

## 1616-2016 Four hundred years that may reveal more surprises

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Tempest* of William Shakespeare deserves special attention. It opens a special view of the Elizabethan age and it can act as a bridge between the magic of the real World and the powers of the human mind. This play has been differently interpreted; however, an original analysis can be developed. An analysis that takes into proper account the possible influence of Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno on the English poet he met just a short while before writing the play.

**KEYWORDS:** *Forbidden Planet, Giordano Bruno, Parallelism, The Tempest, William Shakespeare*

### Foreword

The countless liberties that filmmakers have taken when adapting *The Tempest* can be explained according to the observation that this is “one of Shakespeare’s most unrealistic plays” (Vaughan, Palmer, 1991) and, as Jonathan Bate points out, “the play that more than any other enacts the power of imagination” (Bate, 1989).

### Synopsys

Probably one of the most original and fascinating recreations of the play is the science fiction film *Forbidden Planet* directed by Fred McLeod Wilcox in 1956. In this movie, we find a very particular version of *The Tempest*, first staged in 1611 (Shakespeare, 1610) in which the island of Prospero becomes planet Altair IV in the year 2257 and the sailors happen to be members of a rescue expedition that arrive in the planet in a spaceship. There they will find doctor Morbius, who lives with his daughter Altaira and Robby, his mechanical servant. At first sight the parallelism between the play and the film is clear:

Morbius would be an updated Prospero and Altaira would constitute a new Miranda who, knowing no man except her father, falls in love with Commander Adams, the equivalent to Ferdinand in the film. Equally, Robby would be Ariel, Caliban would become a post-Freudian Monster of Id and in the Cook, we can clearly recognize the character of Stephano. However, for most critics, aside from these parallelisms between some characters, there are no more similarities between *The Tempest* and *Forbidden Planet* (Vaughan, 1991).

### Parallelisms – a Freudian point of view

There are many more unquestionable similarities between Morbius and Prospero. Both characters, apart from the rest of mankind, have devoted their lives to the study of some books that have granted them an extraordinary, almost supernatural, power.

In both cases, we also find a voluntary final renouncement to their power and knowledge. Although apparently different, the magic of Prospero and the science of Morbius are of a similar kind.

The fact that Morbius is the only repository of the knowledge of an extinct superior race gives him a certain mysterious air that brings to our minds the figure of the magician. In fact, Morbius himself uses the word “magic” on several occasions in order to describe his creations and Dr. Ostrow defines his power in the film as “Aladdin’s lamp in a physics laboratory” with the clear implication that science becomes the magic of the future (Philip et al. 1980).

Some critics have suggested a Freudian reading of the character’s development in the movie. For example, Stephen Greenblatt has described Prospero’s magic as “a way to enact the fancies of the brain” (Greenblatt 1995).

This definition perfectly suits the power of Morbius since, thanks to the technology of the Krell, he will be able to give a material form to what exists only in his mind. But this Krell machine will also give shape and a local habitation to Morbius’s subconscious aggressive impulses. In this way, we find the Monster of Id, a materialization of the primitive destructive instincts of our nature, who is the equivalent to Caliban in *Forbidden Planet*.

According to Freud, these primeval impulses manifest themselves through dreams and, in this sense, the link between the Monster and the dreams is continuously emphasized throughout the movie. For example, the sequence of the attack of the Monster to the spaceship is alternated with some shots of Morbius sleeping and just when he wakes up, the Monster disappears. In this case, Prospero’s famous words, “We are such stuff/As dreams are made on (...)” become quite appropriate to this Calibanesque Monster of Id who literally inhabits our dreams (Campos, 1998).

### One different suggestion

In fact, even if this suggestion is somewhat fascinating, I suggest a different and deeper root for the inspiration of Shakespeare’s play. *The Tempest* is the last performance to which our poet participated as a player (Forsyth, Neil 2000). Historically the first performance of the drama is recorded at the Globe Theater in 1611; the first memory of this play, however, dates back to 1601 (Collier, 1844). In fact, in 1601 Shakespeare was still influenced by his encounter with Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno who had met the poet in 1585 during his long journey in Oxford.

There are anniversaries that can be ignored although they relate to events that, even though important, can be forgotten because their effects have ancestral results in a circumscribed spatial-temporal context and do not deserve to be remembered forever.

This attitude has been variously discussed and still deserves merits discussion as it allows us to justify the natural stratification of events. With the aim to deep the understanding why certain events may be overlooked through a removal process that in some cases forces them to trace the history back to rebuild motivations, the whys, and forces to restore in some cases what is already invented or make happen what has already happened. In other words, there are situations for which snaps that can be called Bluebeard's syndrome: "Will not be back there." No more questions, only accepting what you see without asking how we can have reached that point.

However, there are "lumps" of history that do not involve wars, revolutions, famines or special histories of sovereigns. There are "lumps" of history that do not exalt dynasties or nations or sensational events, but rather they play in the silence of a room, in the shadows of a "secret cave" (maybe just metaphorical). It resolves with a meeting between two free spirits. Causing events, infinitely important.

## The role of Giordano Bruno

It is the case of the meeting between Giordano Bruno and William Shakespeare (between April 1583 and October 1585), a fact that marked both, and that the English poet clearly and explicitly acknowledged in *Love's Labour's Lost*. An event that still has a special charm, loaded as it is with philosophical, poetic and spiritual references.

One cannot but observe to which point Shakespeare was able to evolve during his artistic career. By the end of the sixteenth century, he had written about twenty plays and, among these, some, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, had already reached of the maturity of expression, poetic and cognitive tools (Hamlet's tragedy, King Lear, Macbeth, to name only the most famous ones). No one can doubt the fact that from an early age, Shakespeare knew various doctrines, some truly esoteric, others simply occultist, which passionately interested playwrights in London, as well as those aristocrats who kept, protected and encouraged them.

We know that, at the end of the sixteenth century, the medieval mystical heritage was enriched with various currents - Pythagorean, Platonic, cabalistic, hermetic, Rosicrucian and alchemist. Furthermore, at the edge of these, there were astrology and magic. This sort of cognitive engagement had taken place thanks to all those who, at the cost of great suffering and often of their own lives, had had the courage to go against the Holy Roman Church. Giordano Bruno was probably the most prominent among them and the most aware, though, perhaps, the most difficult to understand. As with the visual arts, in this era, even literature has a special relationship with esotericism. The entire universe is regarded as a great theater of mirrors, which can be looked at from different perspectives, and anamorphic, as a set of hieroglyphics that require deciphering.

## The Elizabethan framework

During the Elizabethan era, various philosophical and esoteric movements arose, of which undoubtedly Shakespeare was part. Actually, he belonged to the brotherhood of the Rosicrucians; you cannot ignore the fact that in some of his plays he shows such an extensive and profound wisdom that seems to be rooted in the Kabbalah and Hermeticism. In some passages of Shakespeare's plays (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest* as well as *The Merchant of Venice* and his romance plays *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*), you can find words and concepts taken from leading representatives of Esotericism such as Hermes Trismegistus, Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa, Francesco Giorgi, Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno and the German theological group known as the Rosicrucians, whose doctrine spread fully in England in the seventeenth century (Yates, 1999).

Shakespeare probably drew esoteric subjects from all these teachings and doctrines, which he developed internally to create his great works. Especially in his later production, he uses a mysterious language that made him look as a great initiate that operated under a nickname. Thus, the Swan of Avon appears to be moving in the enigmatic aura as a free spirit. It possesses well-defined concepts of mystery. Although it fought a lot against the magic and its derivations, it is undeniable that in the Renaissance, it was a cultural thing, and in that age literature was full of hidden meanings. In the Elizabethan age, the world was characterized by a particular ideological and cultural background, from Renaissance with a special interest in the supernatural.

The great performances of Shakespeare characters - Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Prospero - are considered to belong to the later phases of Renaissance occult philosophy, which was the philosophical base of the Elizabethan age. Hamlet is haunted by the ghost; Macbeth meets the witches. *Macbeth*, along with *The Tempest*, is one of Shakespeare's esoteric plays. Based on the etymology of the word, 'esoteric' refers to what is internal, hidden, secret, with a language that requires and allows, through a process of interpretation, the unveiling of a deeper meaning.

Esotericism performs a hermeneutical function since it is also a symbol synthesis, which stimulates an interpretation of symbolic language and images. The ideological and philosophical background of Shakespeare's works is, therefore, extremely important in order to understand fully the lyrics, even in their aesthetics reception, in their symbolism, in their pictures and in their colors. Even King James I Stuart was a student of the pseudo-science of the supernatural and of the occult. Magic, astrology, alchemy and philosophy were considered aspects of science: occult science.

The art of the magician, therefore, dominates the world of these spirits. But in order to command the spirits, one has to dominate them through the virtues (McCollum, 1961).

## Bruno & Shakespeare

The meeting between Bruno and Shakespeare - the former with the power of knowledge and the sacred fire of truth, the latter with the magical gift to materialize with the Word what is above and bring it down to earth - could only lead to that great service to the humankind that are the plays by Shakespeare. He saw Bruno and realized that everything was illusion and also wanted to be understood (Orbetello, 1988).

It would not make sense to confine in a single writing everything what has been written about the exegesis of Shakespeare's thought. However, on this anniversary you can still comment on

how it was not fully commented and discussed. Obviously, I do not mean to speak of a manuscript discovered by chance and interpreted as a manuscript of Shakespeare. I want to confine myself to the seeds left by the poet-playwright in the adaptation of *The Tempest* made for the 1956 movie *Forbidden Planet*. In 2013, the movie was named to the National Film Registry of the Library of the United States Congress.

There is no doubt that the occasion of the drama was the celebration of the future wedding of Elizabeth, granddaughter of Queen Elizabeth I, with Frederick V, Elector Palatine of the Rhine, (a wedding which was called the prelude to a European peace between Catholic and Protestant nations). Most controversial is to identify whom Shakespeare referred to with the figure of the magician Prospero. Perhaps to Giordano Bruno himself, who arrived in England as an emissary of the French court at the time of the poet's youth. Inspired by Neo-Platonic and Kabbalistic traditions that went back in the final analysis to the work of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, Bruno could take the place of a Renaissance magician. More likely, however, Shakespeare thought of John Dee who had combined the Hermetic tradition with a strong development of mathematics. As a consequence, he exerted a great influence on the court of Elizabeth I. Dee was in turn formed on Agrippa of Nettesheim's *De occulta philosophia*.

### **Bruno as a magician**

An interesting book is Frances Yates' *Shakespeare's Last Plays*. In this book, the author penetrates into the genesis of some of the most interesting works of the Bard, especially those of recent years. He goes so far as to suggest a meeting that might have taken place in London between Shakespeare and Giordano Bruno in the years when the philosopher, burned by the Inquisition in Campo de 'Fiori in 1600, taught the Copernican theory at Oxford University. Yates does not dwell enough on the conclusion that Prospero, the extraordinary character that Shakespeare puts at the center of *The Tempest*, was inspired only by Giordano Bruno. Bruno is interested in magic from his earliest writings: even Chandler - published in Paris in the last months of 1582 - refers to the operations of the magical character, albeit in ironic terms. But in *Cantus Circaeus*, the tone and the picture change. Here the magic is the 'tool' that Circe uses to reorder the world, restoring a proper connection between what a person appears and what is addressing - and solving through the magic - one of the most acute and severe problems faced by philosophy in the Renaissance, from Alberti to Bell: that of the 'ontological reversal being' and 'appearing', of 'appearance' and 'reality'.

Very important pages deal with magic in *Spaccio della Bestia Trionfante*, where Bruno makes the apology of the ancient wisdom of Egypt: through magical operations, it was able to enter into communication with the gods and to dialogue with them placing a vital and positive relationship between man, nature and God. In other words, restoring the circuit between divine dimension, natural dimension and the human dimension that Christianity had broken, ushering in an era of barbarism, of decadence, of separation and even contrast, among men and gods (Treccani Enciclopedia on-line issued on December 21, 2010).

Precisely because of this epistemic nature, "magic was regarded as a tool to learn about the forces of nature; it offered an explanation of phenomena that often could not be explained by official Aristotelian science, such as births of monstrous individuals, optical illusions, pestilential diseases, natural disasters, comets etc." (Geymonat, 1975).

The above concept was reaffirmed and strengthened by the following remark: “The production of a soul of the world and of the spirit as the natural order, that man does not transcend but with which even coincide completely. On the other hand, and precisely the continuity between the faculty and the lower body with the soul of the world that offers man the opportunity of a knowledge and a practical control of the sensitive reality.” (Bruno, 1891; Ingegno, 1978). The soul of the world is expressed universal intellect, which is the efficient cause, and produces natural things. Bruno calls this intellect interior architect because it forms and organizes Materita from within; the intellect is not opposed to the matter, in fact, it is its field of explication. (On page 67 and 78 Bruno cites the adage from Virgil «spiritus intus alit» (Bruno, 1891).

So Bruno resumes in *De vinculis* generally developed the concept of matter in cosmological dialogues. Matter is not “turpis”, but already contains in all forms, the beauty; it and then “divinum quiddam” (Bruno, 1891).

In the movie, the theme of *The Tempest* is outlined and suggested, variously explained and proposed in a clear manner by suggesting the complete mental control of matter with the resulting increase in the intellectual abilities of whoever gets to the intelligence.

God can to better communicate - not only as being, but also how to learn - has also created spiritual beings capable of knowing him. The wise self-communication of God to be perfect short involves creating ‘creatures capable of knowing (and thus recognize God).

The being with a free communication and good from God, cannot be determined by other aim than by divine goodness itself, cannot be other than a time to multiply the divine likeness in creatures: well, the similitudo (which, as we know, is a communication in shape) one can find in another in two ways: first “quantum them nature” (when an agent communicates a natural tone to a receiver, for example the fire makes it look like in what burns, or when the generator is in general similar to the self-generated). And second, the similarity of something you can find otherwise “secundum cognitionem” (because the intelligible forms are similarities in the intellect existing actually in kind): therefore, «Ad hoc quod similitudo Dei pufearum esset in onus [...]. oportuit quod divina bonitas rebus per similitudinem communicaretur» (Di Maio, 1998).

## Acknowledgment

*Forbidden Planet* may take place on a relatively small canvas, as compared to modern offerings such as *Avatar*, with its action taking place over a mere handful of locations; yet, the size of the sets and the quality of its special effects was, again, unprecedented for its era. The subterranean city of the Krell shows an extraordinary sense of scale thanks to some beautifully wrought matte paintings and dramatic camera angles.

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## Sintesi

*“La tempesta” di Shakespeare ha sicuramente alcune caratteristiche che la rendono particolarmente interessante sia dal punto di vista storico (ad esempio è accertato che è l’ultima opera alla cui rappresentazione l’autore ha partecipato come attore) e dal punto di vista della critica è la più immaginifica opera dell’autore, considerata la collocazione temporale nella vita dell’autore è sicuramente un’opera della maturità del medesimo.*

*Ma questi due aspetti forse sono marginali rispetto ad altre osservazioni che si possono fare.*

*Ad esempio è un’opera profondamente intrisa di considerazioni filosofiche che ci consentono di venire a contatto con le convinzioni filosofiche di Shakespeare la sua adesione al Platonismo, all’ermetismo rosacrociano e a tutto il sentire filosofico dell’epoca in cui è stata scritta.*

*Quindi in questo senso questa opera è una fotografia di una importante porzione della visione filosofica all’epoca dell’autore e questo già basterebbe a renderla molto interessante.*

*Tuttavia non si può non ricordare che questa tragedia è nata dopo l’incontro tra l’autore e il filosofo nolano Giordano Bruno. Incontro che avvenne durante una visita del nolano a Oxford e che lasciò tracce rilevanti su entrambi.*

*In particolare non si può non riconoscere l’influenza del pensiero di Bruno nella formazione della sostanza immaginifica della tragedia. Non si può non riconoscere il ruolo predominante della magia come artefice materiale della realtà fattuale nello sviluppo della tragedia.*

*Ancora, però, l’interesse per questa opera, tutto sommato non facilmente accessibile alla maggioranza del pubblico, ha ricevuto una sorprendente rivisitazione e rappresentazione durante gli anni 60 quando fu trasformata in una riscrittura filmica che senza toglierne i contenuti filosofici ma in qualche modo la rende più accessibile ad un pubblico non necessariamente pronto a seguirla.*

*Nell’anniversario della nascita di Shakespeare è sicuramente utile riflettere sul ruolo di questa opera e sulle possibili interpretazioni che ancora si possono sviluppare sul pensiero del suo autore.*