**SYMBOLISM AND ASTROLOGY IN THE TEMPEST - INTERTWINED PATHS**

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The Shakespearian’s play *The tempest* (1611) is full of symbolic meaning, where implications of astrology and symbolism are aimed to be widely explored in our study. This paper intends to discuss the explanation of language symbols that encompass all astrological aspects of human experience in the play. It also includes an explanation of the connection between astrology and symbolism while discussing their representation within Shakespearian times. With authors such as Priscilla Costello (2008), Roger Beck (2007), Sondheim (1939) and others, we aim to reflect the social, historical and cultural significance of Shakespeare’s work at that time, also addressing the relevance of ancient astrology today, presenting it not as a predictive art, but as a medium for telling stories about our world and the human condition.

**KEYWORDS**: Shakespeare. The Tempest. Astrology. Symbolism.

**1. THE TEMPEST – INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The Tempest has been widely known and diversely controversial since the second decade of the seventeenth century. *The Tempest* probably was written in 1610–1611, and was first performed at Court by the King’s Men in the fall of 1611. It was performed again in the winter of 1612–1613 during the festivities in celebration of the marriage of King James’s daughter Elizabeth. It is most likely the last play written entirely by Shakespeare, and it is peculiar for being one of only two plays by Shakespeare (the other being Love’s Labor’s Lost) whose plot is thoroughly original. The play does, however, draw on travel literature of its time—most notably the accounts of a tempest off the Bermudas that separated and nearly wrecked a fleet of colonial ships sailing from Plymouth to Virginia. The English colonial project seems to be on Shakespeare’s mind throughout *The Tempest*, as almost every character, from the lord Gonzalo to the drunk Stephano, ponders how he would rule the island on which the play is set if he were its king. Shakespeare seems also to have drawn on Montaigne’s essay “Of the Cannibals,” which was translated into English in 1603. The name of Prospero’s servant-monster, Caliban, seems to be an anagram or derivative of “Cannibal.”

Since the worldview of Shakespeare's time is so comprehensive, his allusions are wide-ranging, encompassing the heavenly spheres, the human world on all its levels, and the world of nature. At the same time, *The Tempest* includes stage instructions for a host of elaborate special effects. The many parades and songs accompanied by richly costumed figures or stage magic - for example, the banquet in Act III, scene iii, or Ferdinand and Miranda's wedding celebration in Act IV, scene i - give the play the feel of a mask, a highly stylized form of dramatic musical entertainment popular among 16th- and 17th-century aristocracy. It is perhaps the tension between simple stage effects and very elaborate and astrological effects that gives the play its mysterious, dreamlike quality, making it seem rich and complex, yet it is one of Shakespeare's shorter and simpler plays.

There is a long-established tradition of enchanted islands in Western literature. Some of the most notable are the Isles of the Blessed, the Western Isles to which King Arthur of Celtic legend has gone and from which he is expected to return at some future time (as the “once and future king”). This fits the trajectory of the story: Prospero has vanished from Milan, has sailed away to a mysterious island, and will return at the end of the play to take his place as rightful ruler.

There is an old discussion about the placement of *The Tempest* in the chronology of Shakespeare's plays. The core of this discussion is that it is the last solo work written by the bard, a defense that even gives one of the many interpretative lines for the play, the one that sees *The Tempest* as a symbology of something coming to an end, as a farewell letter. The fact that Prospero closes his cycle of revenge and follows from there the forgiveness of his enemies throughout his life is often seen as an attitude of Shakespeare himself towards his art, his professional colleagues, his competitors in other theater companies British. And even more, the breaking of the wand, the liberation of all spirits and the discarding of the book of spells crown this vision with a demonstration of the creator's detachment in face of everything that brought him inspiration, will, impulse to create. Just as Prospero's magic time comes to an end, some believe *The Tempest* shows William Shakespeare's playwright time closing as a symbol.

Classified as a comedy (in relation to Shakespeare's plays and taking the Hellenic concept of classification for the theater, we understand “comedy” here as a story that doesn't end tragically, that doesn't end in abundant sadness, death, etc.), *The Tempest* begins with an intense scene where former enemies of Prospero are returning from a wedding in Tunisia. When this ship passes near the island where the former Duke of Milan is exiled with his daughter Miranda, huge waves rise, heavy rain falls, lightning and thunder, a storm that is actually a farce carried out by Prospero to attract these individuals to that locality and start your revenge process. From very early on in the play, the reader understands that the old magician does not just want revenge on his usurper brother and also on the King of Naples, who was part of the entire plot. Prospero wants to regain his rightful position, but since he doesn't feel strong enough to ascend directly to the throne, he uses a very curious trick to achieve what he wants.

The play is considered one of the densest works of Shakespeare. Its characters, dialogues and situations had multiple critical readings. It deals with themes such as ambition, betrayal, revenge and redemption, in an environment that mixes the supernatural, the astrological with the earthly. One of the main characters of *The Tempest*, Prospero, closes the play with a remembered monologue, which has become one of the most memorable phrases quoted from Shakespeare over the centuries: “We are made of the same substance as dreams. Our little world is surrounded by dreams."

There are various references to events of its time, since many scholars, the ideas of *The Tempest* are partly inspired by the story of George Somers. This was a famous Royal Navy Admiral who survived after being trapped with his crew in the middle of a storm off the coast of Bermuda in 1609.It was also alleged to be an allusion to voyages of conquest of the New World, territory for which the British and Spanish crown competed. For many Europeans at the time, America was a land of unknowns, supernatural creatures and monsters.

There has been much speculation about the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, primitive human being that the magician subdues and places at his service. Caliban's description says he is a deformed wild slave. More recently, the feature that has been emphasized is about their slavery. He would be a victim of colonialism, even becoming an empathetic figure for his inferior status. According to many readers and critics of the postcolonialism, it represents the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized Indians of America.

**2. HISTORICAL AND ASTROLOGICAL ASPECTS – SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS**

In compliance with Costello, during the Renaissance, people “were more aware of the skies and the stars than nowadays” (2018, p. 3). With no electric lights and a few clocks, Elizabethan people faced some conditions, such as the sky, to determine time and weather; also, personalities were classified according to some specific planets, which can be also called an early form of psychology; then, medical practice were based on planetary types, known as “temperaments”. Therefore, the meanings of the astrological symbols were very familiar to most of them.

However, this is not to say that every Elizabethan Englishman believed in all of these systems of occult lore. Even though it is difficult, for instance, to envision a sophisticated Londoner believing wholeheartedly in the likes of Puck, Oberon, and Titania, it can be said, however, that the average Elizabethan (if such a creature existed) would probably have evinced some varying degree of credence in one or more of these occult belief systems. Nevertheless, these beliefs had remained strong (in varying degrees) through the centuries and were very much a part of the Elizabethans' cultural heritage. It was probably the most popular occult system of belief in Elizabethan England.

The illiterate people, who were the majority, passed down for generations the information acquired, in order to make the astrological language familiar to all, while the literate individuals used to read yearly almanacs in English listing astrological *omens,* which were popular with the general public. Thus, Educated Elizabethans “grasped astrology’s more profound implications since astrological language appeared frequently in religious writings” (Costello, 2018, p. 7). Like the members of Shakespeare’s audience, his characters were also acquainted with the astrological language, even though a few of them express nothing but “scorn and disdain for such superstition” (Sondheim, 1939, p. 243).

The symbols involving astrology can be seem not only in *The Tempest* but also in almost all the other Shakespeareans plays. In *King Lear*, for instance, Kent, in Act V, Scene 3, is somehow convinced that the stars exert an influence on human characters, what is denied by Edmund, in Act I, Scene 2. Since some Shakespearian characters contradict one another, it’s simply impossible to define Shakespeare’s own attitude towards astrology; Camden (1933) exposes that it is unfeasible to shape it towards the science of astral predictions.

So, why were Elizabethans so obstinate about astrology? One reason might be the sheer history of some of these beliefs. It can be seen that Astrology, witchcraft, sorcery, and devils are all mentioned in the Bible and no doubt date back much further. In line with Beck (2007), it is reported that astrology can be dated back at least as far as 2000 BC to the ancient Sumerians. These beliefs had remained strong (in varying degrees) through the centuries and were very much a part of the Elizabethans' cultural heritage. They desperately need something to believe in order to help them in their attempt to make sense of a world in which events were often unexplainable.

In fact, the Elizabethans had a lot to be perplexed about. When we look back at Elizabethan England, we tend to think of the great intellectual ferment of London during this period or of the glory of Elizabeth's court. What we forget are the harsh living conditions that Sixteenth-century English men and women clashed. At a time when science was still in its infancy, Elizabethans had little or no defense against famine and pestilence. Bradbook (1978) explains that there were, for example, some particularly bad harvests during the 1590s, just when Shakespeare's theatrical career was taking off. Even more devastating were the frequent outbreaks of plague. In 1592-1594 one-sixth of London died of plague. De Camp explains that “It has been estimated that almost seven years of Shakespeare's dramatic career were lost due to this scourge; theatres could not operate during plague time for fear of increasing the chance of contagion” (De Camp, 1966, p.20).

Johnstone Parr (1953) estimated that there are over one-hundred astrological references in Shakespeare, even though some critics suggest more. The question, however, is what, if any, significance do these many astrological allusions have? Are they merely figures of speech, as Theodore Oscar Wedel (1920) asserts in his *The Mediaeval Attitude Toward Astrology,* or do they indicate, as Bruce King[[3]](#footnote-3) believes, that Shakespeare's characters are merely puppets of the stars? Even though it is not expected to find any complete documentary evidence, the investigations of astrological beliefs in Shakespeare’s environment are expected to entail us near some explanations regarding it.

**3. SYMBOLISM AND ASTROLOGY: SHAKESPEARIAN’S THE TEMPEST**

As it can be investigated in most of the Shakespearian plays, Costello adds that Shakespeare’s *dramatis personae* usually enclose stars, planets, comets, meteors, eclipses, planetary aspects, predominance, conjunctions, oppositions, retrogradation and all sorts of astro-meteorology. Costello also reveals some relevant information mentioned by Johnstone Par (1956), who explains that people at that time:

“They knew that the Dragon’s Tail exerts an evil influence, that Mercury governs lying and thievery, that Luna [the Moon] rules vagabonds and idle fellows, that Saturn is malignant and Jupiter benevolent, that the signs of the zodiac rule the limbs and organs of the body, that planets influence cities and nations, although they do not go into details regarding this technical workings of the science, his characters on the whole seem to possess a general knowledge of stellar influence on human destiny [...] (Johnstone Par, 1953, p. 64 apud Costello, 2018, p.6).

It is intelligible that modern readers usually don’t comprehend many of the astrological allusions in Shakespeare’s plays as well as they don't understand their significance because we are no longer steeped in the worldview that was fundamental to Elizabethan thinking. Priscilla Costello suggests that we're conditioned in our time “by the dominant beliefs of conventional materialistic science: that only physical things are real and that the only way to acquire knowledge is through five-sense perception” (Costello, 2018).

In all his plays, Shakespeare naturally draws on familiar astrological symbolism as creative inspiration for his art, in both obvious and subtle ways. He uses it for various purposes: to establish time and its passage; to create characters in line with planetary associations; and to allude to themes and philosophical ideas embedded in these symbols.

In *The Tempest* it is seen that twelve years before the opening of the play, the scholar and rightful Duke of Milan, Prospero, was deposed by his ambitious brother Antonio with the collaboration of Alonso, King of Naples. Though Prospero and his three-year-old daughter Miranda were placed in a small boat to die on the open sea, Prospero's faithful counselor Gonzalo put supplies (as well as Prospero's beloved books) on board so that they arrived safely on an isolated island.

In the following twelve years there, as we can see in the play, Prospero becomes an accomplished magician, able to free the airy spirit Ariel from a tree in which he was trapped by the witch Sycorax. Ariel now serves him but longs for freedom. Prospero's other servant is Caliban, son of Sycorax, who is the rightful master of the island and who wants freedom too. Upon his arrival on the island, Prospero tried to teach Caliban, but after Caliban attempted against Miranda, according to Prospero’s perspective, he decides to keeps tight control over Caliban.

As the play goes on, Prospero is aware that his brother Antonio, along with the King of Naples and their entourage, are in a ship passing by the island. Using Ariel as the instrument of his developed powers, Prospero conjures a violent tempest that drives the ship to the island, and separates the ship's passengers into three isolated groups. Left all by himself, Ferdinand, Alonso's son, encounters the lovely Miranda. The two immediately fall in love, but Prospero, fearing a too-hasty romance, enchants Ferdinand by his magic art. The second group is constituted by the nobles Antonio, along with Alonso's brother Sebastian, begins plotting the murder of Alonso so that Sebastian can usurp his brother's place.

Costello (2018) highlights that Prospero's magic thwarts the evil intentions of the nobles, as well as those of the inebriates. He celebrates the impending marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand with a conjured masque, featuring the goddesses Juno and Ceres to bless their union.

The first clues to the sign associated with the play are its title and its opening with a tremendous storm. Appropriately, since the astrologers state that the element of water symbolizes human emotions, Costello emphasizes that “*The Tempest* can be interpreted as a manifestation of Prospero's rage at having been ousted by his usurping brother and his co-conspirators” (Costello, 2018, p.11-12). Also, the writer adds that only at that moment can he direct his anger through the medium of nature to the very persons who betrayed him, since they are sailing nearby. Costello stands out that a water sign is likely to be the key to understanding this play:

Pisces, the third of the water signs and the last and twelfth sign of the zodiac, is entirely apt. One of its chief symbols is the ocean, ruled by the Greek god Neptune. The ocean is the largest body of water on our planet, filled with sleek swimming fish as well as other odd-looking creatures. (Costello, 2018, p.14)

In line with this, references to fish abound within the play. Alonso, grieving for his presumed-drowned son, muses, “O thou mine heir / Of Naples and of Milan, what strange fish / Hath made his meal on thee?” (Act II, Scene I, 111–3). In the droll scene of Trinculo encountering the prone Caliban, Trinculo tries to determine what the bundle on the ground actually is: “

What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive? —A fish, he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of not-of the-newest poor-john [dried hake commonly eaten by the poor]. A strange fish! (II, ii, 23–6)

To gain shelter from the returning storm, Trinculo creeps under Caliban's cloak, laying his body next to Caliban's, but facing the opposite direction. Costello believes that this shape:

“It creates a puzzling visual spectacle, unlike anything in any other Shakespearean play. This strange image suddenly reveals its meaning when we note that the primary symbol for the sign Pisces is two fish, connected by a cord, swimming in opposite directions. Trinculo and Caliban literally create this symbol with their bodies, as they lie on the ground facing opposite directions (Costello, 2018, p.13).

That the action transpires on an island, surrounded by water (and thus removed from ordinary life) is significant. Costello (2018) raises that some Shakespearian researchers take into account Ariel’s reference to fetching dew from an island in the New World, the “still-vexed” [every stormy] Bermudas, (“Bermoothes” in some editions) (Act I, Sc II). This has led to an interpretation of the play as a commentary on Western Europeans' colonialism. But Ariel establishes the location of Prospero's island as somewhere in the Mediterranean between the coast of northern Africa and Italy. Whatever the precise location is the island on which the action of *The Tempest* takes place is unidentifiable and also has no name. This indeterminacy of location accords with the nebulousness of Pisces, associated with places that exist outside of time and space.

Marjorie Garber (2004) suggests that what is the most magical fact about the isle is that in being many places at once, geographically, culturally, and mythographically hybrid, it eludes location and becomes a space for poetry, and for dream. It is not found on any map. Prospero's enchanted island, while drawn from real explorations and published accounts, is ultimately a country of the mind.

Prospero’s familiarity with the concept of a celestial sphere, if not the construct of a celestial globe, is evident from the moment he announces in the opening act: ‘by my prescience / I find my zenith doth depend upon / A most auspicious star’ (1.2.180–2).18 That ‘auspicious star’, I think, is the planet (or wandering star) Jupiter, which moves through the circuit of the zodiac and returns to its zenith over the course of twelve years. Nandini Das, in notes to her edition of Robert Greene’s 1585 astrological pamphlet *Planetomachia*, explains how ‘In [early modern] astrology, Jupiter and the Sun are frequently perceived as having similar effects and signification […] Both celestial bodies are considered to be temperately hot; however, Jupiter is considered the most beneficial of the planets due to its moist nature, while the Sun is hot and dry, therefore liable to have more negative effects’.

Another clue to the associated sign comes from the fact that Prospero and his daughter Miranda have been on this unnamed island for the significant figure of twelve years. Costello shows that planet Jupiter, traditional ruler of the sign Pisces, has a twelve-year cycle (that is, it takes approximately twelve years for it to appear to circle the Earth, as it travels along the ecliptic, the apparent path of the Sun). Jupiter has been described as the greater benefic, the planet of luck and good fortune. She mentions that Prospero is obviously alluding to Jupiter as “bountiful Fortune” and a “most auspicious star” in a key speech in Act I. As he explains to Miranda:

By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune, now my dear lady, hath mine enemies Brought to this shore; and by my prescience I find my zenith doth depend upon A most auspicious star, whose influence If now I court not, but omit, my fortunes Will ever after droop. (Act I, Scene II, 179–185).

After keeping a close eye on the clockwork sky for 12 years, Prospero informs Miranda: ‘the hour’s now come / The very minute bids thee ope thine ear’ (Act I, Scene II, 186–187). An observational astronomer like Prospero, who coordinates his political coup with Jupiter’s orbital period, would not confuse or conflate the tiny earth with the ‘great globe’ of heaven.

It is interesting the fact that the same number is mentioned again in the play, for the spirit Ariel who was imprisoned by the witch Sycorax in a cloven pine for twelve years before being released by Prospero. Analogous to Ariel's period of captivity, Prospero and Miranda spend the same amount of time on this isolated isle before themselves being released to go home to Milan. The type of tree in which Ariel was confined is also revealing, for the pine tree and the oak, in which Prospero threatens to re-incarcerate Ariel, are both sacred to Jupiter. Prospero is obviously the embodiment of certain Jupiterian qualities. Costello (2018) adds that even his name, Prospero, recalls a key idea associated with the planet. It means abundance, wealth and prosperity. Also, Prospero describes himself as the prime duke:

“Being so reputed / In dignity, and for the liberal arts / Without a parallel—those being all my study ...” (Act I, Scene II, 72–4). Devoted to these studies, the seven liberal arts, he neglected “worldly ends, all dedicated / to closeness and the bettering of my mind” (Act I, Scene II, 89–90).

Another, but less Jupiterian figure is the good Gonzalo, who embodies that planet's characteristic optimism and good humor. Even as the tempest rages, Gonzalo comforts himself with his intuitive perception that the Boatswain has “no drowning mark upon him” (Act I, Scene I, 26); that is, fate does not intend the fellow to die a watery death—and hopefully that means that Gonzalo will not either. Three times—a significant number in myth and fairy tale as a number of completions, according to Costello (2018).

Jupiter can also relate both to the expansion of mental horizons (as in reading, reflection, or study) and to the literal extension of borders or boundaries. As well, and more pertinent to *The Tempest*, Jupiter longs for greater possibilities for independent action, self-government, and exercise of your free will, ideally without the restrictions of parents, society, government, or even nature. But complete freedom is impossible in this realm, with human beings apparently limited to three dimensions and five senses—yet most beings, whatever their situations are, long for more.

Regarding Prospero’s dominance over Caliban, the play illustrates his mastery over the physical level: Caliban was compelled to obey Prospero’s commands to perform mundane-world physical services. That Prospero prevents Caliban from discharging his lust upon Miranda symbolizes the magician’s control of his own nature. Also, Prospero’s controls over Ariel reveals his mastery of the element of air and the mental level: “Come with a thought” (Act IV, Scene I, 164) and belongs most properly to a single element: “thou, which art but air” (Act V, Scene I, 21).

Prospero gets “whiter” by the end of the play for several reasons, according to Costello (2018). She argues that for one, he obeys the New Testament injunction to “forgive seventy times seven”, showing mercy to those who have plotted to remove him. Love, mercy, compassion— “these all virtues are particularly associated with Pisces in its highest expression” (Cortello, 2018, p. 56).

Harmony – and order – Restored: All of these events are linked to the astrological sign Pisces and its traditional and modern rulers, Jupiter and Neptune. At the end of the play, the seas, the water element ruled by Pisces, which roiled in the storm at the beginning, will be still, assuring a peaceful arrival home. And with the audience’s applauses, Costello highlights that “the actor too is freed from his role, free to quit the stage, leaving us the memory of the delightful but insubstantial pageant that lives in our imaginations long after” (2018, p. 61).

**4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

If Shakespeare consciously used archetypal symbols as the basis of his plays, then it is entirely right that they can be meaningfully interpreted in the language of any era and not just the one in which they were written.

Unfortunately, any consideration of Shakespeare's personal beliefs will always remain speculation. The playwright left no autobiography cataloguing his thoughts, nor did his acquaintances take the time to write down his beliefs. Any speculation about Shakespeare's thoughts on astrology must be based entirely on the plays, sonnets, and narrative poems he left behind, together with a consideration of his social context.

While the use of so many astrological allusions seem to reflect both the idea that many astrological terms had passed into the English language during this time period, and that astrology was very popular with the Elizabethans,' this does not mean that Shakespeare himself had any great faith in astral prophecy.

We must also remember that Shakespeare wrote for dramatic effect, so that it is dangerous to attribute any one of his character's astrological opinions to him. At any rate, his characters exhibit all sorts of beliefs in regard to astrology.

At the end of the play, when Prospero’s ‘our revels now are ended’ speech has traditionally been read as containing ‘a certain tinge of visionary melancholy’, as if Shakespeare was ‘saying farewell to a whole region of the human imagination […] to magic and all its ways’.[[4]](#footnote-4)The Tempest seamlessly weaves together modern science with medieval romance. In his last solo play, Shakespeare does not write against the fact of the new science, in the style of Donne’s ‘An Anatomy of the World’, nor even about it, in the style of Ben Jonson’s masques; instead, Shakespeare writes with the new science – fictionalizing its discourses and discoveries by scrubbing them of their original circumstances and situations and inserting them into a magical world of his own making.

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4. Noel Cobb, Prospero’s Island: The Secret Alchemy at the Heart of The Tempest (London: Coventure, 1984), 174; and D. G. James, Prospero’s Dream (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)