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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 2

The Tempest

Edited by Fabio Ciambella



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Contents

Contributors	9
FABIO CIAMBELLA	
Introduction	15
Part 1 – <i>The Tempest</i>: Its Genesis and Its Mediterranean World(s)	
1. PAUL EDMONDSON AND STANLEY WELLS	
How Did Shakespeare Write <i>The Tempest</i> ?	29
2. SILVIA BIGLIAZZI	
Navigating Time: Memories of Mediterranean Worlds in <i>The Tempest</i>	49
Part 2 – <i>The Tempest</i> and the Mediterranean Myth: from Resources to Afterlives	
3. CRISTIANO RAGNI	
Prospero, or the Demiurge. Platonic Resonances in Shakespeare’s Mediterranean	75
4. ERIN REYNOLDS	
Auden and the ‘Myth’ of <i>The Tempest</i>	95
Part 3 – From the Mediterranean to the Mediterranean: <i>The Tempest</i>, Italian Music and Cinema	
5. SHIRA F. MELCER	
Ariel’s Music in Italian and English Madrigal Forms	115
6. EMANUEL STELZER	
<i>The Tempest</i> in Italian Dialects	133
Part 4 – Ecocritical and Postcolonial Readings of <i>The Tempest</i>	
7. MAGDALENA GABRYSIK	
Shakespeare’s Nature in Time. Contextualising Ecocritical Readings of <i>The Tempest</i>	157

8. ANMOL DEEP SINGH

Mediterranean Echoes in the *The Tempest*: the Rape
of Miranda between Race and Politics

175

Index

197

Part 2

***The Tempest* and the Mediterranean Myth: from Resources to Afterlives**

Prospero, or the Demiurge. Platonic Resonances in Shakespeare's Mediterranean

CRISTIANO RAGNI

Abstract

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has stressed the relevance of the multifaceted Mediterranean world for any comprehensive interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Reading *The Tempest* as a Mediterranean play implies, as Geraldo de Sousa maintained, exploring "the centrality of the classical tradition" (2018, 908) to that specific context. In this regard, *The Tempest* stands out as a sort of "echo chamber" – to borrow Stephen Greenblatt's words (1997, 3047) – of the preeminent myths of Graeco-Latin civilisation. Building on such studies, this essay will put forward evidence of the hitherto little acknowledged similarities between Shakespeare's Prospero and the divine-like Demiurge that Plato depicts in the *Timaeus*, one of his most influential philosophical dialogues, in which the origin and purposes of the universe are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *The Tempest*; Mediterranean; Plato; *Timaeus*

1. Introduction

Since classical antiquity, the Mediterranean has been the multifaceted setting of cultural formation and transformations; a region "both within and without the borders of Europe", as Geraldo de Sousa explains, which the English especially perceived at the same time "familiar and strange" (2018, 137). It was the "arena" par excellence, to put it in Peter Burke's words, "of interaction, of encounters, and exchanges" between different peoples and cultures (2002, 136). It is of little surprise, therefore, that Shakespeare should look at the diverse Mediterranean world as the perfect setting for many of his plays, and indeed make deft use of what it had to offer.

Shakespeare's engagement with the richness of such multicultural context in *The Tempest* has been increasingly emphasised since the 1990s. After a period dominated by what Paul Cantor has called the "Americanization of Shakespeare studies" (2006, 897), which shifted the focus of attention onto the certainly meaningful reflections of the New World explorations in the play, scholarship has started to go back to *The Tempest's* unmistakable Mediterranean setting, exploring not only the wide variety of 'Mediterranean' sources that Shakespeare likely consulted, but also the socio-political and cultural implications that the varied and hybrid nature of the *mare nostrum* brought with itself (Mason Vaughan and Vaughan 2011, 47-54, 98-108; Charry 2014, 66-78). From the analyses of the Virgilian and Ovidian subtexts of the play (Hamilton 1990; Bate 1993; Tudeau-Clayton 1998; Whittington 2014) and the scholarly contributions on its engagement with early modern European politics (Willis 1989; Kastan 1998; 2000) to the works which have highlighted its relationship with the civilisations of the North-African and Middle Eastern countries (Fuchs 1997; Wilson 1997; Brotton 1998; Hulme and Sherman 2000), a growing body of scholarship has stressed the relevance of the multidimensional Mediterranean world for any comprehensive interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. "Despite Columbus and the rapidly increasing European presence in the Western hemisphere in the sixteenth century", Cantor aptly reminds us, "the Mediterranean was the center of the world Shakespeare lived in, and his plays reflect that fact . . ." (2006, 896).

Reading *The Tempest* as a Mediterranean play implies, as de Sousa maintained, exploring "the centrality of the classical tradition" (2018, 908) to that specific context. Jonathan Bate has convincingly demonstrated how "[Shakespeare's] imagination and his sympathies were shaped above all else by forms of thinking derived from what the character of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* calls 'antique' (or 'antic') 'fables'" (2019, 15). Undeniably, the Mediterranean was the cradle of these "antique fables", and a poet-playwright as imbued with classical knowledge as Shakespeare was certainly knew that well. Small wonder then that *The Tempest*, set as it is on a presumably Mediterranean (if imaginary) island, stands out as a sort of "echo chamber" – to borrow Stephen Greenblatt's words (1997, 3047) – of the preeminent myths of Graeco-Latin

civilisation. From the utopian tradition inaugurated by Plato to the love story between Dido and Aeneas, as well as Medea's ambiguous incantations, *The Tempest* does indeed resonate with a wide variety of classical models, which testify to the complex texture of the play's cultural backdrop, and to the 'mythopoetic' nature of the Mediterranean world.

Building on this context, this essay will particularly put forward evidence of the hitherto little acknowledged similarities between Shakespeare's Prospero and the divine-like Demiurge that Plato depicts in the *Timaeus*, one of his most influential philosophical dialogues, in which the origin and purposes of the universe are discussed. Shakespeare's possible knowledge of and recourse to Greek texts has been the object of an increasing number of scholarly works in recent years. Reassessing the long-held view about his poetic and dramatic output being "cut off from Greek poetry and drama", as A. D. Nuttall famously wrote (2004, 217), Tania Demetriou and Tanya Pollard have recently pointed out that

[Greek] texts circulated in early modern England in Greek, Latin, and vernacular languages; as elaborately annotated folios, portable parallel-text editions, and accessible vernacular octavos; in the form of originals, imitations, and adaptations; as books, performances, and songs. They were studied closely by many of Shakespeare's colleagues, by the young wits, hacks, and lawyers who frequented the playhouses. Most importantly, the conversations spurred by these newly available texts left ubiquitous traces in early modern English culture, including – perhaps especially – in its theatres. (2017, 3-4)

Whatever his direct sources were, in any case, whether the original Greek texts or their translations, not to mention the intellectual mediations provided by self-consciously learned colleagues and friends such as Ben Jonson or George Chapman, Shakespeare did obviously come to know various aspects of Greek culture in general, and of Plato's philosophy in particular (Medcalf 2004; Roe 2004; Demetriou and Pollard 2017). It is not too far-fetched to argue, therefore, that his *Tempest* does indeed play with some of the most popular aspects of Plato's *Timaeus*.

2. Plato in Early Modern Europe and England

All scholars agree on the crucial role played by the Italian humanists in the history of the receptions of Plato and Neoplatonism in the early modern period. From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni, those humanists were the first who read and commented extensively on the only Platonic dialogues which circulated in Europe in various Latin translations: *Timaeus*, *Phaedo*, and *Meno*. This interest was further boosted both by the visits to Italy of eminent Byzantine personalities, such as Manuel Chrysoloras (1355-1415), Gemisthus Pletho (1355-1452), or Cardinal Bessarion (c.1403-1472), just to name a few, and the sojourns in Constantinople of Italian intellectuals like Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481), which made the circulation of the Greek editions of Plato's works between the two countries possible. These fruitful cultural exchanges promoted the general advancement of Greek studies, and would later be reinforced after the 1453 fall of Constantinople, when Greek scholars poured into the West, and started teaching their prestigious cultural heritage to other Europeans (Hutton 1994; Jayne 1995; Bellamy 2015).

Europe's renewed interest in Plato and Neoplatonism stimulated a fundamental translation process, which resulted in the 1484 *editio princeps* of Plato's *Opera*, realised by Marsilio Ficino, who played, as is known, a crucial role in the Western (mis)understanding of the philosopher's thought. As Elizabeth Jane Bellamy has maintained:

Marsilio Ficino's knowledge of Greek inaugurated a more philologically grounded stage in Western receptions of Plato—receptions that were also misconceptions. Ficino's 1464 *Phaedrus* commentary *De amore* erroneously dated the dialogue as Plato's first—hence, foregrounding divine rapture as central to Plato's metaphysics. Ficino's acontextual focus on two speeches from the *Symposium* . . . exaggerated the centrality of love in Platonic thought. Ficino's decontextualization became, nevertheless, a tenet of Renaissance Neoplatonism—that is, love as the desire for beauty . . . Despite Ficino's decontextualized Plato, his concepts of love and beauty cohered into a compelling system of thought. (2015, 503-4)

The coherence of Ficino's model was also assured, as Sarah Hutton puts it, by the fact that it “harmonised Plato and Neoplatonism

with Western Christianity and endowed them with philosophical respectability in his own time” (Hutton 1994, 69). Of course, this does not mean that such a model faced no opposition; however, thanks primarily to the fortune of Ficino’s successful interpretation of the Platonic doctrine of love, this model would flourish among European courtiers and poets at least until the late seventeenth century (Baldwin and Hutton 1994; Jayne 1995; Celenza 2007; Bellamy 2015).

That Plato was generally known in early modern England is undoubted. His works started circulating at the beginning of the fifteenth century in (continental) Greek editions and Latin translations, as well as commentaries, compendia, and commonplace books, thanks to the learned interests of wealthy Churchmen and aristocrats, such as the Archbishop of York, George Neville (c.1432-1476) or Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester (1390-1447) (Jayne 1995, 13-21). English awareness of the momentous operation brought about by Ficino in Italy is also testified by persistent traces of book acquisitions and scholarly debates in the universities, until the explosion of what Sears Jayne has defined a “modish enthusiasm” for Plato’s philosophy during the Elizabethan Age (1995, 97). Plato’s praise of love and beauty, as it had been interpreted by Ficino, was popularised by the poets of this generation, all the more so because it informed such a widely popular work as Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, which Sir Thomas Hoby translated into English in 1561. Jean de Serres and Henri Estienne’s 1578 three-volume Latin edition of Plato’s *Opera*, “ambitiously intended to replace Ficino’s long-dominant Latin translation” (Bellamy 2015, 506), is also worth mentioning. Its first book was famously dedicated to Elizabeth I, and at least parts of it are known to have ended up in both Sir Philip Sidney’s hands, as his *Defence of Poesy* seems to testify (Heninger 1983), and Edmund Spenser’s (Jayne 1995, 115-16). Besides the circulation that Plato’s works among academics, his dialogues, as the *Private Libraries in Renaissance England* (PLRE) database shows, do also appear among the belongings of private owners, including personalities as varied as members of the Parliament, court officials, or diplomats. Among early modern English intellectuals, probably the one who engaged with Plato most closely was John Milton, who proved particularly interested in the debates about the

relationship between the mind and the body originating from the philosopher's works (Samuel 1947; Baldwin 1994). Chronologically, the seventeenth century also saw the burgeoning of an influential Plato-inspired philosophical movement, which opposed the so-called Cambridge Platonists to the predominant Aristotelian cultural milieu. "With the Cambridge Platonists", Hutton noted, "the Renaissance Neoplatonic synthesis is put to the service of religious peace in an age of religious strife. What distinguishes them as a group is their theological optimism, their latitudinarian spirit and their antipathy to the harsh predestinarian theology of Calvinism" (1994, 74). This was the last truly active intellectual engagement, it can be said, with Neoplatonism before the definitive change of paradigm in favour of the New Science (Bellamy 2015, 511-12; Hedley and Leech 2019).

Of course, as has been variously pointed out, in early modern England such multifaceted receptions of Plato never resulted in a deep-seated understanding of his philosophy, but they did contribute to what has been defined as an unmistakably widespread 'Platonising' trend, which particularly prospered under Elizabeth I and during the early Stuart period, before declining towards the close of the seventeenth century (Sears 1995; Hedley and Sutton 2008; Bellamy 2015; Hedley and Leech 2019).

3. Plato's Demiurge

Among the most widely read, studied, and influential of Plato's dialogues in the early modern period, and the one whose echoes can be detected between the lines of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is the *Timaeus* (c.360 BC). As Anna Somfai has explained: "The *Timaeus* is the only one of Plato's dialogues to have been continuously available in Latin translation in the West from the time of classical antiquity. Two Latin versions, both incomplete, circulated in the period prior to the Renaissance: one by Cicero from the first century BC . . . the other by Calcidius from around 400 AD . . . accompanied by his Latin *Commentary* . . ." (2002, 1). The fortune and value of this dialogue remained undisputed throughout the early modern age, when access to the original Greek text spurred

further debates on its main aspects, and especially the myth of the Demiurge, as well as its century-old heterodox interpretations, and its surprising influence on the birth of the New Science, as both Kepler and Newton's knowledge of Ficino's commentary on the *Timaeus* seemingly testifies (Reydams-Schils 2003; Celenza 2007).

In his *Timaeus*, Plato put together and explained his ideas about the origin of the visible universe and the nature of humankind. Before outlining such complex processes, however, the four men involved in the dialogue - Socrates, Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates - appear to be focused on a topic already discussed in the *Republic*: the characteristics of the ideal city state and society. Such discussion causes them to evoke the Athens of ancestral times, whose memory, they acknowledge, had been preserved after the last great flood by the Egyptians. Playing with the well-established *topos* of natural catastrophes such as floods, which cyclically allowed for new forms of civilisation to be born, the four remember Athens's celebrated enterprise against the haughty inhabitants of Atlantis:

αὕτη δὴ πᾶσα ξυναθροισθεῖσα εἰς ἓν ἡ δύναμις τὸν τε παρ' ἡμῖν καὶ τὸν παρ' ἡμῖν καὶ τὸν ἐντὸς τοῦ στόματος πάντα τόπον μιᾶ ποτ' ἐπεχείρησεν ὀρμῇ δουλοῦσθαι. τότε οὖν ἡμῶν, ὦ Σόλων, τῆς πόλεως ἡ δύναμις εἰς ἅπαντας ἀνθρώπους διαφανῆς ἀρετῆ τε καὶ ῥώμῃ ἐγένετο· πάντων γὰρ προστάσα Σεψυχία καὶ τέχναις ὄσαι κατὰ πόλεμον, τὰ μὲν τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἡγουμένη, τὰ δ' αὐτῇ μονωθεῖσα ἐξ ἀνάγκης τῶν ἄλλων ἀποστάντων, ἐπὶ τοὺς ἐσχάτους ἀφικομένη κινδύνους, κρατήσασα μὲν τῶν ἐπιόντων τρόπαια ἔστησε . . . ὑστέρω δὲ χρόνῳ σεισμῶν ἐξαισίων καὶ κατακλυσμῶν γενομένων, Διμῆς ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς χαλεπῆς ἐλθοῦσης, τό τε παρ' ἡμῶν μάχισμον πᾶν ἀθρόον ἔδου κατὰ γῆς, ἣ τε Ἀτλαντὶς νῆσος ὡσαύτως κατὰ τῆς θαλάττης δῦσα ἠφανίσθη . . . (Plato 1929, 40-3)

[So this host [of Atlantis], being all gathered together, made an attempt one time to enslave by one single onslaught both your country and ours and the whole of the territory within the Straits. And then it was, Solon, that the manhood of your State showed itself conspicuous for valour and might in the sight of all the world. For it [Athens] stood pre-eminent above all in gallantry and all warlike arts, and acting partly as leader of the Greeks, and partly standing alone by itself when deserted by all others, after encountering

the deadliest perils, it defeated the invaders and reared a trophy . . . But at a later time there occurred portentous earthquakes and floods, and one grievous day and night befell them, when the whole body of your warriors was swallowed up by the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner was swallowed up by the sea and vanished . . .]

Immediately afterwards, Critias suggests moving on to the discussion on the very beginning of the universe; an explanation, he proposes, that the philosopher and astronomer Timaeus should be made in charge of carrying out. In so doing, as Francis M. Cornford puts it, they successfully manage “to link the morality externalised in the ideal society to the whole organisation of the world” (1997, 5), which Plato justified by resorting to the myth of the Demiurge.

The Demiurge is not described as the creator of the cosmos, but as a craftsman, a divine Reason, that imposes order to the universe because, as Thomas K. Johansen pointed out, “he wants to create something which as far as possible is his equal such that it can enjoy, as far as possible, the same goods as he” (2008, 479):

τούτου δ' ἐκτὸς ὧν πάντα ὅ τι μάλιστα γενέσθαι ἐβουλήθη παραπλήσια ἑαυτῷ. ταύτην δὲ γενέσεως καὶ κόσμου μάλιστ' ἄν τις ἀρχὴν κυριωτάτην παρ' ἀνδρῶν φρονιμῶν ἀποδεχόμενος ὀρθότατα ἀποδέχοιτ' ἄν. βουλευθεὶς γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἀγαθὰ μὲν πάντα, φλαῦρον δὲ μηδὲν εἶναι κατὰ δύναμιν, οὕτω δὴ πᾶν ὅσον ἦν ὄρατὸν παραλαβὼν οὐχ ἡσυχίαν ἄγον ἀλλὰ κινούμενον πλημμελῶς καὶ ἀτάκτως, εἰς τάξιν αὐτὸ ἦγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας, ἡγησάμενος ἐκεῖνο τούτου πάντως ἄμεινον. (Plato 1929, 54-5)

[. . . and being devoid of envy He desired that all should be, so far as possible, like unto Himself. This principle, then, we shall be wholly right in accepting from men of wisdom as being above all the supreme originating principle of Becoming and the Cosmos. For God desired that, so far as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil; wherefore, when He took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion, He brought it into order out of disorder, deeming that the former state is in all ways better than the latter.]

According to Plato, Christina Hoenig has explained, the universe is thus “formed by the demiurge from the materials at his disposal in the likeness of an intelligible paradigm, the ‘eternal living being’, perhaps best understood to represent the totality of intelligible forms whose physical counterparts are to form our universe” (2018, 16). This means that the universe is itself a divine creature, whose various components are divided and allocated by the Demiurge according to exact mathematical and geometrical proportions, and it is endowed with soul and intellect:

Τῆς ἀμερίστου καὶ αἰεὶ κατὰ ταυτὰ ἐχούσης οὐσίας καὶ τῆς αὖ
περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένης μεριστῆς, τρίτον ἐξ ἀμοῦν ἐν μέσῳ
συνεκεράσατο οὐσίας εἶδος, τῆς τε ταυτοῦ φύσεως [αὖ πέρι]¹ καὶ
τῆς θατέρου, καὶ κατὰ ταυτὰ ξυνέστησεν ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ τε ἀμεροῦς
αὐτῶν καὶ τοῦ κατὰ τὰ σώματα μεριστοῦ. καὶ τρία λαβὼν αὐτὰ
ὄντα συνεκεράσατο εἰς μίαν πάντα ιδέαν, τὴν θατέρου φύσιν
δύσμικτον οὔσαν εἰς ταυτὸν ξυναρμόττων βίᾳ. μιγνύς δὲ μετὰ τῆς
οὐσίας καὶ ἐκ τριῶν ποιησάμενος ἔν πάλιν ὅλον τοῦτο μοίρας
ὅσας προσῆκε διένειμεν, ἐκάστην δὲ ἕκ τε ταυτοῦ καὶ θατέρου καὶ
τῆς οὐσίας μεμιγμένην . . . (Plato 1929, 64-7)

[Midway between the Being which is indivisible and remains always the same and the Being which is transient and divisible in bodies, He blended a third form of Being compounded out of the twain, that is to say, out of the Same and the Other; and in like manner He compounded it midway between that one of them which is indivisible and that one which is divisible in bodies. And He took the three of them, and blent them all together into one form, by forcing the Other into union with the Same, in spite of its being naturally difficult to mix. And when with the aid of Being He had mixed them, and had made of them one out of three, straightway He began to distribute the whole thereof into so many portions as was meet; and each portion was a mixture of the Same, of the Other, and of Being . . .]

The same soul and intellect which make the universe alive are also attributed to mortal creatures. Fundamental though he thinks humankind to be, Plato’s Demiurge does not however participate in their creation, but hands it over to other ‘minor’ divine agents, created by him and partaking of his own divine reason: τὸ δὲ μετὰ

τὸν σπόρον τοῖς νέοις παρέδωκε θεοῖς σώματα πλάττειν θνητά, τό τε ἐπίλοιπον ὅσον ἔτι ἦν ψυχῆς ἀνθρωπίνης δέον προσγενέσθαι, τοῦτο καὶ πάνθ' ὅσα ἀκόλουθα ἐκείνοις ἀπεργασαμένους ἄρχειν . . . (“He delivered over to the young gods the task of moulding mortal bodies, and of framing and controlling all the rest of the human soul which it was still necessary to add, together with all that belonged thereto . . .”; Plato 1929, 92-3).

While illustrating the Demiurge’s ordering scheme, Timaeus also mentions the works of Necessity, which stands out “both as a constraining and as an enabling cause in relation to the divine cause” (Johansen 2009, 483). Despite the apparent ambiguity of this term, Necessity is not an obstacle to the Platonic craftsman’s design. In fact, it contributes to its realisation. This is hardly surprising. “The Timaeian narrative”, as Hoenig concludes,

portrays the universe as a teleologically structured whole. Chaos is transformed into orderly beauty, an aesthetic feature that reflects the purposeful cooperation of the world’s harmoniously arranged components. The universe is as beautiful and as good as it can be, exhibiting a kinship of aesthetic and ethical value that coincides in the Greek word *καλός*. (2018, 17)

4. Prospero, or Shakespeare’s Demiurge

An alert playwright and poet such as Shakespeare did have several opportunities, as has been discussed above, to get to know if not the essence of Plato, certainly the most popular aspects of his philosophical thought, by resorting to the various editions, translations, and adaptations of his works that circulated widely in early modern England. Other studies have underscored Shakespeare’s (more or less) direct allusions to or acquaintance with Plato’s *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, or *Phaedo* (Cantor 2000; Parker 2004; Gray 2006; Rowe 2010; Kaytor 2012; 2019), so much so that R.W. Rowe concluded that “it is hard to resist the thought that the Platonic inheritance was a vital source of inspiration” for him (2010, 189). Therefore, it is not too far-fetched to argue also for the resonance of the myth of the Demiurge as presented in the *Timaeus* between the lines of *The Tempest*. This play stages Prospero’s

attempt at a political and moral reform, which eventually allows him to restore order to his world, and provides both himself and his former enemies with a second chance, in ways which can indeed be reminiscent of the Platonic Demiurge's endeavours.

After staging the storm that shipwrecks the most eminent members of the courts of Naples and Milan, in 1.2 Shakespeare offers his audience two insightful perspectives on the apparently tragic event they have just witnessed. The first one emerges from the exchange between Prospero, former Duke of Milan, and his daughter Miranda, which takes place on the coast of the Mediterranean island where they have been exiled. Since Miranda appears much distressed about the fate of the people she has just seen drowning offshore, Prospero reveals:

The direful spectacle of the wreck, which touched
 The very virtue of compassion in thee,
 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 heard'st cry, which thou sawst sink . . .
 (1.2.26-32)¹

As a reply to Miranda's concerns, Prospero thus makes the audience understand that the terrible storm was not real, but a magical trick that he has somehow performed thanks to his "art" (1.2.28). A trick, he explains, that he has orchestrated for Miranda's own good ("I have done nothing but in care of thee . . .", 1.2.16), so that she would eventually learn the truth about her own aristocratic origins, and the usurpation of Prospero's dukedom on the part of his brother Antonio and the latter's ally, the King of Naples: the very people, in other words, that "by accident most strange, bountiful fortune" (1.2.178) brought off the coast of their island, thus giving him the opportunity to redress their wrongdoing (Ragni, forthcoming).

A few lines below, what happened to the shipwrecked vessel and the people onboard is further clarified, when the airy spirit Ariel,

¹ All references to *The Tempest* are from Shakespeare 2005 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

Prospero's agent, enters the stage and provides details about the storm that, we learn, he himself created:

PROSPERO Hast thou, spirit,
 Performed to point the tempest that I bade thee?
 ARIEL To every article . . .
 PROSPERO Why, that's my spirit!
 . . . But are they, Ariel, safe?
 ARIEL Not a hair perished;
 On their sustaining garments not a blemish,
 But fresher than before; and, as thou bad'st me,
 In troops I have dispersed them 'bout the isle.
 (1.2.193-220)

What the audience understands after these two crucial passages is that Prospero is a former sovereign, endowed with magical knowledge, that makes him stand out as a 'divine-like' figure. He is presented as one who is willing and able to tame the chaos that the usurpation of his throne has caused in his and his daughter's life, and thus bring order back to their world. These facts alone would have been enough to make many among Shakespeare's Jacobean audience think about Plato's famous cosmological work. It is thus possible to claim that in a play so concerned with imposing order onto a situation which is perceived as chaotic by a 'divine-like' character, evidently eager to craft a 'new' world according to his own desires, Shakespeare may have been playing with the myth of the Platonic Demiurge, one of the most popular myths of that Mediterranean civilisation against whose background his story is set.

At a close reading, numerous similarities between Prospero and the Demiurge do indeed emerge. Let's start from the attitude towards control they both show. Commenting on *The Tempest's* structure, Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan note that its tight symmetry is "an appropriate characteristics for a story in which the central character is so concerned with disciplining his minions" (2011, 14). Prospero's controlling scheme applies not only to the sphere of action but also to time. Unsurprisingly, it is precisely in his illuminating analysis of Prospero's "time-controlling magic" that Alessandro Serpieri noted his evidently demiurge-like nature.

Prospero's ordering action, Serpieri argued, is introduced by the tempest itself:

The word 'tempest' derives from the Latin *tempestas* that means: (1) time, period, epoch (OED 'tempest', 4); (2a) weather (OED 1), (2b) hostile, unfavourable time (OED 2a); (3) danger, calamity, accident (OED 2b); and in the acceptation (1) it coincides with *tempus*, that comes from the Indo-European root TEM, "to cut", as in Greek τε'μνω = to cut, separate, divide, implying the ideas of section, period, epoch, season. The action of dividing is coessential with all cosmogonic myths, where chaos is the primeval, amorphous and undifferentiated condition, and where neither time nor space have yet intervened to create order. Order is produced only by the creative action of dividing and separating the elements, identifying their qualities, and assigning them different functions and aims. This is how the primordial event of creation is presented in the opening passages of both *Metamorphoses* and *Genesis* (1:1-17). (2014, 101)

This is exactly how creation is presented in Plato's *Timaeus* as well, where the Demiurge's design, as has been discussed above, involved a careful engagement in a complex series of actions of dividing and allocating the various elements of the universe. And this is what Shakespeare's Prospero too does, scattering the shipwrecked characters in different parts of the island and making sure that order be brought back by enacting the different stages of his plan. If the Demiurge's goal was to impose order to the chaos he found in the universe so that "so far as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil" (Plato 1929, 54), Prospero's design aims instead at correcting the wrongs of the 'old' world and thus make sure that what he deems to be good and right would prevail in his universe; "a demiurgical act", Serpieri commented, that, in the play, "is made possible by the magical illusion of theatre" (2014, 101).

Another feature that these two figures share is their common effort to bring order back to the(ir) world. As written above, Plato's craftsman took what "was . . . in a state of discordant and disorderly motion" in the universe and "brought it into order out of disorder, deeming that the former state is in all ways better than the latter" (Plato 1929, 55). Likewise, Shakespeare's Prospero orchestrates the

events so that the order disrupted by his brother's usurpation twelve years before be restored. Despite the various plots which threaten his plan (a sign, it could be suggested, of the forementioned Platonic necessity at work), with his magical "art" Prospero successfully manages to direct what "was . . . in a state of discordant and disorderly motion" – his and Miranda's life, but also those of his shipwrecked enemies – and, at least from a political point of view, his reform thus seems to succeed (Cantor 2000; Camerlingo 2020). "Some heavenly power", Prospero's loyal friend, Gonzalo, exclaims at some point, "guide us / out of this fearful country!" (5.1.105-6). This is indeed what Shakespeare's divine-like demiurge eventually does—he restores himself to Milan's throne, and the marriage between Miranda and Ferdinand, heir to the King of Naples, ensures the future union of the two countries and, hopefully, no more political usurpations:

. . . and so to Naples,
 Where I have hope to see the nuptial
 Of these our dear-belov'd solemnized;
 And thence retire me to my Milan . . .
 (5.1.308-11)

In *The Tempest*, as Cantor put it, "Prospero . . . has the opportunity to reconstitute the society as he sees fit, to refound its regime. He disperses its elements in order to work on each party separately in a fashion appropriate to its nature. The greed and ambition of these more or less representative human beings must be moderated so that the common good . . . prevail[s] under Prospero's wise direction" (2000, 247). This is exactly what Plato's Demiurge does in the *Timaeus*.

Prospero's design, however, could not be successful without Ariel's aforementioned assistance. Again, like Plato's Demiurge, Prospero hands the 'material' realisation of his plan over to his faithful airy agent. In the *Timaeus*, as has been shown above, the Platonic 'artifex' asks for the assistance of lesser divinities to complete his work. In Shakespeare's play, Ariel "perform[s] to point the tempest" (1.2.194), spies on the dispersed royals, refers to Prospero where they are and what they are doing, and most of all constantly sings and plays music, which charms them and makes them do exactly what

Prospero has planned. This association between Ariel and music is especially significant when it comes to discussing Shakespeare's connection to (Neo)Platonic philosophy, since music was one of its tenets. As Francesco Pelosi has summarised:

[In Plato's works] Music is conceived as a means of curing the soul . . . It concerns moulding a young *psychē*, that does not have a well-developed rationality and therefore is at the mercy of the body's needs; it also concerns leading or restoring an adult *psychē*, exposed to the negative conditioning . . . encountered in life, to a correct equilibrium, which permits it to properly manage the connection with the sensible dimension. (2010, 9)

Such a crucial role played by music within Plato's philosophical thought depends on the fact that, as is explained in the *Timaeus*, the very structure of the universe is musical, based as it is on numerical proportions to which "harmonious" values are assigned: καὶ δὴ καὶ τὸ τῶν ἀναλογιῶν περὶ τε τὰ πλήθη καὶ τὰς κινήσεις καὶ τὰς ἄλλας δυνάμεις, πανταχῆ τὸν θεόν . . . ταῦτη πάντα δι' ἀκριβείας ἀποτελεσθεισῶν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ξυνηρμόσθαι ταῦτα ἀνὰ λόγον ("And, moreover, as regards the numerical proportions which govern their masses and motions and their other qualities, we must conceive that God realized these everywhere with exactness . . . and thus ordered all in harmonious proportion"; Plato 1929, 136-7). Set against this background, Ariel's recourse to music does contribute to reinforcing the claim that Shakespeare likely had Plato and his *Timaeus* in mind when he ideated his own version of a Demiurge. If the Platonic artifex turns to what Pelosi has defined "musical mathematics" (2010, 193-5) to impose order to the universe, Shakespeare's demiurge-like Prospero turns to Ariel's music to direct the other characters' fates: it guides Ferdinand to Miranda in 1.2, prevents regicide in 2.1, and foils a possible plot in 4.1. In so doing, Ariel's music ensures the success of Prospero's design, and contributes to bringing order back.

5. Conclusion

"To set *The Tempest* in its comprehensive context", as has been maintained, "is to work spatially from Shakespeare's personal milieu

(the King's Company at the Globe and Blackfriars theatres) outward to Jacobean London, to the rest of the British islands, to continental Europe and on to the outer perimeter . . ." (Mason Vaughan and Vaughan 2011, 37). This "outer perimeter" is largely outlined by the Mediterranean Sea. After all, even though "the placelessness of [Shakespeare's] island", as Bate put it, "encourages the spectator to pick it up like Gonzalo's apple and scatter the seeds so that other islands—Caribbean, Irish, and so forth—grow magically from it" (2004, 304), the numerous references to Naples and Tunis, Milan and Carthage cannot be ignored, and they do place Shakespeare's unnamed island within the pan-Mediterranean world. In this regard, it is significant that one of the only two occurrences of the term "Mediterranean" in all of Shakespeare can indeed be found in *The Tempest*. In 1.2, when Ariel reports to Prospero after dispersing the Milanese and Neapolitan royals "'bout the isle" (220), he adds:

And for the rest of the fleet,
Which I dispersed, they all have met again,
And are upon *the Mediterranean float*,
Bound sadly home for Naples,
Supposing that they saw the King's ship wrecked
And his great person perish.
(2.1.232-7, emphasis mine)

Relevant as it is to the understanding of the multiple meanings of the play, this Mediterranean setting has been shown to reveal strong ties with classical antiquity. "For Shakespeare", de Sousa noticed, "the call of the Mediterranean was the call of the past, and classical culture was an integral part of the multicultural Mediterranean" (2018, 910). Therefore, it is not surprising, as has been argued in this essay, that between the lines of *The Tempest*, one of Shakespeare's most Mediterranean plays, the influence of one of the most influential classical philosophers, Plato, can be detected.

In early modern England, thanks especially to the fortune of the Neoplatonic doctrines elaborated by Marsilio Ficino in Quattrocento Italy, Plato's philosophy could be variously accessed via Greek editions, translations, commentaries, and commonplace books. Among his most famous and widespread dialogues was the *Timaeus*, in which the Greek philosopher explained the coming into

being of the cosmos as the result of the ordering action of a divine Artifex, the Demiurge. In light of the *Timaeus*' fortune, what have been presented in this essay are the various traces that contribute to arguing that when it came to creating a demiurge-like character such as Prospero, intent on bringing order back to his world, Shakespeare likely had Plato's 'artifex' on his mind, and that the 'enterprises' of the Platonic Demiurge do indeed seem to resonate behind Prospero's attempts at reform on his Mediterranean island.

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