

## The Perception of Ariel : Understanding Labour in *The Tempest*

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Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea change  
Into something rich and strange. (*The Tempest*, 1.2.399-401)<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the century, Jonathan Bate claimed in his pioneering work on ecology and English literature that *The Tempest* ought to be reclaimed for environmentalism. He argues that the play, with its themes of magic, art and nature, serves as a “prologue to the whole thrust of technological modernity” and so has acquired an renewed urgency for contemporary ecological criticism (77). While acknowledging the importance of the post-colonial readings of the previous decades, he proposed that criticism could turn, so to speak, from the problem of Caliban to the puzzle of Ariel : “Post-colonialism has restored a voice to Caliban. Ecopoetics asks us to imagine that Ariel can be set free.” (93). By identifying Ariel as the key to set of unexplored problems of the play, Bate certainly raises valuable questions, whatever the implications of his own “ecopoetics”. This short paper will examine the problem of Ariel in the play and imagine ways in which he or she could be “set free”, but it will consider this as less of question of either ecocriticism or postcolonialism, as the matter of labour. By this term, I mean to explore the way in which Shakespeare’s drama is exploring ideas about human activity, performance, and work which have sometimes been considered by readers as the theme of magic and associated with Ariel. To do so, I will also follow recent criticism to consider to what extent *The Tempest* as a play-text can be understood as an example of the “affective technology” of Shakespearean drama (Mullaney 23). This is to relate the problem of Ariel to the matter of performance, of audience perception, and the transmission of affect in the drama. Another way to think of this is of how *The Tempest* famously presents scenes of magic, transformation and discovery, frequently associated with the figure of Ariel, so as to

consider how these acts of transformation and transmission of affect could be understood.

We can begin with a rather naïve question about perception and Ariel in *The Tempest* : does anybody other than Prospero actually know that Ariel exists? Prospero of course tells Ariel to be “subject to / No sight but thine and mine, invisible/ To every eye-ball else” (1.2.303-5), which notifies the audience that Ariel the stage actor should be invisible. Obviously, he appears to others as a presence — as a source of music for Ferdinand, as the Harpy at the abortive banquet, the pack of dogs that hound Caliban and so on — but is there any indication in the dialogue that his compatriots Caliban and Miranda have ever been aware of his presence? Certainly Miranda does not mention him, Caliban is aware that “the Isle is full of noises/ Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not” (3.2.127-8) which might refer to the musical presence of Ariel, but, tellingly, he never mentions Ariel when he recalls his mother Sycorax. Only in the denouement of Act Five is Ariel addressed directly on stage in front of the other characters, which sets up an obvious problem in a theatrical performance about the blocking of stage actors and the use of cues. But it is probable that Prospero and the audience are complicit in being the only ones to perceive Ariel.

Of course, asking how many people saw Ariel might sound as risible a question as asking for the number of Lady Macbeth’s children. However, the problem of Ariel’s invisibility — which is the matter of how the audience perceive Shakespeare’s play — leads to other more interesting issues in the text. This is related to any pairing of Ariel with Caliban as subservient figures to Prospero in the play. If, as Marjorie Garber has suggested in *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, the historical conundrum of *The Tempest* has been to explore the meaning of the word “man” (7), then Ariel and Caliban have provided a means to think of the play as an allegorical psychomachia of super-ego and id, of masculine and feminine, of the imagination versus the body, of colonial subjugation versus forms of collaboration, or in José Enrique Rodo’s polemic, the triumph of Ariel’s intellectual anti-colonialism over Caliban’s debased materiality (Brotherston 216). In her performance history of the play, Christine Dymkowski notes how the gradual humanizing of Caliban in modern post-colonial productions also encouraged a victimization of Ariel, as the mutual dependants of an uncaring Prospero (44). The spectator or reader of the play perceives a thematic binary in the Ariel and Caliban relationship, even if the plot itself may keep the two natives of the island apart.

An important implication of this is to associate both characters with varieties of labour and service, alongside their relationship with Prospero and Miranda. Andrew Gurr once suggested that the essential relationship of these four was something like a displaced form of city comedy, in which Prospero was a widower-citizen, Miranda the eligible daughter, Ariel a type of indentured apprentice whose period of tutelage (usually seven years in Shakespeare's day) had been unreasonably extended, and Caliban a menial, household dependant (205). In addition, we could also argue that the drama is using the escapist, pastoral mode to explore the uses and abuses of work and idleness. From the opening scene, where the audience see the boatswain berate the aristocrats "You mar our labour ! Keep your cabins" (1.1.11-12), the play presents a story-world where hierarchy is turned upside down by the storm, and deploys a plot to explore competing ideas of appropriate labour and the productive use of time. As is well known, the play is Shakespeare's sole experiment in the dramatic 'three unities', and so Prospero notes how "The time 'twixt six and now / Must by us both be spent most precious" (1.2.241-2), and works hard to orchestrate his revenge and eventual reconciliation in the time frame. Another significant point is Gonzalo's aristocratic, pastoral fantasy of an Arcadian Golden Age ("No occupation, all men idle, all. / And women too, but innocent and pure ; / No sovereignty" (2.1.151-3)), put into contrast with Trinculo, Stephano's and Caliban's drunken, plebeian equivalent fantasy of "freedom high day" (2.2.161) in a land of Cockaigne. There is also the betrothal masque celebrating fecundity and fertility through a dance of reapers. And throughout, we see Ariel, the "industrious servant" (4.1.33) undertake a whole set of tasks at the command of Prospero while awaiting the release from his twelve years of bonded service. Overall, the play seems to explore the competing claims of labour and duty and the pleasures of leisure or idleness, which encompasses both the Utopian fantasy of a new world, and the comic censure of a corrupt one. The Tudor Humanist Thomas Smith had stated (in *De Republica Anglorum* of 1583) that he "who can live idly and without manual labour, and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman...shall be taken for a gentleman" (Smith 41), and one thread of *The Tempest* (such as Trinculo and Stephano dressing up in fine gowns and pretending to be noble (4.1.224-5)) is to present the leisure of the island as a moral test for characters.

Moreover, the contrast of labour and idleness also operates arguably on a second level as

part of the more specific historical debate about the value of active and contemplative labour : the competing claims between the *vita activa* and *vita contemplative*. This forms something of a *longue durée* in European intellectual history, drawing from classical ideas of political duty and the claims of *otium* and *negotium* in the Roman tradition, and of Christian arguments regarding the space of the clergy, monasticism, and intellectual life in medieval and early-modern society.<sup>2</sup> This division of labour and of knowledge is also surely an element of *The Tempest* through the role of Prospero. As historicist readings of the play have pointed out, Prospero seems to provide a cautionary example of a sovereign whose retreat from active duty into private, bookish contemplation (“being transported / And rapt in secret studies” (1.2.76-77)) led to political ruin (Curtis 58). This theme also overlaps with the whole, vexed matter of “magic” in the play and Prospero’s status as a theatrical English Magus, an updated John Dee or Dr Faustus perhaps, and the conflicting ideas about the representation of natural philosophy, literacy, and power/knowledge in the play (Lindley 41). Is Prospero’s “rough magic” a wonderful use or sinister abuse of his power and scholarship ?

Moreover, the traditional contrast of active and contemplative labour provides another way to read the Caliban and Ariel relationship, as they can be perceived as personifying the two forms. As is well known, there is a long tradition, since at least Saint Augustine, of allegorising the two types of labour through the Gospel story of Martha and Mary (from Luke 10 : 38-42).<sup>3</sup> In the case of *The Tempest*, however, a contemporaneous example is Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning*, published in 1605. In this work, Bacon uses a Biblical analogy to explain the original division of human labour into a post-lapasarian form. In Eden, when work was not a necessity, “man’s employment must of consequence have been a matter of delight in experiment, and not matter of labour for use” (149), but the Fall led to a division of knowledge figured by the story of Cain and Abel :

[A]fter the fall of man, we see (as the Scriptures have infinite mysteries, not violating at all the truth of the story or the letter), an image of the two estates, the contemplative state and the active state, figured in the two persons of Abel and Cain, and in the two simplest and most primitive trades of life ; that of the shepherd (who, by reason, of his leisure, rest in a place, and living in view of heaven, is a lively image of a contemplative

life) and that of the husbandman : where we see again the favour and election of God went to the shepherd, and not to the tiller of the ground. (Bacon 150)

As Jennifer Summit argues, in this text Bacon seems to be torn in this text between validating manual husbandry as the better analogy for inquiry, while respecting the election of Abel. The text therefore uses the pairing as a commonplace to establish the duality of knowledge and labour (540). While it cannot be said that Shakespeare used this specific text (in the way that he certainly read John Florio's Montaigne, for example), this opposition of Cain to Abel, tillage to pastoral, earth to heaven, provides a way nevertheless to give a context to *The Tempest*. Can we try to picture Caliban, as the Cain-like figure of envy and resentment and Ariel as a more pastoral Abel, the favoured one living in view of heaven? Certainly, Caliban can resemble an idea of Cain, possibly even the Cain of the Mystery Play cycles, being rude, seemingly ungrateful, shown to labour in physical misery in 2.1, marked like Cain as "a thing of darkness" in what is, strictly speaking, a clownish role in the drama (Quinones 59). This is not to deny there is immense pathos there as well, which obviously anticipates the reclamation of the character in modern interpretation.<sup>4</sup> On this matter, if Caliban implies an idea of manual labour as a curse, then perhaps it is Ferdinand who provides an alternative when he says, in a notorious Folio crux, "But these sweet thoughts do even refresh my labours / Most busie lest, when I do it" (3.1.14-15), which might suggest an idea of Edenic consolation in manual labour.<sup>5</sup>

Ariel is an even more enigmatic creation (named, David Lindley suggests, to imply air (107)), but his surveillance and shepherding of other characters across the stage implies a more pastoral identity. Pastoral traditionally provides a literary figure of labour and repose, of course, which may suit the singing and reflective figure of Ariel, yet the character can also be related to other artisanal uses of intellectual labour. The historian Joanne Piciotto has examined the active and contemplative divide in renaissance thought, and argued how modes of artisanal craft and specialist knowledge in the sixteenth century could be represented as a form of "secret knowledge" comparable to magic. Paracelsus compared carpenters to alchemists of wood, for example, as both skills seemed mysterious systems of specialised knowledge (143). Moreover, we may also see a literary precedent for this when Marlowe's Dr

Faustus wonders what a world of profit and delight “Is promised the studious Artizan ?” (1.55). Ariel’s “secret knowledge”, in whatever way he is indentured to Prospero, evokes magic as a craft or technique of labour, a point perhaps where contemplative skill blurs into artisanal manual labour, but distinguished nevertheless from Caliban. Moreover, there is a very real, phenomenological sense in which Ariel’s superior skills are perceived by spectators in the form of theatrical versatility. As a stage performer, the Ariel actor is expected to dress up as a sea nymph, impersonate a Harpy (3.3.53-82), to sing (1.2.396-403), to play the tabor (2.1.180 ; 3.2.118), to visibly lead other actors on and off stage throughout, and probably perform the role of Ceres in the masque (4.1.167). This invisible spirit certainly requires a lot of sweat and hard graft. All stage-acting is a form of labour of course, but Ariel is arguably the most versatile role in the entire drama, and so the idea of magical power of the “industrious servant” is also perceived in the gaze of the spectator enjoying the stage presence of Ariel — a role probably first played by a boy actor, and so perhaps also providing a transgressive, erotic pleasure to the spectator (Johnson 690). The “affective technology” of the play involves an audience admiring the skill-set, so to speak, of the Ariel performer.

The centrepiece of this use of affect and performance technique in the drama is arguably the betrothal masque of 4.1, a sequence which ironically is now the most challenging and perplexing for contemporary audiences. Prospero’s famous address to Ferdinand and Miranda at the end of the betrothal masque provides a statement of artistic vision and the perception of the artwork.

Be cheerful sir,  
 Our revels now are ended ; these our actors,  
 As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
 Are melted into air, into thin air ;  
 And like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
 The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
 And like this insubstantial pageant faded

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
 As dreams are made on ; and our little life  
 Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1. 147-158)

Quoted in isolation (as it so often is) it can imply an act of transcendence and imaginative transformation, or even assumed to be a statement about Shakespearean art in itself, but in fact the use of articles and pronouns as potential deixis words in “*this* vision”, “*the* great globe” or “*this* insubstantial pageant” can also be read as meta-theatrical references to the playhouse performance, or even the actual Globe Theatre. Paul Yachnin has argued that Shakespearean drama marks the historical transition of English theatre from the participatory rituals of late-medieval religious theatre to a more inward and private experience of imaginative enjoyment, of which Prospero’s speech may seem an indication (Dawson & Yachnin 130). We could go further and say that Prospero’s speech indicates a potential “aesthetic ideology” in the text, where the drama idealizes itself as a transcendent, dream-like or spiritual form. Yet, at the same time, by referring to the “actors” of the actually preceding dance sequence, allowing the Prospero-actor to address the audience, and by later giving Ariel the right to drolly comment on the efficacy of the whole abortive spectacle (“When I presented Ceres/ I thought t’ have told thee of it, but I feared/ Lest I might anger thee” (4.1.167-9)), the text also provides an affordance to draw the text away from a pure act of contemplation back to a situation of theatrical performance.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Prospero’s apparent attempt to elevate the text into a contemplative aesthetic experience is challenged by Ariel as the representative of a more active labour of performing (just as he will later remind Prospero of his conscience and humanity at 5.1.19). The text invites us to consider the artwork as both a form of contemplative leisure or as a more product of craft and labour : the two estates of labour suspended alongside each other, awaiting their eventual end in sleep.<sup>7</sup>

The sequence also serves to demonstrate a wider point about perception and the scope of drama as an affective technology, which is to do with the way that the text is perceived, in any medium, as a phenomena of art. The philosopher Jacques Rancière has described aesthetic experience as a “distribution of the sensible” [*partage du sensible*] whereby our relationship to the artwork is mediated through a wider, diverse assemblage of both cultural and

historical institutions, and intellectual and discursive habits.<sup>8</sup> A good example of this would in fact be the history of the theatre, in which the immediate perception of the performance within a physical space, and of the apprehension of literary and artistic form within the institutional context of drama, is popularly reconfigured and contested. Prospero's speech quoted above indicates a point in the written text that invites a realization as stage-event or literary concept. This is of course a form of labour, even if pleasurable, and moreover it seems to be an aspect that is particularly associated with the role of Ariel as performer in the drama. Furthermore, we could also propose that Ariel's role, as one that is expected to transmit affects of wonder, fear and somnambulism to others makes him a figure of not only acting but affective or "immaterial labour" as proposed in contemporary social theory.<sup>9</sup> *The Tempest* presents us with a literary model in which the reforming potential of art as affect (whatever our resistance to Prospero's designs may be) is demonstrably a combination of labour, stage technology and perception.

Diane E. Henderson has claimed "*The Tempest* works—when it works — as an allegory of some sort" (qtd. Lindley 14). This paper has proposed *The Tempest* can be perceived as a form of allegory about forms of labour, and that Ariel is a crucial part of this perception. If Prospero is the author manqué of the text, then Ariel is the key performer and transmitter of affects throughout the drama. This qualifies the allegorical reading of Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* mentioned in the introduction. For Bate, the anticipated freedom of Ariel from Prospero acts as a sign of the potential release of nature from human domination. Ariel's freedom song, "Where the bee sucks, there suck I" (5.1. 88-94) seems to provide something like a pastoral theme, but this is the closest the text can get, Bate argues, to a promise of freedom (93). Bate's argument is that the task of an ecological poetics should at least contemplate a new, less dominant relationship with the earth, so Ariel's release from labour (his unemployment or redundancy, we might say) represents the promise of an unmediated relationship nature. However, is it necessarily the case that the opposite of labour is the idea of nature? As Rancière argues, for example, forms of Romantic and Modernist art imagined the reconciliation of art with work through a renewed social aesthetics rather than a return to nature (44). Another way of reading *The Tempest* allegorically, then, would be to insist on the primacy of labour, as the way in which sensory experience is perceived and



organized. It is then the case that Ariel is the particular figure by which ideas of affect, transmission or “immaterial” are set to work. If *The Tempest* is indeed a prologue to technological modernity, then the play points not to a lost environment but to some uncertain state of being contemporary.

## Notes

- \*This is a revised version of paper first given to the conference “Shakespearean Perceptions”, organized by the Australian and New Zealand Shakespeare Association, at The University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia, September 2014.
- 1: All references to the play are from William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. David Lindley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
  - 2: On the history of the concept of leisure, see Brian Vickers, “Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: The Ambivalence of Otium”, *Renaissance Studies* 4.2. (1990), 107-54.
  - 3: The history of Mary and Martha is explored in Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-142.
  - 4: For a survey of Caliban interpretations, see Alden T. Vaughan & Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
  - 5: This is a crux in the Folio, which states “Most busilest when I do it”: Lindley amends this in his edition as quoted above.
  - 6: Affordance, in this context, means how a play-text can operate as phenomenological or affective performance: see W.B. Worthen, *Drama Between Poetry and Performance* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xviii.
  - 7: Furthermore, the extract provides an early example of what the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk claims is the “world picture” of modernity, as it combines the two metaphors of the globe and luxuriant “palace” that he claims are central to an emergent modern imaginary. See Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 12-13.
  - 8: This is explored in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
  - 9: The argument on immaterial labour is developed in Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 108-9. See also its application to the *vita contemplativa* issue in English literature in Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies: Labor and the Work of the Text in Medieval Britain 1350-1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 191-2.

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“Industrious Servant” : Ariel and the Perception of Labour in *The Tempest*

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William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) has been widely interpreted as a play that relates to the history of colonialism and modernity, especially through the iconic character of Caliban. However, critics have also disputed the precise status and significance of Ariel. Some recent eco-criticism has argued that Ariel represents a form of nature in direct opposition to technology and productivity. This paper argues instead that Ariel can be better understood as part of an early-modern argument about the argues that Ariel can be interpreted as part of a contemporary argument about the status of labour, especially the traditional pairing of active and contemplative labour. By examining the precise role of the 'industrious servant' Ariel in the drama, the paper considers how ideas of artisanal knowledge and theatrical performance are addressed in the play through the performance of Ariel. The paper also considers some arguments based on contemporary affect theory and performance criticism to consider some implications of how Ariel can be perceived by the audience or reader as part of the text.