

**A BARD OF REALMS BEYOND: THE FANTASTIC AND SHAKESPEARE**

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**Abstract**

*This paper attempts to examine the elements in Shakespeare which may also be observed in modern works of fantastical literature and culture. With this in view, this paper will look into aspects, events, and the very nature of these works and examine parallels in Shakespeare. Of special importance in relation to them in this study is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, among other plays. This paper also reads into thematic matters common to Shakespeare's works, and the works studied, which are predominantly fantastical or unreal in nature.*

*It also aims to see issues pertinent to the genre in style and expression as seen in the works of Shakespeare which are considered. In order to achieve such purposes, the paper turns especially to the works of J.R.R Tolkien and Edward Plunkett's cycles of stories.*

*The paper is, hence, an attempt to notice in Shakespeare a considerable link with fantasy, and discern such essences in his art. It also compares subjects which are seen as being rather uniquely instrumental to the functioning of works of fantasy. Aspects explored in this regard are magic and its respective practitioners, the significance of elements, imaginary places, and the position of humans and their aspirations in the structure of fantasy.*

‘And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water.’ (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 1030)

Ships and seas, both tame and wild, have held possibilities in Shakespeare as well as for authors of modern works of high fantasy set in imaginary places and worlds. Works of high fantasy necessarily involve worlds entirely set apart from our own, with their own myths, histories, races, properties, laws, and ways of life. They may also function as a separate world within our world and in them, ideas expressed and devices used with great effect by Shakespeare still persist.

*The Tempest* opens with a ship struck by storms as illusory as the magical ones which try to keep Frodo's ship from Valinor, an island of blessed enchantment. Likewise, Prospero's island is one where magic and even the grotesque has traditionally prevailed in the form of the witch Sycorax, Caliban's mother. It plants an unreal world of magic and wonder

within our own in the tradition of fantasy. Prospero's island is like a continent in itself, incorporating most significant geographical features, such as the sorcerer's cave, woods, 'fresh springs, brine-pits', barren and fertile places. Prospero's settlement functions as the centre of civilisation amidst the wilderness, emphasised by the presence of knowledge as well as authority there. It is the microcosm of the landscapes with varied terrain observed in works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and Robert Jordan's *The Eye of the World*, as well as the disc-bound, chimerical Discworld in Terry Pratchett's *The Colour of Magic*.

The ship motif recurs with equal importance in H.P. Lovecraft's story named 'The White Ship', leading the particularly lucid dreamer to a realm bewitched:

[A] pleasant coast gay with blossoms [and] lovely groves and radiant arbours beneath a meridian sun . . . beyond our view came bursts of song and snatches of lyric harmony, interspersed with faint laughter. (Lovecraft, 1109)

Such is the primary brush with Xura, the Land of Pleasures Unattained, a mirror realm, as it were, to Prospero's quaint isle with its verdure and merriment. Man's unbounded aspirations and greed clash with contrary values in the story as well as in *The Tempest*. The story's narrator later yearns to conquer unknown Cathuria, which 'none hath ever beheld', just as Stephano and Trinculo hope to seize control of an utterly unknown land of magic by overthrowing Prospero.

The wizard Prospero embodies the quintessential paradigm of the mage figuring very prominently in any major fantastical work. Aged more with unfathomable wisdom and lore than perhaps in years, though often approximated to be old as well, the nature of his 'arts' consists of properties strongly represented in many examinations of it in high fantasy. Powers of creating illusions are exercised by Prospero, Ariel, and the other minions and spirits, to enthrall and bend the characters from the shipwreck to the sorcerer's will. Likewise, the witches press their augury through the illusions they call their 'masters', in Act IV, Scene i of *Macbeth*. Illusions abound in the world of *The Wheel of Time* series, such as a principal one used by the Aes Sedai sorceress Moiraine on the timorous inhabitants of the Two Rivers to convince them of apparent courage:

Moiraine suddenly whirled her vine-carved staff above her head . . . a hissing white flame flared from each end of the staff . . . the pale fire still jetted out, brighter than the torches. (Jordan, 131)

In a panoply of mesmerising effulgence such as Macbeth views, the townsfolk, threatened by the enemy, are roused to the valour of their forefathers just as Macbeth's fears are changed by the illusions of the witches to terrible fearlessness: 'Then live, Macduff. What need I fear of thee?' (Act IV, Scene i)

Prospero harnesses the might of the elements in assailing Antonio's ship with great force of wrathful destruction. His maddened rage is reminiscent of Lewis Therin Telamon channelling the One Power in order to perpetuate the struggle between good and evil which is so distinctly noticeable in most works of fantasy:

The air turned to fire, fire to light liquefied . . . The bolt [came from] the heavens . . .  
Stone turned to vapour at its touch . . . The earth . . . heaved like a sea in a storm.  
(Jordan, xiv)

Prospero's powers centre on the deep learning and sense of identification with lost classical lore, which is distinctive of the Renaissance - 'From mine own library . . . volumes that/ I prize above my dukedom' (Act I, Scene ii). Spell casters or mages commonly possess such erudition derived from tomes. The Unseen University at Ankh Morpork in *The Colour of Magic* features a similar instance of magical knowledge held in the highest regard, with books in its library chained as in the Bodleian Library at Oxford:

He had gingerly opened the Book, which was chained to the octiron pedestal in the middle of the rune-strewn floor not lest someone steal it, but lest it escape for it was the Octavo, [with] its own vague sentience. (Pratchett, 67)

The Greater Path is spoken of in the world of Raymond E. Feist's works of fantasy, chiefly *Magician*, where the wizard Pug straddles both the Greater and the Lesser Path of occult knowledge and powers; 'The Greater Path is for scholars.' (Feist, 64)

Prospero is clad in a mantle or robe which not only identifies him as a magical being but is imbued with magic in itself. It is typical of the raiment of wizards and warlocks in fantasy works, such as the outfit of Gandalf:

Bilbo saw . . . an old man with a staff. He had . . . a long grey cloak, a silver scarf. (Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 6)

The garb further emphasises the powers of illusion latent in the magical art of Prospero, as it is with the Istari, Saruman:

For I am . . . Saruman of Many Colours!'

'I looked then and saw that his robes, which had seemed white, . . . were woven of all colours and . . . shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered.' (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 259)

Prospero's magic is tied inextricably to fate itself, just as the magic of *Macbeth's* witches is. He guides the characters imperceptibly, by the vicissitudes of fate. Ferdinand and Miranda are meshed in love. The evil doers are driven to repentance rather than demise, effectively winning their souls to the wizard's cause, whereas both *Macbeth's* ascent and descent fall into the designs of fate itself, as it were, woven by the witches' magic. Likewise, it is prophesied that the foul creature, Gollum, will have a coincidental part to play in

accomplishing the Quest of casting the One Ring, his 'precious', into Mount Doom's fires: 'But do you remember Gandalf's words: *Even Gollum may have something yet to do?* But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring' (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 947). The will of Fate intertwines repeatedly with magic in fantasy literature, as Ba'alzamon explains Rand Al'Thor's destiny: 'Already a bend is forming in the Pattern . . . he who will become the Dragon' (Jordan, 810).

Prospero not only frees Ariel and other spirits from imprisonment in tree trunks, but eventually releases the elemental from servitude, much like Harry Potter's ingenuity in setting Dobby, the Malfoy's house-elf in *The Chamber of Secrets* free. (Rowling, 248) The Malfoy family is as cruel as the witch Sycorax. The idea of imprisoning magical minions in respective cells recurs in the dungeons of Charles Ward:

He saw that something dark was leaping clumsily and frantically up and down at the bottom of the narrow shaft . . . only one of a vast number prisoned in the kindred wells (Lovecraft, 106).

The evil sorcerer, Ward, later explains that the captured creatures 'had been howling down there . . . for a hundred and fifty seven years gone!' (Lovecraft, 115)

Caliban, looked down upon as a vile creature of filth by the other characters is almost a reflection of the much despised Gollum: 'Stephano- This is some monster of the isle with four legs' (Act III, Scene ii). Caliban reluctantly agrees to serve Stephano, falling for the lure of 'sack', just as Gollum is subdued with the One Ring:

'On the Precious. on the Precious!' he repeated.

'And what would you swear?' asked Frodo.

'To be very very good,' said Gollum. Then crawling to Frodo's feet he grovelled before him. (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 618)

When Stephano has enslaved Caliban, Trinculo does not cease to treat him with loathing and distrust. Stephano, like Frodo, forbids him to treat his servant badly: 'The poor monster's/ My subject and he shall not suffer indignity.' (Act III, Scene ii)

The notion of time and its potential ravages which persistently runs through the Sonnets of Shakespeare finds treatment with equal consternation in fantasy literature, both in the appreciation of its might and in efforts to escape the effects. Gollum riddles Bilbo:

*This thing all things devours:*

*Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;*

*. . . Slays king, ruins town,*

*And beats high mountain down.* (Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 91)

The inescapable grip of time is what every user of the Ring tries to evade futilely, and art's immortality is contrasted when Sam says: 'Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. . . . put into words, . . . read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards.' (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 712) Their quest becomes analogous to what

Shakespeare aims at in Sonnet 18, best described in the couplet: 'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.' Time's relentless grasp on mortals is accentuated in the prognostication of the workman who tried to etch his name on scaffolding as he fell off a building: 'Why, yer bloomin' life 'ull go by like a wind,' he said, 'and yer 'ole silly civilization 'ull be tidied up in a few centuries.' (Plunkett, 'The Workman', Web). Sonnet 2 commences - 'When forty winters shall besiege thy brow, / And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field.' The countenance of Shakespeare's refined friend may be likened to civilisation, or even that of the Sphinx: 'I saw the other day the Sphinx's painted face. She had painted her face in order to ogle Time.' (Plunkett, 'The Sphinx at Gizeh', Web) It is equally the strife between unfulfilled selves and art in Shakespeare, seen even in modern instances: 'On the day jazz great Duke Ellington died, John Chancellor began . . . "Ellington died this morning . . . Later in the programme we'll hear him play for us." ' (Rabkin, 206)

The desire to evade inevitable fall by force or cunning reaches its pinnacle in Macbeth. He stands amply for the archetype of the Dark Lord in fantasy works, and like them, commands armies and to some degree, for a span of time, even fate. He is equated by Sauron in the Third Age of Middle Earth, and Morgoth in the First Age requiring great alliances between factions and even races, such as the Last Alliance of Men and Elves, or the Battles of Beleriand, to overthrow the Dark Lord Morgoth. (Tolkien, *Silmarillion*) Likewise, Prince Malcolm marshals an army, aided by Macduff, the Scottish nobles, and Siward. Another archetypal Dark Lord, the Witch-King's death is similar to the fallacy that seemingly fortified Macbeth, that none of woman born may slay him. In the Witch-King's case, no man could kill him, but Eowyn surprises him, having disguised herself as a man to kill him: ' "Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!" . . . "But no living man am I! You look upon a woman." ' (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 814).

Miranda, like the Shire hobbits or Two River folk (Jordan, 6) lives a very quiet, unambitious life and her world is invaded by outer realities, but the ideal is preserved by Prospero. Her enchantment by Ferdinand is like Sam's when he sees Elves for the first time.

*The Tempest* effectively closes with Prospero renouncing his powers as he promised – 'But this rough magic/ I here abjure' (Act V, Scene i). His 'charms' are 'o'erthrown' as he departs from magic to the real 'Naples' where it is unnecessary in a new life to come. Likewise, the magic fades from the Rings of Power as the Third Age ends- 'It was . . . plain that the power of the Three Rings . . . was ended.' (Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 378) Thus, it is seen how palpably Shakespeare not only contains much in common with some important aspects of high fantasy, but *The Tempest* is veritably a precursor to the genre.

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