

The Portrayal of Treason in *The Tempest*: The Fourfold Role of a Machiavellian Duke

Miguel Ángel GONZÁLEZ CAMPOS
Universidad de Málaga

ABSTRACT

In Elizabethan drama treason was a dramatic device of paramount importance. Most of Shakespeare's works, for example, could hardly be conceived without the notion of treason as a central and dominant leitmotif. Tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and also comedies such as *Much Ado About Nothing* mainly depend on, at least, one act of treason. But in spite of its significant presence in those plays, it is probably in *The Tempest* where the representation of treason reaches one of the highest points of complexity and sophistication in Renaissance drama. In this play, traditionally regarded as Shakespeare's farewell to his Art, a myriad of treasons appears to us at different levels (political, moral, socio-economic level, etc.). Unlike other plays by Shakespeare, *The Tempest* is entirely dominated by just one character, Prospero, who controls all the events of the play by means of his extraordinary powers and who articulates the dominant discourse by erasing any dissenting voice. For this purpose, Prospero carefully carries out an extremely interesting task of self-fashioning. The aim of this paper is to analyse the way the multi-layered myriad of treasons is presented in *The Tempest*, paying special attention to the strategies used by the Duke of Milan to validate his own view of things, strategies which have effectively worked until recently on generations of literary critics who had considered Prospero as the one betrayed, such as he depicts himself, rather than the traitor.

According to Curt Bright the discourse of treason was central to a thirty-year period of English Culture beginning in the early 1580's (1990:4). The continuous threats against the established authority due to the political, social and religious issues of the moment undoubtedly made the concepts of treason and usurpation of power very much present in society. Thus, it is not by chance that in Elizabethan drama treason becomes a very common dramatic device of paramount importance. In fact, most of Shakespeare's works, for

example, could hardly be conceived without the notion of treason as a central and dominant leitmotif. The plots of tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and also comedies such as *Much Ado About Nothing* mainly depend on, at least, one act of treason. However, no play by Shakespeare is as clearly focused on treason and rebellious attitudes as *The Tempest*, a dramatic piece in which the representation of treason reaches one of the highest points of complexity and sophistication in Renaissance drama. As James Black points out, in this play “every major character (...) is a plotter against received authority” (1991:31) and, in this sense, the honest old councillor Gonzalo may be the only exception. All the other characters take part, to a certain extent, in different kinds of real or fictional treacherous plots. Consequently, it is not strange that it is Gonzalo himself who imagines in his Utopian fantasy a Commonwealth without treason and felony:

All things in common nature should produce
 Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,
 Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
 Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
 Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
 To feed my innocent people.
 (II.i.156-62)

Significantly enough, as Curt Bright points out, treason is especially privileged in this passage (1990:15), placed at the head of the long list of evils that will no longer exist in that ideal place, a privileged position which it did not have in Michel de Montaigne’s essay “On the Cannibals” (1580), the main textual source of Gonzalo’s Utopian speech:

I would tell Plato that those people have no trade of any kind, no acquaintance with writing, no knowledge of numbers, no terms for governor or political superior, no practice of subordination or of riches or poverty, no contracts, no inheritances, no divided estates, no occupation but leisure, no concern for kinship—except such as is common to them all—no clothing, no agriculture, no metals, no use of wine or corn. Among them you hear no words for treachery, lying, cheating, avarice, envy, backbiting or forgiveness. (10)

In other words, the comparison of both texts makes evident that Shakespeare consciously and explicitly emphasizes in this passage what can be noticed throughout the play, that is, the paramount importance of treason in the micro-universe depicted in *The Tempest*.

The Tempest is a play almost entirely dominated by the presence of Prospero, who controls all the characters and events and appears at the centre of the myriad of treasons which are presented in the play. In fact Prospero is indeed the only character who, in one way or another, is present in each and every rebellious plot, although he plays different parts in them. Interestingly enough, critics who have studied the discourse of treason in *The Tempest* such as Breight or Frances E. Dolan have failed to notice that Shakespeare by means of the character of the Duke of Milan illustrates each of the four possible roles we may find in an act of treason which are:

- 1) Victim
- 2) Traitor
- 3) Indirect instigator
- 4) 'Creator' of imaginary plots.

The coexistence of these four different, and sometimes opposite, facets in the same character has made possible the diversity of interpretations of Prospero which critics have produced over the last centuries: a Machiavellian villain, a benevolent magician, a racist colonialist, an allegorical Christian hero, etc.

However, there is in my opinion another factor which has greatly contributed to this diversity of approaches to Prospero, and that is the original and unique —at least in the Shakespearean canon— way of dealing with treason that we see in him. If we contrast him with other treason figures such as Iago or Richard III, a major difference arises. Traditional Shakespearean villains usually pretend some kind of public honesty and integrity in front of other characters while they display their evil inner nature when they are alone on stage being observed just by theatrical audiences. Prospero seems to have a different level of metatheatrical self-consciousness as a character, especially if we consider that in a way he behaves as the stage director and almost the author of the unusual revenge tragedy he offers to us in *The Tempest*. When after the masque Prospero claims that “Our revels now are ended. These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits” (IV.i.148-9), these words seem to have an expanded meaning in Prospero’s mouth since, unlike the rest of the characters in the play and also unlike other Shakespearean villains, he seems to be aware of the fact that he is a character being observed and judged by external spectators. In his limited soliloquies he hardly ever shares his inner thoughts with the audience keeping in this way his public image even in his most private sphere when he is alone on stage. He does not allow spectators to hear his real plans which not always match the benevolent good-spirited intentions he confesses. This

makes him, in a way, a more sophisticated Machiavellian villain since he carries out a careful task of self-fashioning in order to control and mould other people's opinion (including the audience's). This task is performed so subtly and effectively that Prospero himself seems to fall into his own trap and accepts his own views of facts. He internalizes the artificial image he has created for himself in such a way that he eventually ends up convinced of his own virtues. In any of the four different roles Prospero plays in the rebellious plots in *The Tempest*, he appears especially concerned to stress his virtuous innocent behaviour not only in front of other characters but also in front of the audience. For this purpose, he uses some clear manipulative stratagems that are similar to those Lorie Jerrell Leininger calls "strategies of indirection", which are capable of inhibiting the audience's exercise of critical judgment (1980a:129).

The first of these strategies used by Prospero is already made evident from his very first appearance in the play. In the second scene of the first act he relates to Miranda and, above all, to the audience the past events in Milan where he became the victim of the act of treason performed by his brother. According to Prospero, his enemies tried to manipulate people's opinion and "with colours fairer painted their foul ends" (I.ii.143). But paradoxically enough, this is exactly what he does himself throughout the play. For example, he is not able to acknowledge (maybe he is not even aware) that he was expelled from Milan not only because of Antonio's ambition, but also because of his incompetence for ruling properly. He neglected his obligations and responsibilities as a ruler by devoting his time to his particular aims. In this way, he now performs a manipulative re-telling of the story in his own terms because now language is his weapon. Accordingly, he euphemistically refers to the ruling duties he abandoned just as "worldly ends", and the reason why he disregarded his obligations is something as positive and beneficial as the bettering of his mind (I.ii.89-90). Although it is true that from a humanist point of view the study and the search for knowledge are undoubtedly noble tasks, in the case of a Renaissance ruler this abandonment of power represents a selfish and irresponsible gesture since his first and essential obligation is to carry out the task entrusted to him, that is, to govern his country. From this point of view, Antonio's act of treason may be justified as far as he overthrows a bad neglecting ruler who does not do his duties properly. But of course Prospero is not willing to accept this and he clearly fashions his own particular 'official version' of facts, like a splendid elegant cloak to enhance his external image; and this beautiful garment is going to cover almost the whole play, preventing us

from seeing beyond since, as David Sundelson points out, in *The Tempest* dissent is confined to silence or discredit (1980:34).

Bearing this idea in mind, it is easy to understand the “reception anxiety” (Porter 1993:33) we find in Prospero when he recounts the story of his exile to Miranda. As David Porter asserts, although Miranda gives every sign of being a willing and attentive listener of her own accord, her father continuously interrupts his account as if worried lest his words miss the mark with sentences such as “Dost thou attend me?”, “Thou attend’st not” or “I pray thee mark me”. Prospero demands attention so vehemently from Miranda, and also from the audience, because apart from narrating facts he is also trying to convince his listeners and to impose his ‘official version’ in order to reinforce his authority. Similarly, Prospero’s answer when asked by Ariel to fulfil his promise is very significant:

...I must
Once in a month recount what thou hast been
Which thou forget’st.
(I.ii.261-3)

In this case, the discourse of the past that should be repeated by Prospero on a monthly basis is used by the usurped Duke to renew Ariel’s gratitude and affection and, consequently, to reinforce his dominant position as master and ruler of the island.

But if while dealing with an act of treason in which he has been the victim Prospero makes use of his manipulative strategies, when he becomes a traitor—the second role mentioned above—his behaviour turns out to be still more Machiavellian, such as we see when he usurps Caliban’s island. When recounting what happened in the past, Caliban attributes an act of high treason to his master when he explicitly accuses Prospero of usurping the land in which he was the king:

This island’s mine by Sycorax, my mother,
Which thou tak’st from me.
(...) All the charms
Of Sycorax - toads, beetles, bats - light on you,
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o’ the island.
(I.ii.332-3, 340-5)

Prospero of course does not accept such a charge and in his answer to this accusation, apart from discrediting again Caliban's dissenting voice by calling him "lying slave", he significantly hastens to bring up the subject of Caliban's attempt to rape Miranda. As Dolan points out, "Prospero counters Caliban's narrative of tyranny and usurpation with a narrative of attempted rape" (1992:322). The way Prospero uses this attempt to justify his usurpation is certainly remarkable. Many critics such as Paul Brown, Francis Barker or Peter Hulme have repeatedly made evident that *The Tempest* echoes the contemporary dominant colonialist discourse according to which the image of the treacherous savage should be artificially produced as a way of legitimizing colonial power (Wells 1992:53). Of course I do not mean to suggest that Prospero has invented this rape, since, in fact, Caliban himself acknowledges it. But in this sense I share Leininger's view of this episode, which she calls "The Miranda Trap". According to this critic, Prospero uses Miranda as a sexual bait to create the threat of Caliban and, at the same time, to create the need of protection in Miranda (1980b: 289). In other words, to a certain extent, Prospero himself makes possible and almost subtly instigates this rape in order to justify Caliban's imprisonment. Of course, history is always written by winners and, in this case, Prospero's usurpation of Caliban's island was totally successful. Consequently, what seems to be an act of high treason when he usurps the power in the island is described euphemistically by the Duke as an act of legitimate justice and self-defence, which reminds us of the popular epigram by Harrington: "Treason doth never prosper, what's the reason? / For if it prospers, none dare call it treason".

The third role played by Prospero in the different acts of treason in *The Tempest* is that of indirect instigator. Apart from the example of his behaviour with Caliban which I have just mentioned, this part of instigator can be clearly noticed on two different but parallel occasions in the play: the plot of Sebastian against his brother, the King of Naples, and the plot of Trinculo and Stephano against Prospero himself. In both plots Prospero uses a character, Antonio in the first case and Caliban in the second one, as a treason catalyst which triggers the rebellion. Undoubtedly, without their negative influence neither Sebastian nor Trinculo and Stephano would have seriously considered the possibility of usurping the crown. But besides, in both plots Prospero purposely creates some particular conditions which favour this rebellious behaviour in order to prompt an act of sedition. Let's consider Antonio and Sebastian's plot. Of course, it is clear that Antonio, as the kind of 'serial traitor' he is, clearly follows his own will when he proposes Sebastian to kill the king. But this act of treason just makes sense under the

special conditions that have been carefully arranged by Prospero: firstly, Ferdinand, second in line to the throne, has been given up for dead because he has been conveniently separated from the group, and, secondly, the king and the lords have been purposely induced to sleep by Ariel in order to offer Antonio and Sebastian an excellent opportunity to do the foul deed. But at the same time, Prospero prevents the rebellion and averts its success by making Ariel wake up the king and the lords just on time. As Stephen Greenblatt points out, “Prospero’s art has in effect created the conspiracy as well as the defence against the conspiracy” (1988:145). In this case, and also in Stephano and Trinculo’s plot, we find a clear example of the subversion and containment concept that has been widely explored by New Historicist critics: authority needs to produce a disruptive other in order to re-affirm and assert its power.

With this idea in mind, it is no wonder that when there is no actual treason plot Prospero himself has to invent a false accusation, playing in this way the fourth role I have mentioned above: creator of imaginary plots. This is what he does with Ferdinand, to whom he attributes in front of Miranda some evil intentions that he knows are false:

...thou dost here usurp
The name thou owest not; and hast put thyself
Upon this island as a spy, to win it
From me, the lord on’t.
(I.ii.454-7)

And when Miranda tries to defend him Prospero significantly answers: “Speak not you for him; he’s a traitor” (I.ii.461). Later on, Prospero will try to justify this false accusation by arguing that it was just a trial of Ferdinand’s love. That is why, according to him, he places some obstacles in the way of the lovers since, as Lysander reminds us in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “The course of true love never did run smooth” (1.i.134). But once again, Prospero is painting in fair colours his foul deeds, since after considering his behaviour throughout the whole play it seems implicit that what he really intends is, as happened with Caliban, to reaffirm his authority on the island. In this respect, the parallelisms between Caliban and Ferdinand are remarkably underlined in the play. Both characters get caught in the “Miranda trap”, are accused of treason and imprisoned by Prospero and both are obliged to carry heavy logs as a punishment. In a sense, we could say with Stephen Orgel that “any Miranda’s suitor is Caliban” (1986:55).

In this episode of the false accusation we should notice how Prospero manipulates facts to make them fit in with his ‘official’ version. For instance, when Ferdinand tries to draw his sword Prospero uses his magic to paralyze him. However, Prospero transforms this magic charm into a Machiavellian political argument to support his view, and claims that Ferdinand cannot move because “(his) conscience is so possess’d with guilt” (I.ii.469-70). This scheming magician is wise enough not to confound power with authority and, in this way, he uses his power (an element that belongs exclusively to the individual) to establish and reinforce his authority, which is a social concept arising from the external acknowledgment of this power by other people. Consequently, the image of Ferdinand being unable to draw his symbolically phallic sword makes evident not just the sexual restraint imposed on him by Prospero but, most significantly, Prospero’s pervasive and manipulative control on him and on the rest of the characters in the play.

But, in spite of this benevolent image that Prospero fashions for himself and tries to project all the time—an image that has certainly misled generations of critics—there are two particular moments in the play in which to some extent he gives himself away. The first one is the episode with Ferdinand I have just mentioned, when he openly shows his manipulative arts. The second moment in the play in which the audience has the opportunity to contemplate a certain dissociation between Prospero’s benevolent intentions and his real actions is the epilogue. In spite of his—according to him—‘altruistic’ aims throughout the play, in his final speech Prospero asks the audience for support just for himself. We who have witnessed how Prospero in the play emphasizes his altruism, for example, by repeating several times to Miranda that all his actions are just for her own good (I.ii.16), may be surprised when considering his final speech. Unlike other epilogists such as Puck, Rosalind or Feste, Prospero is the only one who makes no reference to the play itself, neither to his fellow characters nor the company. He selfishly refers only to himself using, as Joseph Westlund points out, the personal pronoun fifteen times in just twenty lines (1986:67) and, what is more revealing about his personality, he asks for the applause and the pardon just for himself without mentioning the rest of the characters or the company, which does not seem to be an accurate behaviour for a generous and benevolent Renaissance humanist. It is suggestive to consider the image that Prospero produces for himself as a magnificent balloon filled just with air. These two moments I have mentioned eventually end up being two punctures on this splendid balloon, through which the air of Prospero’s

kindness and innocence escapes little by little to let us contemplate the deflation of this sham artificially-created image.

As Bright points out in his analysis of the discourse of treason, some of the stratagems and plans portrayed in Renaissance plays are part of the dominant contemporary discourse of treason in late Elizabethan and Early Jacobean England (1990:1). In fact, according to this critic, theatrical audiences at that time, in spite of Prospero's efforts to avoid it, were perfectly enabled to perceive Shakespeare's clever demystification of various official strategies within the discourse of treason. In this way, *The Tempest* appears to us as a politically radical intervention in this dominant contemporary discourse which shows and demystifies those official strategies (1990:1). At this point, as an exercise of creative imagination it could be really tempting to be seduced by the romantic long-established and a somewhat outdated biographical readings of the play. Traditionally *The Tempest* has been considered as the last play written by Shakespeare, on which he bestowed his fully matured Art and where he places all his knowledge and life experience. Is it possible that precisely because it was his farewell to Art, Shakespeare would not feel any fear to carry out this radical subversive unmasking of those official strategies? Of course, it is impossible for us to know and, in any case, the answer to this question, if there is any, probably transcends the field of literary studies and is closer to imaginative speculative fiction.

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Author's address:

Universidad de Málaga
 Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
 Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana
 Campus Universitario de Teatinos s/n
 29071 Málaga, Spain
 magcampos@uma.es