

“HAD I/ NOT FOUR OR FIVE WOMEN ONCE THAT  
TENDED ME?”: PAUL MAZURSKY’S VERSION OF  
SHAKESPEARE’S *TEMPEST*

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One of the most original and least appreciated adaptations of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) is undoubtedly the film *Tempest* (1981) directed by Paul Mazursky. Although the film was strongly attacked by many critics who did not realize the complex richness hidden under the cover of an apparently superficial light comedy, this modern *Tempest* constitutes an interesting attempt to update the universe of Prospero to a contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> century context. The aim of this paper is to analyse and compare both works paying special attention to the treatment of female characters, who, being almost absent in the original play, take a significantly dominant role in the film as a reflection of modern attitudes about sexual politics. In this way, the implications of the transformation of some male characters in the play into new female ones in the film as well as the different sexual roles played by them illustrate clearly how the humanist vision proposed by Mazursky in *Tempest* is fully impregnated with the attitudes, trends and conceptions of the eighties.

Since this paper deals with *The Tempest* (1623), which is, in Jonathan Bate’s words, “the play that more than any other enacts the power of imagination” (1989: 4), I would like to start by proposing a kind of imagination exercise. Let’s imagine that for some reason all Shakespeare’s plays suddenly disappear and only film adaptations are left for future generations. If someone had to reconstruct *The Tempest* using as *Rosetta Stone* just its screen adaptations, this modern Champollion would surely fail. As if it were the character of Ariel, the spirit of imagination and fantasy ready to take any shape, *The Tempest* has undergone all kinds of metamorphosis in the hands of the different film directors who have approached the play. In this way, *The Tempest* has been transformed into things as different as a Western, a futuristic Science-fiction adventure, a Gothic dream-like fantasy or a deconstructive post-modern maze of the kind we find in Peter Greenaway’s films. Paradoxically we have all kinds of versions of *The Tempest* but a more or less literal, close-to-the-text adaptation still remains undone.

One of the most outstanding versions of the text is the film *Tempest* directed by Paul Mazursky in 1982. This film is a modern-day version of the play in which the character of Prospero becomes Phillip, a successful New York architect who, going through a mid-life crisis, decides to retire to a desert island in Greece. There, he will recover his emotional balance by building a theatre instead of the casinos he used to build in Manhattan. In spite of these remarkable differences, the film follows the play more closely than it may seem and, in this way, most episodes, situations and characters exactly parallel those of the original text, although appropriately transformed and adapted to the new context. For example, Alonso, the king of Naples in the play, is now an Italian Mafia boss who employs Phillip, and Caliban becomes Kalibanos, a kind of tourist guide who shows Phillip the secrets of the island and who is taught by him to read and to play baseball. Even minor characters have also their clear updated counterparts in the film and, for instance, Trinculo, the jester in the play, appears in the film as Trinc, a terrible stand-up comedian who is telling bad jokes all the time.

One of the most interesting aspects in this contemporary re-styling of Shakespeare's play is, certainly, the way female characters are treated in the film. If every piece of art reflects in one way or another the society and the context in which it is produced, there is no doubt that the important feminist movement in the seventies and eighties has clearly marked this film. Consequently, women, who were almost absent in the original text, have a major presence in the movie. In some cases Mazursky gives "a local habitation and a name" to characters who did not appear on stage in the play such as Prospero's wife. In other cases some male characters like Antonio or Gonzalo are transformed into women by the director. However, the clearest proof of this "different sensibility" about women is not the increased number of female characters in the film but the significant active role that those characters play in the story and specially in their relation with Phillip, the modern counterpart to Prospero who perfectly embodies the crisis of the traditional patriarchal order.

The first of these women is Aretha, played by Susan Sarandon, who is the equivalent in the film of Ariel. Mazursky himself acknowledges that

Ariel in Shakespeare is really magic, so I decided the closest I could come in human form was to make her a free spirit, and the freest spirit I could think of was a certain kind of woman today who's determined to be free. (qtd. in L. Bennetts 1981: 24)

There are many subtle details which underline this identification between Aretha and Ariel and which even suggest a certain magical nature in the character of Aretha. In this way, bearing in mind some features of Ariel it is no accident that Aretha appears significantly singing "Volare", drinking "Sprite" or surrounded by TV aerials in a kind of visual joke.

But unlike Ariel, a spirit enslaved first by Sycorax and later by Prospero, Aretha is an independent active woman who voluntarily chooses to follow Phillip to the island. This does not mean that she is totally free. According to the director, "Aretha's problem is that she falls in love easy (...) so that gets her into a lot of

situations but at least she does what she wants to do" (qtd. in L. Bennetts 1981: 24). In other words, in a certain way she is enslaved but by her own feelings not by the power of Phillip, who hardly exerts any kind of authority on her. On the contrary, Aretha is the one who convinces Phillip to go to the island and also the one who shows him that forgiveness is the only magic power he possesses. He himself recognizes Aretha's predominant place when he asks her "Are you my teacher or my pupil?".

While Ariel in the play is an asexual spirit, in the film she becomes a sexually active woman who is totally "liberated from the sexual mores and domestic conventions of the past" (Kakutani 1982: 1). She takes the initiative when she proposes a reluctant Phillip to have sex with her and, in the same way, she reproaches him for the celibacy he says he has imposed on himself, a celibacy that has to be understood probably as an excuse to hide his male menopause.

Women's sexual liberation is also present in the character of Miranda. In the original play Prospero's daughter is a personification of innocence and obedience. On the contrary, in the film this modern Miranda is a teenager who feels sexually frustrated because she is fifteen and she is still a virgin. Besides when she meets Freddy (the equivalent to Ferdinand in the film) she warns him that unfortunately kissing is all they can do because she is not on the pill. Like Aretha, she has got an active role and she freely decides to accompany her father in his journey. But Phillip is hardly a master or an authority figure for her, who is disobeying him all the time. In fact, in the film there is a quite significant reversal of roles between those two characters. While in the play the original Miranda still has to learn from her father-figure, discovering in this way a new reality she did not know, in the film this updated Miranda has nothing to learn from Phillip. On the contrary, she is continuously answering her father's questions about pop culture like "Who is Woody Allen?" Or "Who is John Travolta?". In a way it is she who shows her father a "Brave new world/ That has such people in't" (V.i.183-4).

Another very significant transformation in the film is the presence of Phillip's wife, Antonia. As her name points out, she is the contemporary counterpart of Antonio, Prospero's treacherous brother. Antonia is a good-spirited woman married to a man who does not show any interest in her because he is very busy contemplating his own neurosis. She really loves him and she has made sacrifices in order to share her life with Phillip but, as he himself selfishly acknowledges, he is not willing to sacrifice anything at all for others. For this reason he gets quite angry when he learns that she wants to go back to work as an actress, and, significantly, to play a character who is defined as similar to Lady Macbeth.

In a way this marriage Phillip-Antonia seems to be an imaginative variation on Prospero's own marriage. Not much is told in the play about Prospero and his absent wife; however, if we take into account that he was a man who, "dedicated /To closeness and the bettering of [his] mind" (I.ii.89-90), had neglected his own duties and other "worldly ends", it would not be strange to consider that maybe his wife was also included in those "ends" ignored by the magician, who would be far from being the best of husbands. If his studies were so absorbing as to make him not pay any attention to his own people in Milan, probably his

wife got to know Prospero's selfish side too. This could be an explanation for the mysterious silence about his wife we find in the speech in which Prospero tells Miranda about the past events when he was the Duke of Milan.

As we have said before, Antonia is also a modern counterpart to Antonio and, although it is true that she lacks most of his negative features, she also commits what we can consider an act of betrayal against Phillip in the film. In this way Miranda's mother stops being "a piece of virtue", as she is described in the original play (I.ii.56), and has a love affair with Alonso, Phillip's boss. However, this infidelity must be understood not as pure treason but rather as the desperate trying of a woman who is just fed up with being the only one who fights to save her marriage, and tries to find in another man just the attention and the care her husband cruelly denies her.

In this listing of the female characters of the film we should also include Dolores, one of Alonso's friends who is on the boat when the tempest begins. Although this minor character seems to have passed unnoticed for some critics like Peggy A. Knapp, who explicitly affirms that "there seems to be no character who corresponds to (...) Gonzalo" (1987: 49), it is clear that she represents the equivalent of the honest old Councillor in the film. Sometimes she uses exactly his own words and, like Gonzalo, she also shows some philosophical and metaphysical concern which certainly contrasts with the practical pragmatism and superficiality of her travelling companions. She is the one who considers that island as a paradise to start a Utopian ideal society with no wars and no traffic jams. Significantly enough, when she meets Kalibanos, the primitive man, they both feel a sudden and irresistible attraction to each other.

These four female characters we have briefly analysed, and especially Aretha, Miranda and Antonia, constitute a significant example of modern active women whose presence in the film makes evident the different role played by Phillip in comparison with Prospero in *The Tempest*. Unlike the traditional image of a God-like benevolent Prospero in control able to create harmony with his omnipotent power, Phillip has no magic or capacity to control other characters. The headaches he says he has or the supposed celibacy he imposes on himself seem to be mere excuses not to assume his impotence in a sexual and also metaphorical sense. He looks pathetic when he thinks he has some power to stop the storm and, soaked, he has to be moved away from the rain by his daughter and Kalibanos. That moment Kalibanos has a kind of epiphany about his master and concludes "boss no god, only god god". Phillip himself answers him "I'm not a god, I'm a monkey just like you".

Unable to come to terms with himself, he is, of course, totally unable to help anyone. As the female characters around him make clear, he is a failure as a father, as a husband and as a lover.

Phillip, who calls himself "king of high tech", is just a selfish manic man who, going through his mid-life crisis, is totally absorbed in his own neurosis. Bearing in mind this neurosis, Prospero's famous words "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (V.i.275-6) take a new and more contemporary meaning. But Phillip's neurotic crisis is also linked to his inability not just to accept but even

to perceive the collapse of the patriarchal order which he himself embodies. In fact, when he realizes that Antonia and Miranda stop behaving exactly as he wishes his crisis becomes more serious. As the character of Antonia points out in a sentence that perfectly summarises Phillip's problematic situation, there is an authority crisis in the island.

While Phillip remains self-absorbed, unable to accept his own problems, women around him have to take an even more active role. As Richard Combs points out,

both Mazursky's Ariel (...) and Miranda establish themselves spiritedly in the space that has been vacated by the "magician" in their lives, who has abrogated his responsibilities as both lover and father. (1983: 179)

In the original play, Miranda remembers that when she was a child in Milan she had four or five women who tended her. Significantly enough, this is exactly Phillip's situation in this film, where he appears surrounded by some women who are attending him. However, in this case this is understood not as a sign of his power or authority but, on the contrary, as a sign of his helplessness.

Unlike Phillip, women in the film are practical characters who are full of life; they really know what their problems are and try to face them directly. Definitely, they are not the kind of women Joseph Conrad described in *Heart of Darkness* (1900) when he wrote that "(i)t's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own" (39). It is obvious that the character of Phillip is much closer to this portrayal than any other female character in the film. In fact we can talk about a reversal of roles in the film where women take the traditional masculine power position of Prospero while the male character plays a much more passive role.<sup>1</sup>

In the film women become the symbolic magicians who take care of Phillip and make him realise that the only magic we human have is understanding and love (Kroll 1982: 59). Thanks to those women, all of whom love him better than he deserves, Phillip obtains a happy ending (Hatch 1982: 284) which is also spread to the rest of the characters in the film. Thus, in the final reconciliation dance all the characters find a partner as a symbol of the harmony they have just achieved. While some of those couples are predictable (like Miranda and Freddy or Phillip and his wife), others are a bit surprising (the case of Aretha and Alonso or, especially, Kalibanos, the primitive man, and Dolores, the philosopher of delicate spirit), and even the dog finds an amorous dance partner in one of the sailors.

Significantly, in this final reconciliation scene Phillip, instead of forgiving Antonio like Prospero in *The Tempest*, is the one who has to ask for Antonia's forgiveness. Equally, in a particularly interesting moment, he also begs for Kalibanos' pardon. In this way, the problematic aspects which many critics in the

1. In connection with this idea of women taking on the traditional features of Prospero, in May of 2000 a production of *The Tempest* was performed in *The Globe* in London and the leading character of Prospero was played significantly by a woman, Vanessa Redgrave.

last decades have pointed out in the ending of *The Tempest* totally disappear in the film. In Mazursky's version, that is, in a world where women are not relegated to submissive roles anymore and where they come to terms with men, it is much easier to attain some harmony and reconciliation.

John Cassavettes, the actor who plays Phillip, considers that the film tries to express

some kind of message of joy and happiness and forgiveness, which is the same thing that Shakespeare's *Tempest* did, but this is done with modern language. (qtd. in Siskel 1982: 13)

In order to carry out this "translation into a modern language" Mazursky has certainly given, as we have seen, much more relevance to female characters by articulating the story in an, if not feminist, at least feminine key. Using another song simile we can conclude that the film still retains Shakespeare's lyrics but with a totally different modern music, and this music constitutes a revealing recreation of the play that is certainly marked by the social and ideological attitudes and conceptions of its historical moment.

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