8 Psychoanalysis, Idealizing and Magic: Reading The Tempest

David Mikics

Recent psychoanalytic criticism of Shakespeare has mostly been oriented by an emphasis on idealization, on the ways in which Shakespeare's characters develop passionate attachments to images of the admirable or the corrupt: ideas of perfection, both positive and negative, embodied in the self or in other people. According to these psychoanalytic readings, Shakespeare, after dramatizing our inclination toward idealization, toward creating idols worthy of our extreme love or total hatred, finally puts to rest the force impulses that the drive toward the ideal brings with it. In his final phase, his late romances, he gives us (we are told) a conclusive relief from the destructive results of idealization.

In this essay, I focus on The Tempest as a text that puts in question the prevailing argument in most psychoanalytic readings of Shakespeare: that Shakespeare's mature career comprises a plot involving, first, the unleashing of aggressive idealization in the tragedies and, second, the putting to rest of such aggression in the romances. Often, this argument implies that the germ of romance reconciliation lies within the tragedies themselves. The relief from idealizing occurs within the very tragedies that express the wish for the ideal most vehemently: Hamlet, for example, in the readings of William Kerrigan and C.L. Barber. The turn from idealizing aggression to reconciliation is enacted, these critics claim, in Shakespeare's transition from the tragedies to the romances; but also within the tragedies themselves. So Hamlet, in Kerrigan's eloquent estimation, gives up his ferocious vengeance in Act 5 for a sense of death as an impersonal, indifferent, avenger, one who cares nothing for our ideal images.

I want to turn toward a different kind of psychoanalytic reading as an alternative to the focus on idealizing: D.W. Winnicott's investigation of the conditions for the sharing of illusion, and for the liberating effects of play.
their passions as total: transcending the correction, the instructive limits, that dramatic form can provide. But Shakespeare, in Barber’s account, does find such a form, one that qualifies the fury and reverence shown by his heroes in a way that Marlowe did not. He gives therapeutic closure by placing the world-destroying impulses of Lear and Othello within a dramatic frame that reflects on, diagnoses, their passions.4

The psychoanalytic critics who come after Barber share his emphasis on form as a means to the disciplining and understanding of idealizing passions. Janet Adelman argues in *Suffocating Mothers* that the late romances put the resources of the romance genre, the formal insistence on a concluding reconciliation of characters, in the service of a return to maternal origins. This triumph of the maternal, Adelman suggests, is aligned with a reconciliation and quieting of the idealizing associated with masculine heroism in the tragedies. The tragedies concern the suffering brought on by the severe splitting off of virtue from corruption; whereas the romances offer, in their conclusions, a realism that ameliorates such opposition. Adelman identifies this realism with the figure of the female matrix, and with the man’s acceptance of the woman as ambiguous source of life. For Adelman as for Barber and Richard Wheeler in *The Whole Journey*, Shakespeare’s career has an overarching narrative, one that leads through the violence of the tragic ideal to end in the peace of mature, accomplished relationship.

In Adelman’s view, as in Barber and Wheeler’s, the late romances have as their goal the providing of a situation in which persons are no longer, as in the tragedies, the suffering victims or ecstatic beneficiaries of the ideal, but rather, newly, comfortably human. In *The Winter’s Tale*, for example, Leontes survives his idealizing furore, his tragic jealousy of Hermione, as Othello does not. The Hermione who returns at the end of the play is not an object of adoration or contempt, but a newly actual woman. With Hermione’s return, Adelman writes, Leontes enjoys ‘a world made newly trustworthy’, which is also a world in which Hermione is independent of him: no more a product of his fantasies, separate from yet, for the first time genuinely related to him. She is no longer the projection of his ideal wishes and fears, but a woman on, and of, her own.5

The sort of progress past violent idealizing into a new realism that Adelman, Kerrigan, and Barber and Wheeler propose (in their somewhat various ways) is akin to Freud’s sense that life requires a growing up to the reality principle. Maturity means that we must give up the childhood dream of omnipotence of thought, a dream bound up with the idealizing trend. As Adam Phillips describes it, in Freud ‘the infant is conceived of as originally an omnipotent, exploitative hedonist’.6 The breast is, in the first instance, a successful pro-

The *Tempest* seems at first glance to fit Freud’s model, rather than Winnicott’s, forwarding the idea that our characteristic primal form of imagination is that of the infantile omnipotent hedonist. What is Prospero’s magic at bottom, if not a claim to the omnipotence of thought? Prospero’s instruction of Miranda in the long exposition scene, Act 1 scene 2, seems to assert that he has nourished himself on magical imagination, and can therefore paint the world as he wishes, in perfectly idealizing fashion: with himself as the image of virtue, and Antonio and Caliban as pictures of vice. At the end of the play, we might suppose, when Prospero gives up his magical power, he surrenders along with this power the satisfaction of imposing ideal ethical oppositions on the world, of definitively separating the ‘men of sin’ (3.5.53) from the virtuous ones.7 I will argue against this reading of *The Tempest*, suggesting instead that the play itself becomes our transitional object, just as it is Prospero’s. Shakespeare offers us *The Tempest* not in order to teach a
Freudian lesson about how we first want to impose our fantasies or ideals on the world, but are then forced to give in to reality. Instead, he provides a scene of play, with the island itself as transitional object, Prospero’s toy. Other characters are made, or asked, to participate in the illusions of Prospero’s—Shakespeare’s—theatre; illusion shares in, and shows us, reality.

Adelman and Coppélia Kahn both read Prospero as a figure who progresses, or ought to progress, beyond magical idealizing and toward a normative, realistic acceptance of the world. But they encounter certain difficulties in making this argument, difficulties that suggest a problem with the argument itself. In their commentaries, which measure The Tempest against The Winter’s Tale, the Tempest comes up short. Unlike The Winter’s Tale, The Tempest cannot, it appears, be made to conform to the psychoanalytic allegory of progress toward greater mutuality, more intimate relationship and more realistic acceptance of life. Adelman argues that Leontes’ late acceptance of Hermione as an independent woman provides the necessary condition for the playfully miraculous conclusion of The Winter’s Tale. How could The Tempest, notoriously indifferent to mothers and wives, also offer such freedom?

Kahn decides to find Prospero lacking because the maternal is largely missing in The Tempest. Kahn writes that ‘Prospero’s final identity lacks the fullness of that achieved by the other heroes’, the male protagonists of The Winter’s Tale and Pericles. Prospero ‘never recognizes and accepts his sexuality and his women as Leontes does’. For Kahn, Prospero’s ‘sexual and social isolation’ is the ‘cost’ of his freedom at the play’s end. Prospero’s domination over his island is ‘a fantasy of omnipotence’, but he fails to move forward from this childish mastery to a ‘mature sexual relationship’ that would acknowledge and recapitulate ‘the forgiving love experience first known with the mother’.

Adelman finds at least a suggestion of the maternal embrace that Kahn misses in The Tempest. She writes that

Prospero seems able to reshape the image of the world in his own mind. … But the cost of vanishing the world … is high. … The play turns on this recognition, on Prospero’s learning from Ariel that it is less than human to refuse the vulnerabilities of human feeling (5.1.20); and in the end, he abjures his magical control, releasing Ariel and even Miranda (though to a marriage he has arranged for her) and returning to the maternal body of the world, where every third thought shall be his grave (5.3.11).”

Kahn’s and Adelman’s comments show the limits of their normative psychoanalytic way of reading The Tempest. Such an interpretation looks forward to a concluding maturation on Prospero’s part. Maturation for these critics means Prospero’s giving up the fantasy of sovereignty in favour of a realism based on an acceptance of woman, or the mother, and based as well on the commencing of a mature sexual relationship (like the kind presumed to occur between Leontes and Hermione after the conclusion of The Winter’s Tale). Kahn fails to find the promised relationship and therefore denies Prospero a sufficient ‘fullness’ of character; instead, he remains stunted and isolated. Adelman, by contrast, finds an allegorical hint of the sought after grown-up sexuality in Prospero’s concluding plan for a return to Milan, to ‘the maternal body of the world, where every third thought shall be his grave’. Though the world-as-deathly-mother, unlike Hermione, is a mythic symbol rather than a character in a Shakespearean play, Adelman wants to see ‘her’ as Prospero’s partner, with whom he completes his quest after giving up the lonely autonomy of his magic.

Both Kahn’s and Adelman’s readings seem to be based in a normative idea of what makes a healthy individual, rather than in a careful estimation of Prospero’s actual status at the end of The Tempest. Prospero does give up his magic, but not in order to return to a surrounding maternal presence (as Adelman claims); nor does he remain defective because he has no wife (as Kahn argues). His goal at the play’s conclusion in fact appears to be a return to the retired solitude that he pursued during his earlier period in Milan, before his exile; but without, this time, the use of magic. (Instead, he relies on us, the audience, to propel him home.) He will study death, in the fashion of the Renaissance wise man; and this story sounds just as solitary as his earlier magical investigations. (True, Prospero has been given back his dukedom; but it is just as hard to imagine him ruling Milan now as it was before his power was usurped by Antonio.)

Prospero’s situation at the end of The Tempest appears to be, not a development into mature acceptance of reality, but rather a relapse into his original solitary confinement, now that his work is done. But was this work? Before I outline my own idea of the task Prospero sets himself in the play, I will repeat once more the prevailing interpretation of it. The reading of The Tempest shared by Kahn and Adelman, and by many other critics, sees Prospero at the beginning of the play entertaining the impulse to revenge over his enemies, an impulse which goes along with his idealizing assertions of magical control over the world and his strict separation of worthy characters from bad ones. Prospero’s insistence on inflicting the punishments of conscience on Alonso means that he claims the godlike powers of the superego. But he will give up this imperial privilege at the end of the play in order to retire into human weakness. In this reading Prospero’s epilogue would be his recognition of dependency, his bow to the world’s, and the audience’s, controlling perspective.
One major problem with this reading is that there does not seem to be a serious impulse to revenge on Prospero’s part. He is not tempted to destroy his enemies at any point, from the opening storm on. At the beginning of 5.1, Prospero does tell Ariel (speaking of Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian and Gonzalo) that

Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th’ quick,
Yet with my nobler reason ’gainst my fury
Do I take part: the rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel...

(5.1.24–30)

Isn’t this, Prospero’s self-proclaimed struggle with his ‘fury’, clearly just an act? The action of The Tempest has been timed to the minute, and the sole drift of Prospero’s purpose has all along been the marriage of his daughter to Ferdinand, which requires the winning over of Alonso and his party, not vengeance against them.

Prospero’s berating of Ferdinand in Act 1, his playing the senex iratus, is similarly hard to take seriously as the action of a man who is trying to enforce the moralizing potential of the super ego. Prospero plays the overbearing future father-in-law with buffoonish (or pantomimic) insistence. He first accuses Ferdinand of having ‘usurped’ the kingship from his father Alonso (by assuming that Alonso is dead), and then tells Ferdinand,

though hast put thyself
Upon this island as a spy, to win it
From me, the lord on it.

(1.2.456–9)

When Ferdinand draws his sword against Prospero, Prospero paralyses him with his magic, and then proclaims,

Put thy sword up, traitor;
Who mak’st a show, but dar’st not strike, thy conscience
Is so possessed with guilt.

(1.2.472–4)

The rhetoric of moral judgement in these two scenes, 1.2 and 5.1, is really a form of play for Prospero, as critics do not usually recognize. In this respect it fits with the sort of theatrical overstatement that Ariel, directed by Prospero, makes to the three men of sin (Antonio, Sebastian and Alonso) in 3.3: ‘I have made you mad’, he tells them,

And even with such-like valour men hang and drown
Their proper selves ...

(3.3.58–60)

Ariel in these lines invites the audience to the playful relishing of a grand theatrical flourish that they recognize as the unreal exaggeration it is: villains struck with conscience become desperate and suicidal. We know that Ariel’s speech has little to do with the actual state of mind of Antonio and Sebastian, and we would be very surprised if we were suddenly to find them hanging from a tree in the next scene. As for Alonso’s guilt, Ariel simply redirects it. Previously, Alonso blamed his decision to marry his daughter Claribel to an African for Ferdinand’s death; after Ariel’s harpy pageant, he blames his decision to assist Antonio’s usurpation of Prospero. The point is not moral reformation, but rather our enjoyment of Ariel’s, and Prospero’s, playing with the device of Alonso’s remorse. This game works exactly because we cannot take it seriously as an understanding of Prospero’s enemies.

Much of The Tempest is such a game, self-sustaining in the way it rides on, calls forth, theatrical effect. The rough Boatswain begins the action of the play’s first scene by crying defiance to the storm: ‘Blow till thou burst thy wind, if room enough!’ (1.1.7–8). The courageous gusto of the Boatswain’s exclamation, spoken in the face of death, is echoed after The Tempest turns to its scenes of safety, in the boisterous enjoyments of the play’s other characters, including Prospero and Ariel. The Boatswain’s exultation in defying the instrument of destiny, the weather, is matched by Ariel’s pleasure in the fiery spectacles he produces, and Prospero’s own appreciation of Ariel’s self-delight. Describing the laser light show he has produced on the ship, Ariel proudly tells Prospero,

I boarded the king’s ship; now on the beak,
Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin,
I flamed amazement: sometime I’d divide,
And burn in many places...

(1.2.196–9)

Prospero answers Ariel’s account with deep pleasure: ‘My brave spirit!’ (1.2.206). Though Ariel offers his speech as proof that he has (in Prospero’s words) ‘perform’d to point the tempest that I bade thee’ (1.2.194), his enjoyment shows that he is not merely following orders, and that he amuses himself as much as his audience with his spontaneous trickery. The contrast is extreme with the imprisonment that Sycorax inflicted on Ariel: the airy spirit stuck in a tree, churning his wings and venting groans ‘as fast as mill-wheels strike’ (1.2.281), in dumbly repeated, tormented motion.
Ariel's graceful turbulence plays with chaos, rather than being an emblem of self-congratulatory, manipulative mastery on his own or Prospero's part. The Tempest, the only one of Shakespeare's texts that has a magician-cum-stage manager presiding uncontested at its centre, is about play: about producing effects that astonish and baffle others, and that far exceed any moralizing function. (The mockery that Antonio and Sebastian direct at Gonzalo is a debased form of such play.)

The storm of 1.1 recapitulates the bad weather that first brought Prospero and Miranda to the island. But Prospero does not raise his tempest as an act of revenge; this is not Prospero doing to his enemies what they have done to him. Instead it is a show, and a good one. Throughout The Tempest, Prospero shifts between making harmony and making vigorous confusion. Play is an end in itself in The Tempest, as in Winnicott's theory: the very form of freedom. Prospero creates the storm as an echo of his own shipwreck, delighting in the spectacle of the beautiful world toyed with, tampered with, turned upside down and then restored. This is his opportunity to conjure up his past, to tell his story to his daughter and, in the process, to first disturb and then calm her. Prospero affects Miranda, she affects herself, in the course of scene 2, this trial of simulation. 'Tell your pitious heart / There's no harm done', he reassures Miranda (1.2.14-15). What kind of game is this?

Here I rely on Winnicott's use of the term potential space, most fully described in his essay 'The Location of Cultural Experience' (1967). For Winnicott, potential space names the place where for the child play is first made possible, and afterwards the cultural experiences of adulthood. Potential space is by definition neither the inner self nor the realm of external reality, but rather what stands between inner and outer worlds. As Winnicott puts it, 'This potential space is at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control.'12 In this way Winnicott departs from Freud's notion that infantile experience begins in a sense of omnipotence, in the ability to recreate the satisfactions of the breast through hallucinatory fulfiment, only to come up, later on, against the limitations of reality.13 Where a secure potential space does not exist, the individual is deprived of the benefits of creative play. In such circumstances, one can speak of an inner world that cannot be playfully enacted, made external, but that remains separated from the environment of sheerly external objects.

Prospero's experience in Milan, as recounted to Miranda in Act 1, scene 2 of The Tempest, forms a lesson about such a lack of potential space. As Prospero tells it, his inner self is split off from the outside world that he

hands over to his brother Antonio. Prospero demonstrates that he has learned the lesson by enacting a different sort of parenting with Miranda than he enacted earlier with Antonio: by educating her in a playful manner, inventing the potential space that was missing with Antonio.

In 1.2, Prospero explains to Miranda that he gave over the management of Milan to Antonio:

the liberal Arts ... being all my study,
The government I cast upon my brother,
And to my state grew stranger, being transported
And rapt in secret studies.

Antonio, he continues, 'new created / The creatures that were mine, I say, or chang'd 'em, / Or else new form'd 'em' (1.2.81-83). 'I, thus neglecting worldly ends', Prospero adds,

All dedicated
To closeness and the bettering of my mind
With that which, but by being so rare,
O'er-priz'd all popular rate, in my false brother
Awak'd an evil nature; and my trust,
Like a good parent, did beget of him
A falsehood in its contrary, as great
As my trust was, which had indeed no limit,
A confidence sate bound. He being thus lorded...

like one
Who having into truth, by telling of it,
Made such a sinner of his memory,
To credit his own lie, he did believe
He was indeed the duke...

'Hence his ambition growing,' Prospero concludes, 'To have no screen between this part he play'd / And him he play'd it for, he needs will be / Absolute Milan' (1.2.89-109).

Prospero describes his study in Milan as 'the liberal Arts'. Thought is free. But his rendition of what happened between him and Antonio is anything but a free or playful tale. Instead it seems overshadowed by a parallel between Antonio and Prospero that threatens Prospero with a real loss of self. 'And to my state grew stranger': Prospero means by 'state' the dukedom, of course, but the word applies as well to his own, internal state, suggesting that his studies in Milan brought on an alienating forgetfulness of his place in the world. Antonio is a virtual cipher in The Tempest; his inscrutable self seems to consist wholly
of a strictly self-sustaining wish for power. Prospero's inclination to magical study in Milan appears similarly closed off, matching Antonio's dull and empty nature. There is a deep contrast between Prospero's early pursuit of magic in Milan (as he describes it) and the later pleasure in his powers that he displays so abundantly on the island. If there is a maturation in The Tempest, it takes place before the play begins: from Prospero the oblivious scholar of Milan to Prospero the playful exiled mage. (Prospero claims that he will return to Milanese oblivion at the end, drowning his book. I will return to this gloomy desire for relief from power at the end of this essay.)

'Like a good parent' is Prospero's attempt to exonerate himself in 1.2: for the Renaissance it was a proverbial law of the world that good wombs give birth to bad sons, that the virtuous parent may likely bear a vicious child. Yet Prospero also suggests, in contradiction, his own responsibility for Antonio's seizure of power. 'The government I cast upon my brother,' 'Cast' here means threw away, threw from himself. Prospero's retrospective hint is that he got rid of his political obligations in order to give Antonio his role: as one casts a play, with Antonio the dark double of Prospero. Does this feel merely retrospective, part of Prospero's theatrical claim as he formulates it on his island?

'Having into truth by telling of it' is Prospero's description of what Antonio has done: convincing himself that he rather than Prospero is the true duke, 'absolute Milan'. Antonio's isolated conviction, the dream of an absolute, matches Prospero's own; it needs no conversational confirmation, no response. Antonio's ambition grew, says Prospero, toward the goal of 'have [then] no screen' between playing the duke of Milan and being the duke. Prospero on his island relies on such a screen, the inventions of his magic, because he has learned from the experience of the usurpation his human need for a potential space, a place like that of the theatre, in which to stage his own life, as well as Miranda's.

The action of 1.2 is Prospero's way of telling Miranda who she is, informing her further: letting her mimic him in a radically opposite way to Antonio's imitation of the earlier Prospero. 'Had I been any God of power', Miranda explains when she witnesses the shipwreck, 'I would / Have sunk the sea within the earth' (1.2.10–11) before letting the ship sink and its noble creatures drown. In this remark Miranda tries on Prospero's magic. (She began her speech, her first in the play, by asking him if he has raised the tempest by his art: she knows what he can do.) The extreme character of Miranda's magical idea, sinking the sea within the earth, answers her distraught emotion as spectator: Prospero brings her to such a pitch so that he can then calm her down, reassure her with his story. Her next lapse into distracting emotion will be her first sight of Ferdinand, for her the very definition of wonder (as she is for Ferdinand).

Winnicott speaks of our need to rely on 'the capacity . . . to become uninigrated, depersonalized, and to feel that the world is unreal'. He defends our inclination to retire, to withdraw into a place of refuge on escape where illusion can reign and the burden of selfhood is lifted. Such a refuge reappears throughout The Tempest, not just in Prospero's 'full poor cell', the place of his afternoon naps and magical projects, but also in the pleasant prison that Ferdinand imagines for himself when he finds himself bound by the vision of Miranda. Here is Ferdinand, near the conclusion of Act 1:

My spirits, as in a dream, are all bound up.
My father's loss, the weakness which I feel,
The wreck of all my friends, nor this man's threats,
To whom I am subdued, are but light to me,
Might I but through my prison once a day
Behold this mad: all corners else o' th' earth
Let liberty make use of, space enough
Have I in such a prison.

(1.2.489–96)

Shakespeare will return to this territory a few years later in The Two Noble Kinsmen, which relies, as does Ferdinand's image, on Chaucer's scene of the imprisoned Palamon and Arcita glimpsing Emily in The Knight's Tale. In Ferdinand's speech, love nearly becomes a parody of the Freudian idea of replacing a lost love object with a newly available one. In the standard linear sequence, Miranda would replace the (presumed dead) father Alonso, a new object taking the place of the lost one. This is indeed what happens to Ferdinand, but the transformation goes far beyond such a simple one-for-one replacement. Instead everything becomes unreal, all losses light, with the advent of this godlike apparition, Miranda: she seems to turn the very world to illusion. The music Ariel sang to Ferdinand earlier in this scene, 1.2, has already turned his father into something rich and strange, a forgotten dream. And now Miranda becomes for Ferdinand a god of power, making the dream a more general one. The feeling is mutual: Ferdinand and Miranda are 'both in either's pow'-ns' (1.2.452) enfolded. The Tempest's ultimate emblem of their romantic cell will be an image of play, the chess match during which Miranda teases Ferdinand by accusing him of cheating (5.1.171). (The gentleness of the bickering indicates that Miranda, unlike Beatrice, Rosalind or Cleopatra, is new to this game.)

The most memorable instance of dreaming as refuge in The Tempest belongs to Caliban. In 3.2, he has just been reassuring Stephano and Trinculo that the
island is worth seizing from Prospero. Part of his evidence is the rapturous music that (I think we assume — but Caliban does not) is supplied by Prospero himself. Woken from dreaming, Caliban famously cries to dream again:

Be not afraid; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,
That, if I then had wak’d after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak’d,
I cried to dream again.

(3.2.133–41)

Here the dream, like the artwork that is *The Tempest*, becomes an end in itself. Caliban’s usual pinching torment at the hands of Prospero is transformed into an ambient, teasing enjoyment. The dream’s evasiveness is in perfect contrast to the confrontational gabble of recrimination that usually characterizes the Prospero-Caliban relationship. The game of ambient, tempting sight and sound in Caliban’s dream, assuming that it is produced by Prospero and not by the island itself, differs from Prospero’s customary treatment of Caliban. This scene of sensual effects is not purposefully directed, not designed either to punish or reward Caliban. It is simply there, blending waking with sleep, music with vision. Here Shakespeare defines wish fulfillment as the self being taken up, and in, by illusion, rather than (as in Freud’s usual account) having the ability to impose its illusion on the world.

The passage I have just quoted recalls an earlier instance in *The Tempest*, when Antonio tries to infect Sebastian with usurping ambition. Here Antonio shows Sebastian an image very close to Caliban’s ‘riches / Ready to drop upon me’.

In Act 2 scene 1, Sebastian and Antonio wonder at the spell that has caused the rest of the crew, including Alonso and Gonzalo, suddenly to drop into sleep, while their own ‘spirits’ remain ‘nimble’ (2.1.197). Antonio remarks to Sebastian, speaking of their companions’ rapid somnolence,

They fell together all, as by consent;
They dropp’d, as by a thunder-stroke. 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 thy head.

(2.1.198–204)

Antonio here presents himself as a rival magician to Prospero: he means, at least for this one moment, to compete with Prospero’s stagecraft. The double-take with which Antonio hooks Sebastian, ‘No more: — / And yet’, is clearly designed to show him as a master of illusion, the purveyor of fulfilled wish and a master of psychology as well; he can see Sebastian’s true nature in his face. But Antonio is not the master he thinks he is.

Is it really Antonio’s ‘strong imagination’ that sees the crown dropping on Sebastian’s head, or is this (as I believe we assume it to be) a Prospero-induced vision? Antonio’s exclamation, ‘O, what might?’ refers both to the ‘might’ that means possibility and the ‘might’ that means power; but he is not the owner of this might. The occasion speaks to him, through Prospero, making him just as vulnerable as his sleeping companions. This imagination is strong because it makes Sebastian weak, subject to plotting, the passive recipient of an irresistible honour. (Later on, Ferdinand, speaking his love to Miranda, will correct Antonio’s image, begging heaven and earth to ‘crown what I profess with kind event’ (3.1.69); and later still, Gonzalo will imagine the gods dropping a ‘blessed crown’ on this couple, Ferdinand and Miranda (5.1.202).) Antonio’s effort at mastery makes him, and Gonzalo along with him, the victim of Prospero’s playing.

I have been suggesting that it may be worthwhile to try to redirect the story usually told by psychoanalysis, which emphasizes how our desire wants to take over the world, and then how we give up that ambition in grudging recognition of dependency on others. Rather, we might investigate what we get from illusions, what illusions do to us and how illusions might be shared, in playful or serious ways. Prospero’s imaginative career may be finished at the end of *The Tempest*, but Miranda is just growing up to amazement: not to disillusion, but to a world of wonder. The appearance of Ferdinand amazingly overlaps with exactly what she wanted, or rather with what she never knew she wanted until reality — which seems so fantastic that it becomes illusory — steps in to supply her wishes. ‘I would not wish / Any companion in the world but you’, she tells Ferdinand, ‘Nor can imagination form a shape, / Beside you, to like of’ (3.1.54–7).

In a crucial essay, ‘Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena’ (1953), Winnicott remarks that he is studying the substance of *illusion*, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion, and yet becomes the hallmark of madness when an adult puts too powerful a claim on the credulity of others, forcing them to acknowledge a starting of illusion that is not their own. We can share a respect for *illusory experience*, and if we wish we may collect together and form a group on the basis of our illusory experiences.19
Collecting together and forming a group on the basis of our illusionary experiences: this is a good description of what a theatrical audience does or, for that matter, what Shakespeare critics do. But there is a potential dark side to this collective process, acknowledged in Winnicott’s remark that someone might try, unsuccessfully, to force others “to acknowledge a sharing of illusion that is not their own”, and that they will therefore see him as mad. We might consider Prospero a successful case of forcing one’s illusions on others, such that he becomes a magus rather than a madman. But ‘force’ is perhaps the wrong word here; some characters, like Ferdinand and Miranda, do not seem to see it as a question of force at all. They join in the illusion by falling in love, as if illusion were simply the realized nature of this brave new world. (This effect can only be sustained if it remains unclear to what extent Prospero’s charms are responsible for their love.) Other characters feel merely manipulated by Prospero’s spectacular special effects: Caliban, Antonio and Sebastian. As an audience, we willingly participate in this unreality (most of the time, at least), wishing to distinguish ourselves from someone like Antonio, who disavows the illusion and feels merely compelled to acknowledge it.

Winnicott tends to describe the creation of the transitional object in idealizing terms; unlike Freud, he is a comic, not a tragic, thinker. Made from the benevolent partnership of mother and child, the transitional object shows that human life does not begin in an impulse toward mastery or domination, but rather in a wish for support and communication. But the original scene of mutually supportive play that occurs between mother and child often dissolves, later on in life, to situations involving manipulation of others, the refusal of partnership. Other people may even themselves become transitional objects for us, to be used as we earlier used our toys. Prospero in The Tempest plays with his old enemies somewhat as a child plays with dolls, in a way that, often, finds satisfaction in imagining or staging their responses, rather than awaiting an actual response from them—a perfectly healthy lack of mutuality. The disturbing implications of this kind of playfulness are not fully considered in Winnicott’s work, which tends to recur to the original scene of wholesome mutual interaction between the parent and the infant. The only role for another person in Winnicott’s version of infancy is as a nourishing, overseeing presence (or, when the nourishment fails, an absence). When other people, rather than mere physical objects, become our pawns, what becomes of this first happiness?

Winnicott may not explain such a development of the transitional object into another person, someone like Caliban, Alonso or Antonio, whom Prospero can tease, taunt or otherwise manipulate. But he does acknowledge the increasing sway of the transitional object, the way in which it becomes a large part of our world, for good and for bad. Winnicott’s idea of the transitional object, which begins as the familiar security blanket or doll, enlarges or blurs. In ‘Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena’, after describing how the transitional object is ‘affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated’, he remarks that, long after we stop playing with dolls, almost the whole field of experience remains a realm of transitional phenomena: neither hallucinatory nor merely, simply external and indifferent to us, but in between. ‘At this point’, Winnicott writes, my subject widens out into that of play, and of artistic creativity and appreciation, and of religious feeling, and of yearning, and also of fetishism, lying and stealing, the origin and loss of affectionate feeling, drug addiction, the idolatry of obsession rituals, etc. 

Winnicott seems to be making more of his own concept here by mauling it, ‘excitedly lov[ing] and mutilat[ing]’ it as one does a childhood toy. That final ‘etc.’ bears witness to a close to maniac sense that everything is a transitional phenomenon. The analyst can set no strict line between the merely imaginary and the soberly real; reality testing cannot be the way of therapy. Instead, the analyst must acknowledge that playing is the basic form of human interest: asserting a partnership with things that makes, or finds, them to be neither merely inward nor merely independent of our fantasy. Much of Winnicott’s therapeutic career was devoted to understanding how interest can be lost, how playfulness, and therefore health, comes to be lacking. But in light of Winnicott’s excited reflection on transitional phenomena, a different question suggests itself, one that allows us to return directly to The Tempest: what are the possibilities for the partnership between the self and its objects, such that this interchange can become degraded as well as enriched? And, moreover, can the richness itself be dangerous, absorbed in its enthusiasm so that—as in the case of Prospero enjoying his masque—the plot may be neglected? (The plot here being the way in which others might be playing, or perhaps more to the point, refusing to play.)

When Prospero breaks off the masque in Act 4 scene 1, declaring his most famous speech, he does so in order to declare a limit; to round off his illusion-making. But several rough edges remain. As Prospero’s tempest reaches its conclusion, we may perceive in Antonio an unplanned limitation of the play, of Shakespeare’s magic as well as Prospero’s: Antonio does not seem sufficiently there. Antonio’s hiddenness or unintelligibility, his famous near-silence in The Tempest’s final scene, marks one margin of theatrical magic, the futile, interminable cursing that goes on between Prospero and Caliban marks another.
I want to conclude by considering Prospero’s most comprehensive effort to complete his game, the monumental speech of 4.1. ‘Our revels now are ended’, he tells Ferdinand,

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,  
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.

(4.1.148–58)  

I am drawn by Kermode’s suggestion, following Wright, that ‘rounded’ here means crowned.17 Prospero hints that death, the sleep that follows the waking dream of life, not only caps that life, softens its contours, but also annoints and honours it, crowns it, by bestowing on it the closure of a final repose. This thought shall be his grave: the comfort of a dreamless, cloudless oblivion. When the world is considered as a dream, an illusion as suave and acceptable as those produced in the Globe Theatre, the ‘baseless fabric of this vision’ melts easily into nothing. But Prospero also wrestles harshly with what cannot be dissolved in this way: ‘The strong-bas’d promontory / Have I made shake’ (5.1.46–47), he reminds us in The Tempest’s final scene.  

And so, after his tranquilizing nightcap, Prospero interrupts himself again, to marvel, ‘I will plague them all, / Even to roaring’ (4.1.191–3; he is speaking of Caliban and his companions). The Tempest plays rough, as well as smooth. Perhaps Prospero will return to his game after all, despite his closing abdication. Can theatrical magic really be given up, even in the face of death’s solemnity? Even if he does not return, we will. A place offers itself, in Shakespeare’s drama, where there is no sovereignty, and yet each person can be a crowned king: the potential space of literary romance, of illusion and of human play.18

NOTES

1. See William Kerrigan, Hamlet’s Perfection (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 122–31. I should note that Kerrigan does not explicitly address the late romances as the other critics I mention do.


5. Janet Adelman, Sacrificing Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 234–5. Adelman cites Winnicott here, but only in order to enfold his idea of potential space inside the narrative story that she tells (potential space appears only after Leontes accepts the real Hermione at the end of The Winter’s Tale).


9. Adelman, Sacrificing Mothers, p. 237. Adelman sees Shakespeare as ambivalent in his romance phase: not merely moving toward realism and reconciliation in The Winter’s Tale, but also aggressively attempting to restore the ideal parental couple in the other romances (see pp. 193, 236, especially). My point is that The Winter’s Tale remains Adelman’s model for what she thinks Shakespeare should be doing at