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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 2

The Tempest

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info@skeneproject.it
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4

Auden and the ‘Myth’ of *The Tempest*

Erin Reynolds

Abstract

This essay focusses on W.H. Auden’s 1944 poem *The Sea and the Mirror*, against the background of changing interpretations of *The Tempest*, particularly those relating to ideas of the Mediterranean ‘Sea’ and the portrayals of Ariel and Caliban. Shakespeare’s Mediterranean is distinct from the ideas about the Mediterranean as representing an ideal life and culture that surrounded Auden. Auden’s Ariel and Caliban are similarly influenced by the ideas of the two as codependent opposites which developed around *The Tempest*, though not present in the text of the play. This essay explores how Auden consciously or unconsciously relates to these themes, in connection with his own understanding of ‘myth’ and of *The Tempest* as a ‘mythical’ play, and uses them and their disconnect from the text of the play to articulate the dualist, Kierkegaard-influenced Christian philosophy which he was interested in at the time he was writing ‘The Sea and the Mirror’.

Keywords: *The Tempest*; W.H. Auden; myth; nature; art

In his 1947 lecture on *The Tempest*, W.H. Auden called it Shakespeare’s only success “in writing myth” – his explanation for the enormous number and diversity of reinterpretations, continuations, and appropriations of the play throughout its history. This idea of ‘myth’ is as a “pattern of events” or a basic essence of a work, distinct from its poetry. Auden quotes C. S. Lewis to aid his explanation of it: “In poetry the words are the body and the ‘theme’ or ‘content’ is the soul. But in myth the imagined events are the body and something inexpressible is the soul”. Expanding on this, Auden says that apart from some “accidental” parts of it which are “dependent on poetry”, such as the masque and Ariel’s songs, “you could put *The Tempest* in a comic strip”. The effect of *The Tempest* being a work of ‘myth’ in this sense, according to Auden, is that it “inspire[s] people to go on for

themselves". He points out Browning's *Caliban on Setebos* and Renan's *Caliban: Suite de "La Tempête"* as examples, and also mentions that he has "done something with it [him]self": his 1944 poem *The Sea and the Mirror*. Here Auden seems to assume that there is a single 'myth' of a work, to which writers add their own "extension[s]" (Auden 2019, 296-7), but of course different people in different contexts and times will understand a work differently. *The Tempest* is particularly notable for how understandings of it have changed through time, with interpretations originating in works derived from often feeding back into criticism and popular ideas about the original play and changing people's 'myth' of it.[1] It therefore makes a very good lens through which to examine Auden's idea of 'myth', as reflected in *The Sea and the Mirror* and articulated in his lecture on *The Tempest.* For example, the first two chapters of *The Sea and the Mirror* take place before and during the voyage of the principal characters back to Milan, on the explicitly Mediterranean 'Sea' of *The Tempest*, but Auden uses the Mediterranean to represent nature or all life, as in the central metaphor in the title of the poem, with the "Sea" as nature and the "Mirror" as art. In this way Auden uses the presence of the Renaissance Mediterranean in *The Tempest* as an example for his 20th-century dualist philosophy. He does not just write an 'extension' to the play, since he is influenced by his own context and wants to express his own ideas takes the idea of the Mediterranean as a powerful life-giver and place of opportunity present in *The Tempest* and which evolved around it in the Renaissance, and combines it with his own dualist philosophy in the poem.

As I will explain in this essay, several pervasive critical ideas became attached to popular perceptions of the 'myth' of *The Tempest* in the centuries between Shakespeare writing it and Auden writing *The Sea and the Mirror*, which influenced Auden's ideas about the play in that poem. The most famous of these is the idea of Prospero representing Shakespeare or the artist, but Ariel also came to

1 For example how the explicitly monstrous Caliban in Dryden and Davenant's *Enchanted Isle* was often present in early criticism of *The Tempest* during the post-Restoration time when the original play was not performed, or (though this is after Auden) how Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* led to a proliferation of interpretations of *The Tempest* in a colonial setting with a more heroic Caliban.

represent not just a magical spirit of the air, but all knowledge and art, with Caliban his counterpart in nature and primitive or basic humanity, and these are the roles which these characters play in *The Sea and the Mirror*. These ideas are so inextricably connected to the play and criticism of it, as well as the poem, that Arthur Kirsch wrote in his otherwise excellent introduction to the 2003 Princeton edition of *The Sea and the Mirror* that "Caliban is in constant counterpoint with Ariel in *The Tempest* – they cannot exist without each other – and their opposition informs or reflects everything else in the play" (Auden 2003, xiii) – though this seems like quite an extreme exaggeration, and there is certainly no suggestion of a codependence of Ariel and Caliban in the play. There is a reasonably large pool of criticism on *The Sea and the Mirror* but, despite the poem's subtitle "A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*", it rarely engages with how exactly the poem "comment[s]" on the play, instead generally focusing on Auden's life and philosophy when he was writing it. This is because the poem, rather than clearly commenting on the original play, relates to its 'myth' as Auden understood it. When critics talk about the poem and the play together they often, like Auden, work within popular ideas of the 'myth' of the play – Thomas R. Thornburg writes for example that "Probably for both [Auden and Shakespeare], and for Auden certainly, Prospero exists as the poetic persona" (Thornburg 1969, 3), echoing the Prospero-as-Shakespeare trope – or risk being unconvincing, as Kirsch is when he looks for an overarching shared "theme of forgiveness" (Auden 2003, xxxviii) in the poem and the play. The poem responds to and reflects Auden's idea of 'myth' but ultimately also shows the problems inherent in it as part of its theme of the falsity of art, having Ariel and Caliban be merely actors and *The Tempest* with its Mediterranean setting a play within the poem, although it leaks out into the rest of the life of the poem.

1. The 'Myth' of *The Tempest* Before and Around Auden

Auden quotes C.S. Lewis in his lecture on *The Tempest*, saying that the "pattern of events" instead of "poetry" is what is important in 'myth' (Auden 2019, 296-7), but what the pattern of events

of a 'myth' is taken to be will be based on reinterpretations and simplifications of it. He partially takes this into account with the idea of new works based on a work of 'myth' being "extension[s]" of the 'myth' (297). Auden's 'mythical' conception of *The Tempest* as shown in *The Sea and the Mirror* is therefore based on the tradition of receptions of the play up until he wrote the poem, so to discuss the poem I will first go through the main elements of interpretations of *The Tempest* which reappear in the poem. Ariel and Caliban are generally the most radically altered figures in works inspired by *The Tempest*. In the Brough brothers' burlesque 1848 *Raising the Wind*, for example, Ariel takes the part of a policeman and Caliban appears as a slave and then a revolutionary, asking "Ain't I a man and a brother" (*Raising the Wind*, in Shakespeare 2003, 315) – a precursor to 20th-century reinterpretations of *The Tempest* sympathetic to Caliban. Interestingly, this Caliban also borrows lines, and perhaps some nobility, from Othello and Hamlet, saying "A round unvarnished tale", and "Ay, there's the rub" (316), at least suggesting a reformatting of his character as tragic hero.

Between the Restoration and 1838 the only version of *The Tempest* performed was Dryden and Davenant's comedy *The Enchanted Isle*, while critics still read Shakespeare's *Tempest*, but the Dryden and Davenant version influenced their criticism of the original play. The first criticism of *The Tempest* was already fascinated with Caliban. John Dryden wrote in 1679 that, in Caliban, Shakespeare 'created a person which was not in nature', with a "monstrous" person and "language as hobgoblin as" it (Dryden 1962, 252-3) and Nicholas Rowe reported in his 1709 *Works of Mr William Shakespear* that "three very great men" (the notable royalists Lucius Cary, Henry Vaughan, and John Selden) "concurred . . . that Shakespeare had . . . adapted a new manner of language for [Caliban]" (Rowe 1948, xxiv-xxv). These ideas about Caliban's language sparked considerable debate, with Samuel Johnson eventually arguing that Cary, Vaughan, and Selden "mistook brutality of sentiment for uncouthness of words" (Johnson 1908). Even in this early critical reaction to *The Tempest*, the 'myth' of the play had already departed from the actual text. Caliban's language is sometimes unusual in comparison to Stephano or Trinculo's (who usually speak in prose in contrast to Caliban's frequent verse), for instance in his "I cried to dream

again" speech (2.3.141), but his speech is not clearly different from Prospero's or Miranda's. As he famously says, "[Prospero] taught [him] language": it is "your [Prospero's] language" that he speaks. Critics viewed Caliban as something less than human, but Prospero explicitly states that he has 'a human shape' (1.2.284). In *The Enchanted Island*, however, Caliban is clearly stated in the Dramatis Personae to be a "Monster of the Isle" (Dryden and Davenant 1670, 10). If critics did not already have the image of Caliban as a monster from performances of the play, perhaps his language would not have seemed so monstrous to them.

Moving into the 19th century, however, interpretations of Caliban became increasingly sympathetic, with William Charles Macready's 1838 production of the original *Tempest* and *Raising the Wind* only 10 years after. Caliban became a vessel for philosophy and politics, such as in Ernest Renan's 1878 *Caliban: Suite de "La Tempête"*, mentioned by Auden in his lecture, a sequel to *The Tempest* in which Caliban learns reason and becomes a representative of powerful but uninspiring democracy, overthrowing Prospero and ultimately leading to the disappearance of Ariel and death of Prospero and the cultured aristocracy he represents. This trend would later lead into the colonial interpretations of the play in the 20th century.

With the rise of Darwinism the enduring image of Caliban as half-man, half-fish led to interpretations of him as a sort of evolutionary 'missing link'. In Robert Browning's poem *Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island*, also mentioned in Auden's lecture, Caliban, half-fish, "a sea-beast, lumpish" with "toe-webs" (Browning 1864, 130), tries to conceive the features of his god Setebos through his own behaviours and morality. He is primitive, and has a primitive conception of religion, through which Browning satirises "Natural Theology" and Victorian theologians who tried to understand God as a reflection of themselves. Nine years later, Daniel Wilson wrote *Caliban: The Missing Link*, associating Caliban with 'that imaginary intermediate being between the true brute and man' (Wilson 1873, xi) and appropriating the 'myth' of Caliban to support ideas about evolution.

Ariel has not undergone so many or varied reinterpretations as Caliban. Critics generally found him to be representative of the ideal servant; the obedient and airy spirit to which Caliban is contrasted.

Over time, in conjunction with the popular identification of Prospero with Shakespeare and because of Ariel's various beautiful songs, it became completely accepted to view him as 'the spirit of poetry'. Fanny Kemble regarded him in 1882 as a "spirit of knowledge" (1882, 159), and by G. Wilson Knight's writing in 1929, Ariel had become unquestionably "the 'airy nothing' of poetry" (1947, 25).

The oppositional contrast between Caliban and Ariel had emerged earlier: Ludwig Tieck wrote in 1793: "in every serious scene we are reminded by the presence of Ariel of where we are, and in every comic scene by the presence of Caliban" and "the extraordinary contrast between Ariel and Caliban increases our faith in the wondrous" (trans. mine). To Tieck, Ariel and Caliban being contrasting opposites was central to the structure of the play and the creation of the sense of wonder in it, with the plausible portrayal of both characters "so remote from humanity" convincing the audience that they "had been transported to an utterly strange, as yet unknown world" (Tieck 2004, 695). This idea also appeared in English-speaking criticism – Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that "Ariel has in every thing the airy tint which gives the name" and "Caliban, on the other hand, is all earth" (Coleridge 1836, 98) – and would endlessly reappear in later criticism of the play. Kemble argued that "Caliban is the densest and Ariel the most ethereal extreme" "of the wonderful chain of being" (Kemble 1882, 132) and Knight wrote that "two creatures serve [Prospero]: Ariel, the 'airy nothing' of poetry; and the snarling Caliban, half-beast, half-man; the embodiment of the hate-theme", and that they "are yoked in the employ of Prospero, like Plato's two steeds of the soul, the noble and the hideous, twin potentialities of the human spirit." (Knight 1947, 25). The critical meme of Ariel and Caliban as opposites, based on the ideas of Ariel representing "poetry" and Caliban being "half-beast, half-man", evolved into their being opposite aspects of humanity or of Prospero, the white and black winged steeds commanded by the charioteer Reason in Plato's allegory in *Phaedrus*.

This opposition between Caliban and Ariel is less obviously present in the play itself, or is at least more complicated. Knight describes both Ariel and Caliban as "creatures", but Caliban has a "human form" and is the child of a human. It is Ariel who is clearly inhuman, with his famous "were I human" line (5.1.20), which makes

portrayals of the two as twin aspects of humanity problematic. Ariel is also a servant, carrying out a fixed and agreed-upon term of service to Prospero – Prospero promised “to bate [him] a full year” for good service and eventually agrees to “discharge” him after another “two days” (1.2.250, 298-9) – whereas Caliban was seemingly raised as something close to family by Prospero and Miranda, having been “strok’[d] ... and made much of”, and taught “how / To name the bigger light, and how the less”, until he tried to rape Miranda, whereupon he was imprisoned in his rock and treated as an “abhorred slave” (1.2.333, 334-5, 350). This complicates the narrative of “two creatures serve him”: the dynamics between Prospero and Ariel and Caliban are more complex than just a master with a good and a bad servant.

2. Auden and the ‘Myth’ of *The Tempest*

As previously discussed, W.H. Auden understood *The Tempest* as a work of ‘myth’. By the time he was writing *The Sea and the Mirror* in 1941 there had been many expansions and reinterpretations of this ‘myth’ of *The Tempest*, both in fiction and in criticism. If we base our understanding of the mid-20th-century ‘myth’ of the play on criticism such as that by G. Wilson Knight, Caliban was less than human, and an embodiment of nature and primitive human traits. Ariel was representative of knowledge and art and the air, and was understood to be diametrically opposed to Caliban; Prospero was Shakespeare, or the master of these two opposite aspects of human nature. This opposition seems to have been one of the main things which attracted Auden to the play. After moving to America in 1939 he had joined the Episcopal Church, a return to his childhood Anglican Christianity inspired by his reading of Christian existentialist philosophy, such as by Søren Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr. In November 1942 he wrote in the Roman Catholic journal *Commonweal* that he could not “help feeling that a satisfactory theory of Art from the standpoint of the Christian faith has yet to be worked out” (Auden 2003, xii). He became fascinated by the idea of the duality of humanity and finding some sort of perfect unity through religion, saying that “all the striving of life

is a striving to transcend duality" (xix) – in heaven, or through Christian marriage and becoming "one flesh". Since 1939 he had been in a relationship with the poet Chester Kallman which Auden described as a 'marriage', but Kallman ended their sexual relationship in July 1941, not wanting the exclusive relationship which Auden demanded. This personal tragedy, along with the catastrophe of the Second World War, may have turned him more towards religion and dualist philosophy. On Christmas Day 1941 Auden wrote a letter to Kallman comparing their relationship to the Nativity and Christian ideas, ending:

> Because . . . I believe that if only we have faith in God and in each other, we shall be permitted to realize all that love is intended to be . . . As this morning I think of the Good Friday and the Easter Sunday implicit in Christmas Day, I think of you. (xvii-xviii)

As Arthur Kirsch writes, this is "an elegy . . . not an epithalamium" and "Auden's hope of achieving the mystical union of flesh and spirit he yearned for remained unfulfilled" (xviii), just as the freedom from dualism in art and life which it would represent seems almost impossible in *The Sea and the Mirror*.

In 1943 Auden taught a seminar on Romanticism at Swarthmore College and distributed a chart of his worldview to his students (xvi). It has on either side of "This World", defined by "Dualism of Experience", the "Hell of the Pure Deed / Power without Purpose", which is entered by a "Search for Salvation by finding refuge in Nature", and the "Hell of the Pure Word / Knowledge without Power", entered by a "Search for Salvation by finding release from Nature". Paradise is perfectly centred, and can only be entered by going through Purgatory from one of these two Hells, journeying towards the other side of the chart before going back to the centre, "The Voluntary Journey of the corrupt mind" or "the corrupt body", depending on the Hell. On the chart are listed various ideas and aspects of humanity, placed on the spectrum between the two Hells. The "Pure Deed" has "Mutual Irresponsibility", "Blind Superstition", and "Tyranny"; the "Pure Word" "Mutual Aversion", "Lucid Cynicism", and "Anarchy". The centre of the chart has "Civilisation", "Faith", and "Marriage", but also "Anxiety"; its "Heroes" are

Dostoevsky's "Idiot" and "Don Quixote". So, for Auden, both a life of art and seeking knowledge and a life dedicated to nature or to gaining power would lead you to a "Hell", but staying in the middle was also not ideal, since a person would ultimately have to go through both "Hell[s]" to enter heaven.

In *The Tempest*, and the ideas associated with Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban in the 'myth' of it, Auden found examples to create his own "theory of Art" demonstrating the worldview shown in the Swarthmore chart, in *The Sea and the Mirror*. John Fuller writes that Auden's interpretation of the play is heavily influenced "by the allegorical interpretations of *The Tempest* which circulated in the nineteenth century, that Prospero is the artist, Ariel his imagination, Caliban his animal nature" (Fuller 1998, 357). In accordance with this, Auden has Ariel represent the "Pure Word" of the Swarthmore chart, Caliban the "Pure Deed", and Prospero an old disciple of the "Pure Word" trying to reach "This World". The title of the poem itself is an expression of Auden's ideas about duality, with the "Sea" representing nature and the "Mirror", of course, art. This "Sea" is of course the Mediterranean, the sea of *The Tempest*. For the Victorians, the Mediterranean represented a natural ideal life, and also the origins of their lifestyle. As John Pemble discusses in *The Mediterranean Passion*, Victorian tourists followed Samuel Johnson's famous statement that "All our religion, almost all our law, almost all our arts, almost all that sets us above savages, has come to us from the shores of the Mediterranean", and went to the Mediterranean "as regular visitors coming to a home from home" (Pemble 1988, 2), and in doing so "passed from the circumference to the centre of things", dwelling "on roots, origins, essentials, and ultimate affinities". Auden could not have avoided this historical context viewing the Mediterranean as the most natural possible sea, and presumably it partly played into his choice to use *The Tempest* for the poem. Chapters[2] 1 and 2 take place in the immediate context of this Mediterranean "Sea", within the play or the world of it, and chapter 3 suddenly taking readers out of the story, onto the stage after the play has finished; as it were,

2 Auden requested that the parts of *The Sea and the Mirror* be labelled chapters, although most editions do not do this (Kirsch 2003, xli).

on the other side of the "Mirror". It is notable that there are no mirrors in *The Tempest*, but the sea is very prominent, so the close association of the first two chapters with the "Sea" and the third with the "Mirror" reflects the actual structure of the poem, first demonstrating Auden's philosophy within the world of the play and then discussing it more explicitly outside the play. In the poem, Auden also continually draws into question how far the poem, or any art, can show true human experience or be fully understood, and through that deconstructs his own idea of 'myth', portraying an audience's understanding of a work of art as a simplified fantasy based on their own circumstances and expectations. To understand what is happening in *The Sea and the Mirror*, a reader needs to have a knowledge of the 'myth' of *The Tempest* in Auden's terms, but the poem ultimately dismantles that conception of myth.

Alonso's poem in chapter 2, "The Supporting Cast, Sotto Voce", a message to Ferdinand on how to rule wisely, is a clear example of Auden's dualist philosophy in *The Sea and the Mirror*. It is set fully within the world of the play, as the characters sail back to Milan over the Mediterranean, and the idea of the "Sea" as nature is extremely prominent in it, but this natural Mediterranean is significant mainly as one of the two "Hell[s]" of Auden's Swarthmore chart. Alonso says "Only your darkness can tell you . . . Which you should fear more – the sea . . . or the desert", and:

> As in his [a prince's] left ear the siren sings
> Meltingly of water and a night
> Where all flesh had peace, and on his right
> The efreet offers a brilliant void
> Where his mind could be perfectly clear
> And all his limitations destroyed:
> Many young princes soon disappear
> To join all the unjust kings. (Auden 1979, 142)

It is difficult to imagine Shakespeare's Alonso saying this, but Auden's Alonso is relevant only for being a wise and successful ruler, and, in passing down his wisdom, repeats almost exactly Auden's own philosophy, transposed into a political philosophy to show its universality: the dualism of human experience and the tight-rope walk of life between the temptations of the flesh, or

actions, and the temptations of the spirit, or knowledge, with the necessity of maintaining a perfect balance for success.

Chapter 1, "Prospero to Ariel" shows an example of a ruler who didn't have Alonso's advice: the powerful and learned but disillusioned Prospero preparing to live out his dying days in insignificance and normality, no longer the mighty sorcerer. It deals with an aspect of the play that responses have frequently found problematic or unbelievable: that Prospero forgives everyone unconditionally and then completely gives up his power. Auden's explanation for this is to make him someone who sought "release from Nature" and entered the "Hell of the Pure Word". Auden considered this the fate of artists, and this section parallels the message to artists in "Caliban to the Audience", said "at his [Shakespeare's] command" (Auden 1979, 158).

Auden portrays Prospero as disillusioned with power, with his only path to happiness being a Kierkegaardian leap of faith to accept normality – "The silent passage / Into discomfort", or, with another metaphorical use of the "Sea", "Sailing alone, out over seventy thousand fathoms"[3] (135, 134). He says:

> I am glad that I did not recover my dukedom till
> I do not want it; I am glad that Miranda
> No longer pays me any attention; I am glad I have freed you,
> So at last I can really believe I shall die.
> For under your influence death is inconceivable. (129)

Prospero regrets his search for learning and fame, the "magic" he "made" to "blot out forever / The gross insult of being a mere one among many" (130), because, in Auden's philosophy, only a balance between "Word" and "Deed" can lead to happiness. This Prospero in the "Hell of the Pure Word" is closely connected to the popular interpretation of Prospero as Shakespeare which became part of the 'myth' of *The Tempest*, and critics interpret him in this context. As Sophie Ratcliffe writes, this section, "suggests to the reader the

3 The strange use of "fathoms", said twice in *The Tempest*, is one of many fragments of quotations from the play in this chapter, perhaps a reminder that we are still 'in' the play. It also emphasises the depth of the water (and the danger of falling) over the distance of the journey.

need for a poet to consider the ethical implications of creativity, and, possibly, to reject the narcissistic artistic enterprise" (2008, 126): the path of magic or poetry will inevitably conflict with the humility and normality necessary to access heaven. Prospero says that Ariel "will be off now to look for likely victims" (131), even though Ariel in *The Tempest* wanted freedom from human rule – another example of how Auden uses the 'myth' built around *The Tempest* rather than just the text of the play. The Ariel in the play is a spirit of the air wanting freedom, but Auden's Ariel had become over centuries the spirit of poetry and art, and, to him, the "Pure Word", so Ariel must by nature seek out new artists and knowledge-seekers. Caliban, representative of the "Hell of the Pure Deed", is mentioned only once in this chapter, as Prospero's "impervious disgrace", a "wreck / That sprawls in the weeds and will not be repaired", created by Prospero's "wish / For absolute devotion" (132). This objectification of Caliban – a "wreck" that needs to be "repaired" – contrasts with the articulate Caliban later in the poem, which is perhaps a reminder of this chapter still being within the world of *The Tempest*, or of the 'myth' of Caliban as representative of the "Pure Deed" and therefore unable to fit within any construction of the "Pure Word".

In chapter 3, "Caliban to the Audience", the illusion of the world of the play is immediately and very deliberately shattered, with the previous characters dismissed as "hired impersonators" (Auden 1979, 148) – 'myths' of characters instead of real people – and Caliban suddenly speaking directly to the audience of the play (or the readers of the poem) in an imitation of Henry James, making a stark contrast to the previous verse in the poem and also strangely echoing the ideas in early criticism about Caliban having a unique and alien language. The "Sea" and the Mediterranean are conspicuously absent here: the setting is now an English theatre with an English audience, and the focus is on the mirror. Caliban, missing in the earlier chapters, replaces the Mediterranean as the representative of Nature, perhaps suggesting that the mythologised idea of the Mediterranean as an ideal natural life is just as false as the rest of the 'myth' of *The Tempest* which Auden deconstructs in this chapter. The setting outside the play and the prose style allow Auden to state relatively directly his "philosophy of Art" and life, but they also reflect his ideas about Ariel and Caliban: he wrote in a letter to the American poet and

Shakespeare critic Theodore Spencer about the poem that Caliban "doesn't fit in; it is exactly as if one of the audience had walked onto the stage and insisted on taking part in the action" (Auden 2003, xxxi), and that he "tried to work for this effect in a non-theatrical medium" in *The Sea and the Mirror*, through the juxtaposition of the world of the play in chapters 1 and 2 with 'real life' in chapter 3. Caliban also "*echo*[*es*]" (Auden 1979, 149) the audience, talking about the "Muse" of English literature as a hostess giving "famous, memorable, sought-after evenings" (ibid.) and accusing Shakespeare, "one of the oldest habitues at these delightful functions", "of the incredible unpardonable treachery of bringing along the one creature ... whom she cannot and will not under any circumstances stand" (151) – Caliban himself. This idea about Caliban would be strange to interpret just from the text of the play[4], but fits perfectly with the combination of the 'myth' of it and Auden's own philosophy. If Caliban represents uncivilised nature and the "Pure Deed", he cannot "fit in" in a play, a piece of poetry and an example of the "Pure Word" – Ariel's territory. Now Caliban really has "walked onto the stage", but it is after the play is over. Auden is influenced by the 'myth' of Caliban, but also implicitly problematises it by having it be unable to exist within the actual *Tempest*.

Although the chapter is titled "Caliban to the Audience", Auden portrays Ariel and Caliban as mutually dependent opposites, so the chapter also focuses on Ariel. One of the clearest examples of Auden's belief in this is the stylistic imitation of Henry James: Auden wrote in his letter to Spencer that he wanted "(a) A freak 'original' style (Caliban's contribution), (b) a style as 'spiritual', as far removed from Nature, as possible (Ariel's contribution) and James seemed to fit the bill exactly". Caliban's voice in the poem is a combination of his and Ariel's. Even outside of the world of the play, Caliban the personification of nature needs Ariel's help to address the audience, though in *The Tempest* he is easily capable of beautiful poetry without Ariel – but the Caliban here is the 'myth' of the wild man, the embodiment of the flesh and not the mind. This mimicry of James is what Auden calls in his letter a "truc", or a poetic trick, and Kirsch

4 The main piece of evidence that could support this idea in the text alone is probably that Caliban stays on the island at the end – perhaps as the audience are left behind as the actors leave the stage.

notes that the "conception of art" as "fundamentally frivolous", which his taste for "trucs" reflects, "is critical to all of Auden's later work", helping "account for his attraction to Kierkegaard's distinctions of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious" (Auden 2003, xxxi). In the poem Auden repeatedly emphasises the limits and frivolity of art, advocating for faith instead.

After the "*echo*", Caliban restates many of the ideas from chapter I with a message from Shakespeare to those in the audience who "have decided on the conjurer's profession" (Auden 1979, 158). The metaphor of writing being "the conjurer's profession" clearly connects these two parts of the poem, as well as reinforcing Auden's use of the Prospero-as-Shakespeare trope. The "conjurer" partners with Ariel to great success, though "the eyes, the ears, the nose, the putting two and two together are, of course, all His [Ariel's]" (160), but eventually begins to fail and tries to dismiss Ariel, who however "refuses to budge" and, looking in his eyes, the "conjurer" sees reflected "a gibbering fist-clenched creature" (161), Caliban. Unlike the example of Prospero in chapter I, however, for whom Caliban and Ariel are real spirits, since he is within the world of the play or the Mediterranean, Caliban and Ariel here are entirely metaphors for the "Pure Deed" and the flesh and the "Pure Word" and poetry – Caliban is literally the "conjurer's" body and Ariel the spirit of poetry.

Later in the chapter, Auden gives Ariel and Caliban more personhood, but separates them further from their characters in *The Tempest*, making them agents of a sort of cosmic order guiding people to Auden's two "Hell[s]". When the "dim chorus" asks Caliban to "take [them] home" (166), he has "no option but to be faithful to [his] oath of service and instantly transport [them], not indeed to any . . . specific Eden which [their] memory necessarily but falsely conceives of as the ultimately liberal condition, . . . but directly to that downright state itself" (167), the "Hell of the Pure Word", an unchanging and empty, but free, desert of inevitable existential despair. "Important persons", ask Ariel to transport them to their own conception of heaven, at which, "obliged by the terms of His contract", Ariel takes them to "a nightmare which has all the wealth of exciting action and all the emotional poverty of an adventure story for boys, a state of perpetual emergency and

everlasting improvisation where all is need and change", the "Hell of the Pure Deed".

This Caliban then describes the paradox facing the artist, "who, in representing to you your condition of estrangement from the truth, is doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth from which it is estranged, the brighter his revelation of the truth in its order, its justice, its joy, the fainter shows his picture of your actual condition in all its drabness and sham" (171). Thornburg writes that by this Auden means that an artist "can only show people what they are . . . But the danger of art becoming magic [which is to say entrancing] is omnipresent" (Thornburg 1969, 33). Thornburg decides that the artist's best option is to only show the "condition" and rely on readers to deduce the "truth", but in the text this is portrayed to be just as bad as focusing only on conveying the "truth". Instead, this is a complaint about the ultimate futility of art, through the lens of Kierkegaardian ideas about the necessity of accessing God (or "truth") through uncertainty. Caliban and Ariel, becoming more like people, no longer seem to entirely represent the diametric opposites of "Word" and "Deed". Distanced from the first two chapters, the play of *The Tempest* and the Mediterranean, they also become separate from the ideas of them in the 'myth' of the play, showcasing how art, or the 'myth' of art, can never accurately portray both "truth" and "condition" and will always be a simplification.

Building on this, the Caliban figure then explains that the "performance" (172), is now "over"; that he and Ariel can hear "the real Word", and, despite their flaws:

> are blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we [they] are separated by an essential emphatic gulf . . . so that all our meanings are reversed and it is precisely in its negative image of Judgement that we can positively envisage Mercy. (173)

The solution to Auden's paradox of life and art is religion, a "Wholly Other Life", and Caliban and Ariel, escaping the two "Hell[s]" understand, in Kierkegaardian fashion, that this religion is inherently paradoxical and accessible only through its inaccessibility. It is still the fictional character of Caliban speaking, however, in his "true"

imitation of Henry James, a reminder that, though the characters of Caliban and Ariel have escaped the 'myths' of themselves in the play-within-the-poem, the reader is still reading a poem, with the falsity inherent to Auden's view of art.

A final reminder of this is the "Postscript", "*[Ariel to Caliban. Echo by the Prompter]*", the first speech from Ariel in the poem, but with an "*. . . I*" from the "*Prompter*" after each stanza, reestablishing the fact that *The Sea and the Mirror* is art and therefore false, just like the chapter headings and the overall structure of the play-within-the-poem. Ratcliffe writes that the "*Prompter*" shows the "difficulty of establishing an unscripted self": "this Ariel will never be free – his words will always be written for him" (Ratcliffe 2008, 157-8). Having had his characters of Ariel and Caliban assert their individuality and the imperfection of art, Auden reminds the audience that they are still metaphorically actors following a script – that is to say fictional characters written by an author – and that the poem is also subject to the impossibility of perfect expression, or of having a single perfect 'myth' representing a character or thing.

W.H. Auden's idea of 'myth' in his lecture on *The Tempest* was a sort of basic story or set of ideas that make up a work, which responses to that work can follow and build upon. However, different readers of a work, in different contexts and with different preconceptions, will interpret it differently, and so the 'myth' of a work is necessarily vague and mutable. Auden quotes C.S. Lewis saying that "Myth does not essentially exist in *words* at all . . . [it] is a particular pattern of events, which would equally delight and nourish if it had reached [him] by some medium which involved no words at all – say by a mime, or a film. Any means of communication whatever which succeeds in lodging those events in our imagination has, as we say, 'done the trick'" (Auden 2019, 296). Popular ideas about *The Tempest* have changed enormously throughout its history, and therefore the 'myth' which people receive of it, through the criticism or re-imaginings of it which they read, the performances of it which they watch, and the socio-political circumstances and ideas they are involved with, changed and evolved from Shakespeare's time to when Auden was writing *The Sea and the Mirror*, with Caliban being cast as a representative of nature and Ariel his opposite in art, and Prospero becoming representative of Shakespeare and the poet. A

significant reason why Auden chose to use *The Tempest* for *The Sea and the Mirror* was presumably how well this 'myth' of the play fit into his philosophy of dualism, allowing him to transform Ariel and Caliban into representatives of the two "Hells" on either side of Auden's "This World" and then subvert the 'myth' by making them actors playing roles of themselves to demonstrate the limitations of knowledge in life and art. He uses the fictionalised Mediterranean setting of *The Tempest* and its 'myth' to express his philosophy of life, but takes care to show its inherent falsity: the necessarily imperfect and biased understanding of a text as its 'myth' mirrors Auden's belief in the impossibility of fully understanding the world or religion, and the need for acknowledgement of that ignorance and a Kierkegaardian 'leap of faith' to reach a semblance of the truth. Rather than a "Commentary on" *The Tempest*, then, *The Sea and the Mirror* is an exploration, response to, and deconstruction of the 'myth' of the play in Auden's sense of the word.

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