Andrea Young

Augustinian Vision in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: Actor, Audience and the power of seeing.

Thursday 26th May 2011

BritGrad Conference – Shakespeare Institute

I am going to propose a reading of *The Tempest* as a play whose prime concern is with ‘ways of seeing’. Vision, or levels of seeing, are used to create a hierarchical order in *The Tempest*, a play which, in both setting and provenance, could be argued to be lacking in authority. This preoccupation with levels of vision also exposes the play’s acknowledgement of its own instability as a piece of drama, and its questioning of its relationship with its audience.

Unlike other Shakespeare’s plays, *The Tempest* takes place on an exotic island far from the usual hierarchical structures; we are regularly reminded that this place is far from Milan; it is a place where the inhabitants can accept the existence of the phoenix or the unicorn and the intervention of spirits. It is not *completely* ‘Godless,’ as Prospero recognises the existence of a higher power, “I find my zenith doth depend upon/a most auspicious star, whose influence/If now I court not, but omit, my fortunes will ever after droop.” However, God is firmly pushed into the background. R.W. Hanning argues that in Augustine’s *City of God*, “drama...as a form peculiarly belongs to God’s creatures, not to their creator.” So, where better to explore its limits and possibilities than on this island?

*The Tempest* is unusual amongst Shakespeare’s plays in that it does not rely on a direct authority. If we look at the definition of authority, it comes from the Latin ‘auctor’ - to create. Shakespeare may have taken inspiration from William Strachey’s sea adventures, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Virgil’s *Aeneid* and other contemporary accounts of monsters,
but the story is his own. Shakespeare is the author and the authority. Yet, as we shall see, *The Tempest* expresses a striking awareness of multiple perspectives and ways of seeing, and therefore acknowledges the audience’s ability to create or author their own experience of the play at the moment it is acted - thus achieving their own authority. The power to make meaning through the way that one sees something is a powerful force, and one that I will argue *The Tempest* openly acknowledges.

In his work *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, Saint Augustine argued that vision could be divided into three classes: physical, imaginative and intellectual. Whereas physical vision refers to the perception of the world through the bodily sense of sight, imaginative vision perceives images that can be recalled or evoked in the imagination based on what one had already seen, similar to memory and this could also extend to dreams. Intellectual vision is different again and this involves beholding abstract concepts – life, death, love, loss. It does not need to correspond to the physical sight. Augustine’s classification of seeing is also hierarchical, as it is only through intellectual vision that one can truly get close to God.

If we examine the first two scenes of *The Tempest*, we realise that from the outset, the emphasis is on seeing and on how things are seen. The audience is thrust directly into the middle of the action on the ship and the sailors and the passengers ‘see’ or interpret the storm in different ways. Gonzalo is assured that they will all be fine as, “Me thinks he hath no drowning mark upon him.” However, he comes into conflict with the sailor’s who still see the practical need to try to save the ship, a conflict of perception that is perhaps reflected in the Mariners’ cry, “We split! We split!” There is a division of opinion as well as a physical divide as some jump from the ship and others opt to stay. In scene two, we move immediately to Miranda who has seen the ship from the shore, “The sky, it seems, would
pour down stinking pitch,/But that the sea, mounting to th’welkins’ cheek/Dashes the fire out. O, I have suffered/With those I saw suffer!” (lines 3-6). Miranda has been emotionally moved by what she has perceived visually. Notice how she says “seems.” However, Prospero is quick to explain in lines 28-32, “I have with such provision in mine art/So safely ordered that there is no soul – No, not so much perdition as an hair/Betid to any creature in the vessel,/Which thou heardst cry, which thou sawst sink./Sit down, for thou must know farther.” Prospero admits that he needs to share information with Miranda that will help her see this event differently, and on a higher level.

In the same scene, Ariel returns and describes in detail the action of the tempest that he has caused (lines 196-207) and recalls the reaction of the rest of the fleet who have since left, “Supposing that they saw the King’s ship wrecked,/And his great person perish” (237-8). In just two scenes we have at least six different ways of seeing the tempest. With each new account of the same event, the audience, as well as the characters, have to readjust their interpretation of the tempest.

These first two scenes also introduce the idea of perspective, in both the visual sense and in the sense of a mental process. Perspective allows for the same thing to be looked at from a different angle, which in effect can change our perception of that thing and therefore its ‘meaning’. It also allows attention to be drawn to one thing over another. Perhaps more importantly, however, the perspective of the watcher allows for a personal or individual response, or rather multiple responses, something built on in act 2 scene 2 where Gonzalo, Antonio and Sebastian describe what they can see on the island:

**Antonio:** The ground indeed is tawny  
**Sebastian:** with an eye of green in’t
Antonio: he misses not much
Sebastian: No, he doth mistake the truth totally.

This may be, on one level, a joke about staging, but this and the first two scenes also make an important point about individual responses.

If we compare art from the Medieval period to that of the Renaissance, the first thing we would probably notice is difference in perspective. Medieval art, the majority of which is religious, often focuses very much on figures in the foreground, whilst backgrounds are not as important. The aim of most medieval art was to engage the audience in contemplation of that central image, usually a crucified Christ or a saint, and thus stir them to devotion. When perspective is used in medieval art, it is used to draw attention to the central figure of Christ, and often the other figures in the painting are focused on Christ alone or have their heads bowed in an expression of grief. The emphasis is on making all viewers contemplate the same thing.

Medieval audiences were also regularly told what they should see. Medieval mystery plays had the figure of the Contemplacio or Expositor, who could arrive before and after a biblical episode was played, first telling the audience what they were due to see and afterwards telling them how they should see it figurally, symbolically or typologically. At the start of the Chester Abraham play, the Expositor says, “This play, forsooth, begynne shall hee/in worship of the trinity that yee may all hear and see/that shall be done todaye” and at the end of the play he returns and says, “Lordinges, what may this significye, I will expounde it appertly – /the unlearned standing herebye may know what thus be.” The medieval Treatise of Miraclis Playing also held as one of its main oppositions to medieval drama the fact that
the watcher’s reaction could never be fully determined or controlled, despite efforts to prescribe what an audience should see.

If we look at art from the Renaissance period, there is a difference with regards to depth. The eye can move around and zoom in and out, focus on one item in the distance or the foreground, or look at it as part of the bigger picture. It encourages individual response and choice of response. The opening scenes of *The Tempest*, through giving us different viewpoints of the same thing, also try to create perspective, visually and narratively. The play also emphasises the role of perspective in the metaphorical sense. Prospero, on the island and away from Milan, has been able to achieve perspective on his situation and admit his own faults as well as his brother’s. At the end of the play, Gonzalo acknowledges that distance was needed in order for people to find resolution, “in one voyage/Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis,/And Ferdinand her brother found a wife/Where he himself was lost;/Prospero his dukedom/In a poor isle; and all of us ourselves,/When no man was his own.”

The idea of perspective is also used at the end of the play to signify Alonso’s new understanding of the situation. When Ferdinand and Miranda are revealed to the group, Alonso responds by saying “If this prove/A vision of the island, one dear son/Shall I twice lose,” questioning what he sees. Ferdinand moves forward, as if from the background to the foreground of a painting, thus changing the perspective of his father and allowing him to realise that he is real. Elsewhere, when Ariel takes Stefano, Triculó and Caliban into the thorns and the thickets, it is as if they are moving into the leafy background of a painting, to allow the wedding masque, and all it reveals, to take precedence.

*The Tempest* openly admits that as a play it cannot control what, or rather how, the audience see the play. This admission, and perhaps anxiety, is also apparent in act 1 scene 2.
as Prospero continually chides Miranda, and accuses her of not paying attention as he tells his history. “Dost thou attend me?” “Thou attend’st me not!” Miranda needs to pay attention physically in order to progress through the visual hierarchy. Yet Miranda’s ability to progress is paradoxically expressed through the act of crying – “Alack, for pity!/I, not remembering how I cried out then,/Will cry it o’er again; it is a hint/That wrings mine eyes to’t.” (131-134) She is able to use both imaginative and intellectual vision to experience the loss and fear felt by her father.

Throughout the play, The Tempest uses the different levels of seeing as identified by Augustine, as a loose hierarchical structure upon which to build the action of the whole play and to differentiate between characters. In act 2 scene 2, Caliban immediately identifies Trinculo physically, “Here comes a spirit of his, And to torment me.” (line 15). Trinculo, perhaps as a way of suggesting the difference between the shipwrecked characters and Caliban as ‘the other’, uses his imagination to try and figure out what Caliban is by referring to what he has heard about creatures in distant lands, ”A strange fish!” “A-four legged monster” (lines 18-36). However, in the same scene, Trinculo, Caliban and Stefano partake in drinking, numbing their senses and blocking the physical channels through which they take the first step in perceiving things. In preventing the first level of ‘seeing’ the physical world correctly, they are unable to achieve the other types of ‘seeing’ and thus Stefano and Trinculo follow Caliban. It is metaphorically a case of the blind leading the blind, as Caliban’s belief that Trinculo and Stefano will actually be of any use to him can also be questioned on grounds of his drunkenness.

This same visual hierarchy is also used, I would suggest, on a basic level to differentiate between Caliban and Ariel. Caliban, as we have seen, appears to be associated with seeing
things physically or incorrectly. In contrast, much of Ariel’s purpose in the play is to watch and report back what he sees to Prospero. However, I would argue that it is not until act 5 scene 1, where Ariel really secures his release through demonstrating his ability to see on a level akin to the intellectual level described by Augustine. In a poignant exchange, Prospero asks Ariel to report on his brother and Gonzalo to which Ariel replies: “Him that you termed, sir, the good old lord Gonzalo:/His tears run down his beard like a winter’s drops/From eaves of reeds. Your charm so strongly works ‘em/That if you beheld them your affections/Would become tender.” Prospero asks, “Dost thou think so, spirit?” to which Ariel replies, “Mine would, sir, were I human” (15-19). Prospero goes on, “And mine shall. Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling/Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,/One of their kind, that relish all as sharply/Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art?” (21-23). Although, as admitted by them both, Ariel is not human, he has been able to progress through an approximated visual hierarchy, and in so doing has allowed Prospero himself to ‘see’ his brother’s plight and the need for forgiveness. Caliban, on the other hand, remains left behind, admitting at the end of the play “What a thrice-double ass/Was I to take this drunkard for a god,/And worship this dull fool!” (299-300) but without any real chance to demonstrate that he can be any wiser before the action of the play ends. The play does not allow him to fully progress through the hierarchy of vision.

So far, the emphasis has been on the characters and their ways of seeing. However, in act three scene two, the audience themselves are called to question what they see and more importantly how they see it. The scene begins as Caliban creates an alternate vision of the island, with Prospero painted as a ‘tyrant’ and a ‘cheat’. Ariel then enters, invisible. The audience is immediately in a privileged position and watch as Caliban, Trinculo and Stefano
argue and come to blows as Ariel interjects their words with ‘thou liest’, suggesting that there is an alternative vision of the island than that presented by Caliban. Undeterred, Caliban builds up his picture of life on the island to develop the plot to kill Prospero. In keeping with the visual hierarchy, he aims to ‘brain’ Prospero when he is asleep and therefore without the sense of sight. How is the audience to view this scene? They are privy to something that the figures on stage cannot see, and therefore their ability, as spectators, to access different levels of seeing is brought to the forefront. Comedy and danger are sharply juxtaposed against one another.

The last time the audience saw Caliban, Tricuло and Stefano it was a comedic scene featuring alcohol. Drunkenness, which usually signals comedy, also frames this scene. As a result, does the audience look at the scene on a comedic level, enjoying the violence and the conflict between Stefano, Caliban and Trinculo that Ariel’s invisibility brings? Do they take their threat to Prospero seriously, or as a joke due to how the scene started? Does the way they see this scene change throughout? What’s more, is the audience not invited to question whether Caliban may actually be telling, what to his mind, is the truth about his treatment by Prospero? Up to this point the audience has been made fully aware of the existence of different perspectives and different ways of seeing. In Caliban’s eyes, the colonised island inhabitant, Prospero is a ‘tyrant’ and a ‘sorcerer,’ – perhaps as an audience we are asked to reconsider how accurate a description this is of him. The audience may also want to re-assess their perception of the exchange between Prospero and Caliban in act one scene two. Act three scene two, I think, brings to the forefront the audience’s role in making meaning through what they choose to see, and the way that they choose to see it.
However, the wedding masque in act 4 scene 1 is perhaps the moment where ‘seeing’ in the Augustinian sense comes to a head. To begin with, this scene symbolises Miranda’s maturity and progress through the different levels of seeing. When she first saw Ferdinand, Miranda said he was so perfect that “Nor can imagination form a shape/besides yourself, to like of.” This may appear on first hearing as counter to the imaginative process, but, in order to progress up the visual hierarchy she has to begin to appreciate him physically, which, in paradoxically disparaging imagination, the next step in the structure, she does. By the time we get to the wedding masque we also see that Prospero trusts his daughter’s ability to see for herself. Prospero no longer needs to complete the meaning of things by explaining to her the context or the bigger picture as he did at the start play. Miranda can now complete the meaning of what she sees by herself, and in doing so she has gained authority (remembering that authority comes from ‘auctor’ - to create). This is perhaps signified by Prospero’s instruction to put into practice her new skill and simply watch the masque –“No tongue, all eyes! Be silent.” The wedding masque is the symbolic reward for Miranda’s visual maturity.

Miranda’s visual progress runs parallel to, and is connected with, that of Prospero. The masque is described by Prospero as a “vanity of mine art” to entertain the couple and celebrate their union. Ferdinand clearly appreciates the entertainment value: “This is a most majestic vision/and harmonious charmingly” (118-9) but he is stopped in his tracks by Prospero who again wants him to simply look, “Sweet now, silence.” (124) Prospero himself appears to be engrossed in the bringing forth of this play within the play until the reapers and nymphs dance, at which point he puts a halt to the proceedings and becomes agitated. Prospero acknowledges the couple’s disappointment “You do look, my son, in a moved
sort. / As if you were dismayed" (146-7). This comment from Prospero reveals the different levels of ‘vision’ or ‘seeing’ in this scene. Whilst Ferdinand is dismayed at the loss of his “majestic vision,” suggesting that he looks at the play on a visual and imaginative level only, Prospero has gone through the three levels of seeing in a way he has never done so before.

During the masque, Prospero himself was immersed in the drama, just as at the start of the play we hear that he had immersed himself in his books and so neglected his kingdom, leading to disaster. I would suggest that the fact that Prospero stops the Masque during the dance between the reapers and the nymphs is key. Prospero has seen and enjoyed the dance physically and imaginatively. In seeing it imaginatively, he has recalled his own knowledge of the figure of the Reaper. Reapers suggest two things – one, fertility, but also, the act of reaping has links with death through the figure of the grim reaper himself – the direct opposite of fertility. Prospero advances from imagination to intellect and is now at the stage where he considers the abstract concepts of life, death, and second chances. He can avoid the same disaster as he faced in the past by leaving the drama as he should have left his books when he was Duke of Milan. He sees the bigger picture, so to speak, takes action against Caliban et al and does not fall at the final hurdle.

We have covered much of what seeing means within the play, but what does this tell us about Shakespeare’s perception of the way his own art is seen? Much has been made by critics of the role of Prospero as the artist, authority and even a proxy for Shakespeare himself. He labours, schemes and plans to perfect his work, weaving together separate strands to create unity. In his Epilogue, Prospero apologises for any wrong doing in his attempt to finish his work and acknowledges that he belongs to the drama. He asks that the audience show their approval through the clapping of their hands “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” (9-13). The audience’s role appears to be defined as
suspending their disbelief long enough to watch the play and showing their approval at the end.

However, if we look closely at the start of his speech, something else is revealed about the audience’s part in the making of this play. He begins “Now my charms are all o’erthrown,/And what strength I have’s mine own,/Which is most faint.” The play proper has finished and so Prospero’s strength is failing – a recognition that he depends on the audience, not Shakespeare, for his existence. The audience are needed to complete play – they are the creators of meaning and they therefore possess authority. I would argue that, although the two depend on each other, the focus of The Tempest is not on the artist but on the audience. Far from a play that focuses on the role of the lone artist as he attempts to perfect his creation, The Tempest is heavily aware of the collaboration needed between author, actor and audience to create meaning. It is not always happy about this, but it does acknowledge that it is essential.

The first meaning of drama is mimesis - literally miming, copying someone or someone else’s actions and traits. Pretending to be something that you are not. Christian history identifies Lucifer’s attempt to usurp God as the first act of drama. It is very much an earthly pursuit. The Tempest is full of examples of mimesis, of drama within the drama - Ariel transforms from his usual form to that of a Harpy, Prospero feigns cruelty towards Ferdinand and lies to Alonso that his son is dead. He also admits the dangers that come when mimesis goes too far, as in the case of his brother: “To have no screen between this part he played/And him he played it for, he needs will be/Absolute Milan’.
However, there is another aspect of drama that tends to be forgotten. Peter Brook notes, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.” Drama happens whenever there is a watcher and someone to be watched; it requires at least two parties for it to happen. It is a collaborative endeavour. And it is this aspect of drama that The Tempest is concerned with. If we think about Prospero again, we realise that he has just as much, if not more, affinity with the audience than the artist. He spends just as much time watching the action and taking meaning from it as he does directing it. He watches and interprets what he sees as the tempest takes place, as Miranda and Ferdinand fall in love, and as Ariel appears as a Harpy to Alonso, Gonzalo and Sebastian.

Throughout The Tempest, characters interpret what they see in different ways, whether that is through choice, naiveté, influence or perspective. No matter how perfectly something is made, responses to that thing will vary. This is perhaps why the revelation of Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess is never fully explained to us. Alonso and Sebastian do respond to what they see, but they do so on a basic visual level and not an intellectual one, Alonso focussing on his son rather than the scene, and believing him to be a spirit. Prospero says nothing at all as to the meaning of the game. The audience, and the rest of the characters are to make their own mind up about what they see. This is perhaps an admission that, try as he might, neither Shakespeare, nor any artist for that matter, can make an audience see something in exactly what they may want us to.

At the end of the play, Prospero breaks his staff and drowns his books. Many have seen this as a rejection of the world of illusion for the real world. However, I suggest that it is a

---

recognition that the pen and paper can only do so much; the staff being akin to a writing
implement and the books signifying the written word, which only come to life and gain true
meaning when acted – as Hans George Gadamer has observed, “drama only exists when it is
played.”

If we consider that the word authority comes from ‘auctor’ - to create, we realise that the
authority of the play does not lie with the one who writes the words, it is a collaborative and
variable process, and Shakespeare chooses to explore this in a play that is divorced from the
usual authorities – it is an original story that does not rely on an authoritative source and it
is also on an island far from usual hierarchical structures of authority. The only true
authority is the audience, as they create their own meaning through ‘seeing’ on the various
levels. In The Tempest, it is perhaps not just the case that, “all the world’s a stage,” but that,
‘all the stage’s the world.’