «by altering the ayre, which is the mean by which the object or species is carried to the eye» (Perkins 1610, p. 157). As illustrated by Martin Antonio Del Rio's *Disquisitionum magicarum* (1617) in the light of the widely shared Aristotelian notion of species, demons were presumed to

prevent the visible *species* from carrying to the eye by hiding the entire object or part of it from view, or by placing in the medium some quality by which the *species* that passed through it were so changed that they presented the object other than it was [...] Demons could alter the composition of the air immediately around the object or between the object and the eye by thickening it so that its appearance was correspondingly changed by refraction (just as a coin thrown into a basin of water looked bigger than it was, and when thrown to the bottom seemed to lie on the surface). They could move the intervening air, so that the species of objects also appeared to move. (cited in Clark 2007, p. 132)

It cannot go unnoticed, in this perspective, that if air is mentioned in many Shakespearean plays as an instrument «of sleights and tricks, not one of transparency and truth, the location for deceptive images of spirits and souls» (Clark 2007, p. 248), *The Tempest* explicitly relates its deceptive quality to the illusory nature of Prospero's art («this **airy** charm», 5.1.54; my emphasis), and accordingly, to the entire universe it conjures up, thus implying more extensive epistemological repercussions:

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,
 Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
 Leave not a rack behind. (4.1.148-157; my emphasis)

4

In such an imaginative interweaving of the multiple components of early modern visual culture, *The Tempest* evocatively sheds light on the far reaching ethical and political implications of visual uncertainties in a cultural context in which, as Stuart Clark has pointed out, «to problematize sight [...] was to problematize the positive things with which sight was symbolically and metaphorically associated, including many of the values of orthodox politics and political morality. [...] If vision was supposed to be the most certain and most noble sense, then to acknowledge its uncertainty in fundamental ways was to dislodge particular political, religious and moral values and question their certainty too» (pp. 256-257).

That the political problem of the legitimacy of authority is a central concern in *The Tempest*, starting from the symbolism of the title, as influential readings have pointed out (Greenblatt 1988), needs no further evidence. As Thomas Thomas' *Dictionarium linguae latinae* (1606) clearly testifies, the word 'tempest' connoted social and political behavior as well as natural phenomena:

Tempeſtas, atis [...] Time: a ſeaſonable time and faire weather: a faire weather: a faire or good ſeaſon: a tempeſt or ſtorme [...] a boiſterous or troublous weather, be it winde, haile, or raine: commonly it ſignifieth a tempeſt, or ſtorme of raine and haile together: alſo great trouble, buſineſſ, or ruffling in a common weale: a ſtorme or trouble of aduerſities (Thomas [1558] 1606)

Instances of the Renaissance tendency to employ meteorological metaphors with political connotations are furthermore provided by Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577-1587), one of Shakespeare's most influential historical sources, which explicitly praises Queen Elizabeth's ability to pacify the destructive winds and calm the swollen seas of Queen Mary's reign:

After all stormie, tempestuous, and blustering windie weather of queen Marie was overblowne, the darkesome clouds of discomfort dispersed, the palpable fogs and mists of most intollerable miserie consumed, and the dashing showers of persecution overpast: it pleased God to send England a calm and quiet season, a clear and lovely sunshine, a quitsett from former broiles of a turbulent estate, and a world of blessings by good queen Elizabeth. (4, p. 155)

Although Prospero's storm is eventually used as a means for re-establishing harmony, still it unquestionably displays a violent confrontation of nature with the social order (Kott 1964) and exemplifies the Renaissance use of tempests as symbols of political chaos,² embodying «bellicose and anticivilizing demonism» (Schmidgal 1981, p. 162). On the other hand, Miranda's clear allusions to the four Aristotelian elements («The **sky**, it seems, would pour down stinking **pitch**, | But that the **sea**, mounting to the welkin's cheek | Dashes the **fire** out», 1.2.3-5; my emphasis) overtly imply a threatening distortion of the natural order, much as Ulysses sets forth in *Troilus and Cressida* (1.3.101-124), thus stressing the figurative connotation of a tempest meant, in accordance with the Elizabethan world view, as a sign of «the cosmic anarchy before creation and the wholesale dissolution that would result if the pressure of Providence relaxed and allowed the law of nature to cease functioning» (Tillyard 1972, p. 24). At the same time, the boatswain's question «What cares these roarers for the name of King?» in the opening scene, indisputably sets the political overtones of the event, performing an elaborate proleptic function that «points to the plotting by figures who care not for the name of King: Antonio and Caliban» (Schmidgal 1981, p. 161).

More relevant to this discussion, however, is how the play overtly relates political chaos to the implications of visual ambiguities. The plot against King Alonso, clearly echoing the usurpation of Prospero's dukedom and providing a new iteration of the struggle for power as the underlying principle of human history (Kott 1964), is elaborately prepared in an atmosphere of strange heaviness and drowsiness of the senses, a torpor that involves all the courtiers except Antonio and Sebastian: «what a strange drowsiness possesses them [...] Why | Doth it not then our eyelids sink? I find not | Myself disposed to sleep» (2.1.197-199). It is in this dream-like condition of confusion between sleep and waking, where Antonio seems to be «asleep | With eyes wide open» (2.1.208-209), that the deceptive visions of his ambitious imagination are conjured up:

2 Significant examples include not only *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, where the symbolism of storms is widely explored, but also *Richard II*, where Sir Stephen Scroop reports that the immanent civil struggle will come «like an unseasonable stormy day» (3.2.106) or 2, *Henry IV*, where the meteorological eruption of Northumberland is even more remarkable; see Schmidgal 1981, p. 162.

What might,
 Worthy Sebastian, O what might? No more.
 And yet methinks I see it in thy face,
 What thou shouldst be. Th' occasion speaks thee; and
 My strong imagination **sees** a crown
 Dropping upon your head. (2.2.202-207; my emphasis)

He thus eventually clarifies his project to kill the king in a context in which appearance and reality may be easily confused one with the other:

Here lies your brother,
 No better than the earth he lies upon,
 If **he were** that which now **he's like** - that's dead -
 Whom I, with this obedient steel, three inches of it,
 Can lay to bed for ever. (2.1.275-279; my emphasis)

Similarly, Caliban's conspiracy with Stephano and Trinculo to murder Prospero is described through recurring allusions to forms of idolatry that overtly parody religious rites («That's a brave god, and bears celestial liquor: I will kneel to him», 2.2.119; «I'll swear, upon that bottle», 2.2.126) whilst maintaining explicit references to the corruption of vision:

Caliban: Hast thou dropped from heaven?
 Stephano: Out o' the moon, I do assure thee: I was the man I' th' moon when time was.
 Caliban: I have seen thee in her, and I do adore thee. [...]
 Stephano: Come, swear to that; kiss the book, I will furnish it anon with new content. Swear.
Caliban drinks
 [...]
 Caliban: I'll show thee every fertile inch o' th' island and I will kiss thy foot. I prithee be my god.
 (2.2.130-142)

They intriguingly call to mind early modern debates on the demonic use of visual deceptions. As Stuart Clark reports, «idolatry occurred in its primary form when the devil convinced people that he was a god by blinding their understanding occupying the inner eyes of their mind» (p. 245). The moral and ethical implications of the deceitfulness of sight were extensively explored by George Hakewill's *The vanities of the eye* (1608) in which, arguing that sight was responsible for all the major sins, he went so far as to attribute «the Fall to the fairness of an apple apprehended by a woman's eye; the 'sense of seeing' thus provided the original motif for sin and the reason for its repetition down the ages» (Clark 2007, p. 26).

The play's programmatic attempt to problematise vision and explore its ideological implications is finally epitomised, in a wider perspective, by its ambiguous response to the courtly aesthetic of the Jacobean Masque and to its use of linear perspective. As influential studies have pointed out, Alberti's set of rules enabling a rigorously unified representation of space around a single vanishing point³ was extensively employed in this form of entertainment, among other rhetorical conventions, with a eulogistic function (Orgel; Strong 1973). Inigo Jones' scenic inventions, first introduced to the English stage with *The Masque of Blakness* (1605), most notably testify to the Masque's aesthetic principles where «the lines of *Prospective* were made to converge on the eye of the monarch, whose chair of state was always placed at the optimum viewpoint» (Thorne 2000, p. 51). Used exclusively at court, or when the monarch was present, the adoption of perspectival scenery functioned as a ritual homage to the monarch in a political setting that meaningfully witnessed the reappearance of the Divine Right of Kings, as Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong have pointed out:

Through the use of perspective, the monarch, always the ethical centre of court productions, became in a physical and emblematic way the centre as well. Jones's theatre transformed its audience into a living and visual emblem of the aristocratic hierarchy: the closer one sat to the King, the 'better' one's place was, and only the King's seat was perfect. It is no accident that perspective stages flourished at court, and that their appearance there coincided with the reappearance in England of the Divine Right of Kings as a serious political philosophy. (Orgel; Strong 1973, vol. 1, p. 7)

That *The Tempest* does not share «the ideological agenda behind these ostentatious celebrations of monarchical power», despite its extensive reference to the forms and conventions of the Masque, has been influentially argued by Alison Thorne (p. 204). It is also significant that the masque and antimasque forms displayed in *The Tempest* «are part not of a court entertainment but of a 'dramatic allusion to one'» (p. 205) within a theatrical context that was utterly alien to such conventions and ideology:

³ They had been largely diffused in English culture thanks to the Richard Haydocke's *A Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge, Carvinge & Buildinge* (1598), the translation of the first five books of Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura* (1584). Haydocke's text, which contained a number of personal additions and emendations to the original, testifies to the ways in which «this particular mode of conceptualising space - or, to be precise, the rhetorically infected discourse associated with it - was transplanted into English culture». Thorne 2000, p. 58. For the equally relevant influence of Serlio's *The First Book of Architecture* (1569) see also Schmidgall 1981, pp. 140-145.

How could the masque be altered by being performed in a public theatre like the Globe with its apron stage, which, reflecting the socially eclectic composition of its audience, is not structurally designed to give precedence to any one perspective? How can it be accommodated within a dramatic form whose characteristic multimodality or heteroglossic nature makes it equally resistant to the imposition of a single controlling point of view? (Thorne 2000, p. 205)

Far from adopting perspective, its mode of conceptualising space and the «rhetorically inflected discourse associated to it» (Thorne 2000, p. 58), *The Tempest* overtly displays the paradoxical nature of this apparently mimetic form of representation which, as Panofsky pointed out, «subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual» (p. 67). As Alison Thorne further explains: perspective «shows things not as they are, according to their ‘exact and true’ dimensions, but as they appear from a given standpoint. Yet it is precisely this distortion of objective fact that makes perspectival images seem so truthful to the eye» (p. 75).

In this sense, Ariel’s rapid movements from one part of the island to another, which reflect the different characters’ points of view as a sort of moving mirror, challenge the single, authoritative position implied by the restrictively monocular focus of Alberti’s *costruzione legittima* and its inherent ideological implications. They create a «hall of mirrors in which reflection is added to reflection in a curiously claustrophobic dramatic world» (Lindley 2002, p. 3) and contribute to producing «a strange and fantastic anamorphosis of events» (Trüstedt 2005, p. 352), which mostly characterises Shakespeare’s late plays⁴ where «we find miraculous events, strange distortions and discontinuities – all the result, it might be said, of holding up to nature, not Hamlet’s ordinary mirror but what Elizabethans called ‘perspective glasses’ or ‘trick mirrors’ (Schmidgall 1981, p. 125).

It is tempting to find parallels between Ariel’s structural function and the illusoriness of anamorphic images, those perspectival puzzles that were so popular in Shakespeare’s lifetime: «Simply by adjusting one’s viewing position, distorted apparitions could be made to resolve themselves into intelligibility, or one image to metamorphose into another [...] the effect of such ambiguity is to throw the beholder’s normal ontological categories into disarray by compelling him/her to experience at first hand the difficulties of disentangling the fictive from the real, truth from falsehood» (Thorne 2000, p. 136). Interesting similarities may be found, in particular,

4 Alison Thorne also reads Troilus’ crisis over Cressida’s identity as an «anamorphic puzzle» that sheds light on the play’s obsession with the epistemological discrepancy between «things as they are and what the perceiver makes of them». Thorne 2000 p. 165.

with some popular anamorphic images of those years consisting of two different pictures combined on a pleated wooden panel, so that one image was visible from the left and another from the right. An intriguing variation of it curiously implied also the use of a mirror:

It resembles the plain wooden version, but the pleats are horizontal instead of vertical, and hence one subject appears when viewed obliquely from below, another from above. The mirror is carefully placed in a tilted position above the panel, which is hung high enough that the second subject cannot be directly seen without the glass, but becomes visible by reflection. The onlooker approaches the perspective and sees the image on the lower pleats. When he glances at the mirror hanging above, perhaps expecting to see his own countenance, he is astonished with the reflection of something else. (Shickman 1978, p. 226)

Regardless however of parallels which might provide further evidence for Shakespeare's first-hand acquaintance with such techniques,⁵ *The Tempest's* imaginative handling of linear perspective and its intentional divergence from Albertian norms shed further light on the play's wider sceptical approach to the unreliability of human perception, memory, knowledge and interpretation of reality (Spolsky 2001), within a cultural context of «visual paradoxes where distinguishing between the true and the false became impossible on visual grounds alone» (Clark 2007, p. 2). In this respect, the play sharpens and defines Shakespeare's «already deeply rooted preoccupations with questions of viewpoint» (Thorne 2000, p. 55) that unquestionably inform his whole production, but are here more extensively explored in their far-reaching epistemological, moral and political implications. As Alison Thorne has influentially argued: «Consistently in his writings, perspective is associated with, and can function as a metaphor for, the relativity of human perception and cultural value-system by which it is shaped, a relativity that is shown to be equally conducive to self-delusion and conflict» (pp. 55-56).

5 That Shakespeare was acquainted with of anamorphic perspective has long been recognised by scholars. As Alan Shickman has pointed out, he might have seen instances of it in the distorted portrait of Edward VI at the National Portrait Gallery and he makes explicit references to such techniques in his plays (Shickman 1978, pp. 218-225).

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