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Lying or Belying: Dreams in *The Tempest*

“You do yet taste / Some subtleties o’th’ isle, that will not let you / Believe things certain” cautions Prospero, the magician protagonist of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, to the befuddled councillor Gonzalo (5.1.123-25). After revealing both himself and his awe-inspiring magic to the shipwrecked sailors from Naples and Milan, Prospero senses Gonzalo’s wary disbelief regarding his sudden and fortuitous turn of events, and he attempts to comfort the noble Gonzalo by assuring that the current experience—unlike the earlier tricks of the island—exists firmly in reality. Of course, Gonzalo’s disbelief is well-founded, for throughout the play, Prospero tortures the sailors with dreamlike fantasies only to reveal the falsity of these visions. Earlier in the plot, for example, Prospero conjures a tempting and beautiful banquet before the starving men, tantalizing their imaginations and encouraging them—after a brief debate—to partake in the feast. However, before the sailors consume a single morsel, he makes the food disappear and replaces the feast with the obedient Ariel’s dreadful harpy, revealing the lie behind the dream of the banquet. In fact, Shakespeare continuously links dreams and lies in both the language and plot of the play, and this allows him to highlight the audience’s own imaginative process when viewing a work of theatrical fiction. Thus, by juxtaposing dreams and lies—both theatrically and textually—throughout *The Tempest*, Shakespeare draws attention to and ultimately celebrates the imagination of the play’s audience.

A close analysis of the word “dream” reveals its historical connection to lies and deceit, especially during Shakespeare’s time. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, a dream signified “a series of images, thoughts, and emotions, often with a story-like quality, generated by mental activity during sleep; the state in which this occurs” or also “a prophetic or supernatural vision experienced when either awake or asleep” (“dream”). In this definition, dreams stimulate the imagination, producing stories with emotions or prescient visions both when awake and during sleep. Notably, the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Shakespeare’s use of dreams in *The Tempest* as an example of this definition, solidifying its relevance to the play. However, this dictionary supplies another understanding of the word “dream” during Shakespeare’s life, asserting that word also referred to “something imagined or invented; a false idea or belief; an illusion, a delusion; (in early use also) a sham, a pretence (*obsolete*)” (“dream”). In addition to the narrative fantasies associated with dreams, dreams also indicated instances of falsity and even outright deceit. Though part of this meaning has since become obsolete, Shakespeare lived in a time when this definition was prevalent, and—according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*—he even used the word in this context in his *Timon of Athens*. Evidently, Shakespeare possessed familiarity with both the imaginative and deceitful definitions of dreams, allowing him to exploit this relationship in *The Tempest*.

Further exploring the nature of dreams during Shakespeare’s life, medievalist scholar Jerome Mandel provides more evidence connecting Shakespeare’s use of dreams—as both fantasies and lies—to the imagination. Dreams clearly resulted from the imaginative process for Shakespeare’s audience, according to Mandel. Relying on medieval and Renaissance scholarship from the perspective of the 1970s, Mandel reveals that “no matter how real [the dreams] seemed,

they were inherently illusory...whatever reality they present or represent was an imaginative reality which is as distinct and separate from experienced reality as the play-world is from the real world” (Mandel 63). Apparently, Shakespeare’s audiences understood the inherent fabrication of dreams; despite their belief in witchcraft and acts of divinity or the supernatural, Jacobean audiences knew that dreams stemmed from their imagination—not some external reality. In addition to directly connecting the audience’s imagination to dreams during the time of Shakespeare’s career, Mandel also links the disparity between dreams and reality to the difference between theater and reality. This analogous relationship allows Shakespeare to highlight and celebrate the audience’s imagination in *The Tempest* through the dual nature of dreams.

Intriguingly, the convergence of dreams and lies first appears in the stage directions—and in the minds of audience members—even before the first line of dialogue. Conveying the titular tempest, the first direction declares “*A tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard*” (1.1). While the stage directions in this play’s text seem uncharacteristically long when compared to Shakespeare’s other plays, this line—even with its added detail—fails to capture the full effect of the storm. Instead, by solely referencing the “noise” the audience hears, the note concerns only the sound of the tempest that serves as a catalyst for the drama by shipwrecking the sailors. In his analysis of Shakespeare’s meteorology, *Shakespeare’s Storms*, Shakespearean scholar Gwilym Jones focuses on the original production of *The Tempest* at the indoor Blackfriars Theater, noting that “‘thunder’ and ‘lightning’ are different theatrical effects, but ‘thunder and lightning’ is a compound phrase synonymous with ‘storm.’ There is, therefore, no decisive contradiction in the stage direction...the ‘tempestuous noise’ is likely to have been only a noise” (Jones 128-29).

Despite “lightning” indicating a visual element to the effect, Jacobean audiences likely interpreted “thunder and lightning” as a shorthand for storm. Moreover, the constraints of the Blackfriars’ indoor setting and higher-class audience eliminated the possibility for smelly pyrotechnics to convey the storm, so sound allowed Shakespeare to thrill his audiences without disturbing their sensibilities. And, although researchers cannot necessarily attribute the stage directions to Shakespeare, the surviving directions provide a record of how the plays were likely performed during his life. Notably, according to the stage directions in *The Tempest*, the storm foregrounded in the play’s title does not actually materialize—no actual storms appear onstage. Rather, sound merely hints at the tempest, prompting theatergoers to fabricate the rest of the storm with their imagination. The storms’ stage directions permit Shakespeare to build a fantasy in his audience using lies.

As a result, Shakespeare stimulates his audience’s imagination with the portrayal of the tempest at the start of the play. In order to create the storm, theatergoers must imagine the terrible tempest based on the auditory—and even, as theater technology advanced, visual—cues supplied by the production. Probing the power of the audience’s projection in *The Tempest*, English literature scholar Peter Knox-Shaw argues that “to project...is to transfer a mental image to an object outside the self. An obvious feature of this process is that an inward tendency presents itself as—and sometimes gets mistaken for—an objective reality” (Knox-Shaw 23). The sparse stage directions for the storm provide enough abstraction for the audience to project and imagine their own storm onto the play; members of the audience each create, or dream, their own tempest. However, since Renaissance theatergoers understood the inherent fabrication of their imaginings, this act of imagination encouraged at the start of *The Tempest* immediately draws

attention to itself. Shakespeare juxtaposes the deceit of the storm's realization with the dreams of the audience's imagination, foregrounding the power of imagination for the rest of the play.

Beyond the theatrical, Shakespeare also conflates dreams and lies on a linguistic, textual level—notably, in Prospero's speech after the dissipated masque. After distracting thoughts of Caliban's rebellious plot override his consciousness and thus end the celebratory performance he put on for his daughter, Miranda, and her recently betrothed, Ferdinand, Prospero delivers a contemplative monologue, reflecting on "the baseless fabric of this vision" (4.1.151). At first, Prospero appears to simply reflect on the limited power of his magic to maintain the illusory masque, but he then grows more introspective, adding "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" (4.1.154-158). Commenting on the fleeting nature of his masque, the theater, and life itself, Prospero points out how—with imagination—people create dreams and fantasies for themselves. Yet he reminds himself—and Miranda, Ferdinand, and the audience—that these mortal dreams eventually end and disappear. Prospero interprets these imaginative dreams as temporary placeholders; they serve as lies that—for a time—mask the true nature of existence. English and medievalist scholar Clifford Davidson, analyzing this crucial monologue, frames Prospero's remarks in terms of Neo-Platonism: "the world, actors on an ordinary stage, and this particular pageant are like dreams which, when they pass, vanish without a trace. Prospero's Neo-Platonic cosmos is an insubstantial emanation: life is shadow and dream" (Davidson 16-17). According to Davidson, Prospero looks to his imagination and magic to veil the darkness that underlies life. In the monologue, Prospero contends that people must dream—and thus lie to themselves—in order to

make life worth living, and through these impactful reflections on the dual nature of dreams, Shakespeare calls attention to his own role in imagining them. And, by pointing out how vital this imaginative process is to living a full life through Prospero's monologue, Shakespeare ultimately celebrates his audience's imaginations.

Furthermore, Davidson's Neo-Platonic analysis of Prospero's monologue emphasizes the role of truth in the poetry of the play, revealing Shakespeare's celebration of his audience's ability to craft their own truth. In his description of the technical details of the masque's production within the confines of the drama, Davidson highlights the inherent falsity of the project: "the masque and its actors have been presented through [Prospero's] magical control over the spirit world. The magic through which Prospero produces his effects is, furthermore, hardly consistent with the essential truths of the masque" (17). Reiterating Prospero's own assessment of the masque as "baseless" and a mere "vision," Davidson moves beyond the practicalities of Prospero's magic and mortality to focus on the inherent essence—or truth—of the production. The masque's actors are just spirits posing as divine goddesses; Prospero cannot summon the actual Juno and Ceres—the true essences of the characters in the masque. Thus, Prospero composes his gift to Miranda and Ferdinand with lies imitating fantasies.

Here, the parallels between Prospero's Neo-Platonic reflections and Plato's own ideals come into sharp focus, for Plato cites the inherent deceit of imitation as a reason to expel poets from his ideal society. In the context of the Renaissance—a time characterized by renewed interests in classical antiquity—this connection becomes especially salient. Through a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon in Book 10 of *The Republic*, Plato argues that "the poet, without understanding anything except how to imitate, paints the colors, so to speak, of each of the crafts

with his words and phrases, so that to other people of similar sort, looking at how things seem from words...it will appear to be well expressed” (Plato 415). For Plato, poets’ art stems from mimicking reality, so poets only know how to reproduce and replicate—not create. As a result, the work of poets becomes dishonest and damaging to society since they do not deal with truth. Moreover, Plato fears the influence of poets’ lies on gullible members of society who may find their artful language “well expressed” and therefore convincing. Aware of this possible charge, Shakespeare permits his audience to contemplate the inherent falsity of his craft through the meta qualities of the fleeting masque, enabling members of the audience to forgo and transcend Shakespeare’s own idea of truth by finding their own truth within the play. By drawing attention to the fabrications of the stage, Shakespeare empowers his audience as the consumers of his work. According to Plato, “the excellence, beauty, and correctness of each piece of equipment...has no other purpose than the usage for which each of them has been created,” so, “it’s absolutely essential that the user...inform the maker how good or bad his product is for its purpose” (417). Since produced items—such as tools and, most importantly, plays—exist to fulfill their purpose, the user of these items—who applies them to their purpose—best understands their nature and essence. In including the audience in the fiction of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare recognizes the audience’s primacy in playgoing as the “user” of the drama. So, when he foregrounds the audience’s own imaginative capabilities in Prospero’s monologue—where the magician affirms the need to imaginatively create meaning to survive—Shakespeare ultimately celebrates the audience’s ability to project meaning onto his manufactured plot—without which the play would not exist.

Building upon Davidson's foundational interpretation of Prospero's consequential monologue, English scholar Gabriella T. Giorno focuses on how Shakespeare recreates imagination through words, enabling him to celebrate his audience's ability to fantasize while watching *The Tempest*. Referencing French philosopher Louis Lavelle, Giorno asserts that "language is magical because nothing is impossible when first conceived as a thought. We feel that we can call anything into its word... 'at first, thought is only a dream without consistency.' Each of us is a dream that has no substance, and so we try to fill that thoughtful dream by calling words" (Giorno 204). For Giorno, even though words shape and attempt to capture thoughts—which themselves are products of the imagination—thoughts still dominate these textual constraints. Through his writing, Shakespeare supplies words to prompt and encourage his audience's imagination, but without the theatergoers' participation, his trick will fail. Thus, when Shakespeare draws attention to the audience's imaginative abilities through Prospero's brief but wondrous "insubstantial pageant faded" (4.1.155), he ultimately celebrates the audience, cheering it for finding beauty in his inspiring assortment of words. Furthering this idea, Renaissance scholar Genevieve Juliette Guenther adds that "the masque does more than express Prospero's desire for escapism. It also provides a way for Shakespeare to satisfy *his audience's* desire for escapism, or more precisely, their desire for a sense that there is something in this life that is almost purely beautiful...for a fleeting moment" (Guenther 102). On a meta level, the masque allows Shakespeare's audience to imagine and share the pure beauty of the suggested revels with Miranda and Ferdinand—the audience for the masque within the confines of the *The Tempest*. Through this experience, the audience can imagine the sheer wonder of the moment even though the masque is merely a fabrication of the theater performed by actors posing as

actors. During the masque, the audience watches a lie, but because of their imaginative abilities, theatergoers manage to interpret the spectacle as pure and beautiful. And, since Shakespeare has already drawn attention to the audience's astonishing ability to imagine by juxtaposing dreams and lies, Prospero's masque allows Shakespeare to provide theatergoers with a celebration of their imagination—in which they remain acutely aware that their imagination gives meaning to the spectacle.

In addition to his juxtaposition of dreams and lies within the textual plot of the play, Shakespeare, directly addressing the audience through Prospero, continues his grappling with the dual nature of dreams and the resulting celebration of imagination in the play's epilogue. With the central conflicts resolved, Prospero—alone—remarks, “Now my charms are all o'erthrown, / And what strength I have's mine own... / 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” (Epilogue.1-13). Admitting that he no longer wields his magic, Prospero urges the audience to clap for his magical art and even his actions, which he insists were designed to satisfy and amuse. Moreover, the language of the epilogue suggests that Prospero needs the audience's applause in order to successfully complete his project. Examining the success of Prospero's art, English literature scholar Rose Abdelnour Zimbardo notes that “it has not been able to touch the deeply disordered natures of Antonio and Sebastian and it had never been able to fix form upon Caliban. Prospero's art then can order what is amenable to order, but it can only affect temporarily that which is fundamentally chaotic” (Zimbardo 55). Zimbardo judges Prospero harshly for his inability to satisfactorily resolve the usurping plots of both Caliban and the duo of Antonio and Sebastian. As a result, she finds Prospero's abilities woefully limited, but

in making this apt assessment, she leaves unmentioned the power of the audience's imagination—revealed through the juxtaposition of dreams and lies—to transcend the trappings of the text and heighten Prospero's powers.

Like Prospero's earlier, post-masque monologue, the epilogue can also apply to the reality of the play's performance, offering Shakespeare the opportunity to surpass the limits of his text and celebrate his audience's imaginative dreams. Shakespeare scholar Kevin Curran, in his analysis of the epilogue, contends that "the request for judgment is also an appeal to the audience's capacity for literary invention, specifically its ability to craft an imaginary afterlife for Prospero...clapping is an act both evaluative and generative" (Curran 165). Prospero requests applause because the plots of the play—his "charms"—are over, but the ensuing claps offer little to the fictional character. Instead, applause signifies that the audience found the produced drama they just witnessed emotionally moving and worthy of celebration. For Shakespeare, supportive applause cements the lasting power of his characters and stories, supplying the "breath" to fill Prospero's "sails" and prolong his mental existence. But, the applause also affords Shakespeare the opportunity to celebrate his audience's imagination. While Zimbardo found Prospero's magic hindered, Curran rightly recognizes that Shakespeare—especially in the epilogue—intends for the audience to imaginatively enhance the impact of the play. The epilogue allows Shakespeare to draw attention to the inherent artifice of his own fictional "project"; Shakespeare points out how his lies of the stage manufacture a dream for the audience. By clapping in response, theatergoers admit that they recognize the artifice of *The Tempest* and desire to perpetuate the dreams the play inspired in their minds. Thus, I argue, theatergoers celebrate both the marvels of

the play and their own imagination—which gives meaning to the play—when they applaud at its conclusion.

Ultimately, Shakespeare juxtaposes both dreams and lies in *The Tempest* in order to celebrate the audience's imagination. During Shakespeare's life, people understood dreams as both fantastical visions and deceitful shams, and Shakespeare relied on both of these definitions in his later career. Moreover, Shakespeare's audience knew that dreams stemmed from the imagination, ensuring that his references to dreams also highlight the imagination's role in their creation. Shakespeare leverages these associations early in *The Tempest*, with stage directions indicating that early performances of the play utilized noise effects to conjure the play's eponymous storm. As a result, audiences imagined—and continue to imagine today—the full breadth of the tempest, immediately finding themselves crafting dreams out of the theater's fabrications—and drawing attention to their imaginative abilities, too. Later, Prospero reflects on the jubilant yet fleeting masque he puts on for his daughter and her betrothed, commenting on dreams' important power to mask reality and give meaning to life. This moment allows audience members to once again contemplate the nature of their imagination while partaking in the pleasures of their imagination by finding beauty in the revelry of the masque. It is true that the inherent fiction of this masque connects with the deceitful qualities of poets as outlined by Plato. Shakespeare recognizes his craft's own shortcomings, though, and thus emphasizes the role of theatergoers as consumers of the play to generate their own meanings and truth—an invaluable element of playgoing. At the end of the play, the epilogue further illuminates the dual nature of dreams by asking audiences to celebrate both the artifice of the production and their own imaginative abilities to add meaning and significance to a series of words written by Shakespeare

and performed by actors. Nearing the end of his storied career, Shakespeare juxtaposes dreams and lies in *The Tempest* to laud the imaginations that allowed him to realize his own fantasies—even if they only appeared in the artifice of the theater.

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