Through the Microscope:
Understanding *The Tempest* in the Context of the
Introduction to Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*

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Introduction

In his last major play *The Tempest* (1611) Shakespeare synthesizes various themes into an extraordinary whole. These themes include, among others, reports of a shipwreck in Bermuda, the motif of Doctor Faustus, reflections on the conquest of the New World from Montaigne's *Essais* and contemporary treatises on magic. For the story of Prospero itself, however, Shakespeare did not draw on a specific original. Literary critics have therefore assumed that, unlike Shakespeare's previous plays, *The Tempest* does not have a distinct source.**(1)**

This paper suggests one possible alternative interpretation, namely, that Shakespeare might indeed be referring to an underlying source, even staging its very details. In this case, though, rather than using a previous version of a drama or an older tale or legend, he may have adopted crucial ideas and figures from a philosophical treatise, the *Oratio de hominis dignitate (Oration on the Dignity of Man)*, composed in 1486 by the Italian philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463 - 1494). Pico's text was originally designed as an introduction to the disputation about his theological, philosophical and scientific theses that had been due to take place in Rome.**(2)**. As the disputation was prevented from taking place, Pico never delivered his speech. Nonetheless, the introductory text – later referred to as the

Oratio de hominis dignitate – has acquired considerable significance throughout subsequent centuries. This is especially true of the general philosophical considerations presented on the opening pages, where Pico captures a key psychological feature of his age, justifying his exploration of philosophy with great enthusiasm and compelling figurative speech and thereby highlighting the predominant identity and credo of Renaissance man. Pico conjures a renewed awareness of the possibility of moral self-determination along with its implications in terms of individual responsibility and personal conduct.**(3)** Although the idea itself is by no means a new one, Pico succeeds in depicting its fundamental philosophical context in highly poetic terms.**(4)** His account is effectively a paean to human spiritual potential and, to this extent, a celebration of man made in the image of God.

While Pico refers to this subject on various occasions throughout the text, his most famous description of the wonders of human existence in the *Oratio* is stated in two passages on the first few pages. Pico imagines God – having created Adam – celebrating the fact that He has bestowed upon human beings a unique position in creation:

> ' “I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are the divine.” '**(5)**

Pico then elaborates on this image by explaining:

> 'As soon as brutes are born, they bring with them […] what they are going to possess. Highest spirits have been, either from the beginning or soon after, that which they are going to be throughout everlasting eternity. At man's birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him.'**(6)**

The key existential themes are discussed in one way or another in every Shakespearian drama, of course. Shakespeare's lifetime coincided with the ending of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Baroque period, so it is no surprise that he addresses philosophical ideas associated with the Neoplatonic concept of the Great Chain of Being. In *The Tempest*, however, we can see that, rather than having his characters engage merely in theoretical contemplation of these issues, Shakespeare appears to be staging the practical dilemmas of man's existence between the higher spirits and the animals and, moreover, to be placing Pico's key issue of human free will and moral obligation at the very centre of his drama.

In other words: Here is man in the world, positioned between the higher spirits and the mere brutes, with the possibility of either being reborn into divine likeness or degenerating into the animal condition – a status that brings with it manifold opportunities for development and decision making; and against this background there stands the abundantly talented Duke Prospero on an island in the middle of nowhere, kept company by Ariel and Caliban, and surrounded by castaways acting in various ways and struggling with questions of conscience. Ultimately, the focus is on Prospero, who is at the height of his powers in a situation that turns out to be crucial for him.

If we mentally superimpose the lines leading from Pico on top of the figures and plot of Shakespeare's drama, what immediately emerges is an intertwined three-dimensional image, a transition from abstract interrelations to visible processes of existence and conscience, simultaneously fantastic and real. Viewed from this perspective, the centre of the world becomes an island, Pico's Adam becomes Prospero, and Pico's words are translated into the fanciful action of *The Tempest*.

Although there is no written evidence to suggest that Shakespeare was familiar with Pico's text, it can perhaps be assumed nevertheless that such correspondences do not arise by coincidence. After his early death, Pico's writings spread from Italy to the learned circles of Europe. Modern research emphasizes that the *Oratio* – especially the praise of man's freedom to choose his own moral nature – was only accorded significance as a key Renaissance text in later centuries, and that philosophical reflection regarding man's place in the universe was a major issue in Renaissance thought.**(7)** Already in sixteenth-century England, however, Pico's work was studied by, among others, John Colet and Thomas More. **(8)** More translated some of Pico's minor writings and some of his letters and also introduced Pico's work to Erasmus of Rotterdam**(9),** who later declared Pico a leading authority among Renaissance thinkers.**(10)** Considering, therefore, that Pico was held in high esteem by English humanists such as Thomas More and that Shakespeare would have been interested in motifs from all sorts of sources, it is not impossible that he might also have become acquainted with Pico's depiction.

Of course, one could argue that Shakespeare is simply drawing on familiar philosophical ideas and not at all necessarily on Pico in particular. However, it is quite remarkable that Pico's emphasis on man inevitably being called to the process of moral self-creation should be

so precisely reflected in the final act of *The Tempest*. The figure of Gonzalo actually describes the play's conclusion as a recovery of the lost self. It might also be noted that Shakespeare grants the highest (indeed sacred) significance to these events, which extend far 'Beyond a common joy' (5.1.207)**(11)** and should be 'set […] down / With gold on lasting pillars' (5.1.207-8). That such great existential value is accorded to the overall plot, however, seems striking in a context of nothing more than general Renaissance thought. There is a final point: Could Shakespeare's creation of Miranda – still a popular girl's name – be interpreted as a reference to the author's inspiration?

Literary critics have long acknowledged that Shakespeare in *The Tempest* might have been referring to the *Oratio* (among other sources): echoes of Pico's philosophical scheme and of his reflections on the various forms of magic, contained in the second part of his text, are evidence of this.**(12)** However, rather than merely suggesting that Pico's text might in some way be related to the play, the present analysis is based on the proposition that *The Tempest* can actually be interpreted as a dramatization of Pico's memorable images. This assumption is based on the notion that Shakespeare could have sourced his dramatic scheme from the *Oratio*, either on the basis of an excerpt from the text, for example, or from having been acquainted with it in some other way, and that he then chose it to serve as his conceptual template.

Thus this article, rather than entering into the present discussion of specific aspects of the play, seeks to contribute to scholarly debate about its underlying meaning. Over the last 150 years in particular, a variety of allegorical and philosophical analyses have been put forward – and refuted. James Russell Lowell (1886), for instance, suggests that the play evokes 'an under-meaning everywhere'.**(13)** He also identifies *The Tempest's* allegoric ambiguity in

Shakespeare’s use of types rather than characters, albeit without offering a possible interpretation. In later allegorical readings, the play is associated variously with the history of salvation, the different aspects of the intellectual or psychological sphere, and with levels in the natural hierarchy. In opposition to such approaches, Elmer Edgar Stoll (1940) strongly objects, as did others before him, to all notions of allegory, symbolism or biography in the play, asserting that to assume meaning on unproven ground 'actually troubles and disturbs the artistic effect'**(14)** and manifests an inherent discontent with Shakespeare and his play. Another interpretive approach is introduced by Frank Kermode (1954), who analyses Shakespeare's play against the background of the conflicting spheres of art, or civility, and nature.**(15)** Later studies discuss, among other things, the significance of Shakespeare’s references to magic and art along with the possible presence of allusions to his personal life, including his retirement from the stage. In line with the sober view expressed by Stoll, however (see above), the many in-depth analyses of individual themes appear to support the claim that the richness of *The Tempest*, with its multiple references to complex and exotic ideas, cannot be appreciated by viewing the play from any single narrow or restricted perspective. This view is confirmed in the revised edition of 2011, in which the Arden editors Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan state that the play seems to reject an overall interpretation.**(16)** Current research – as presented, for instance, in the Arden edition – nevertheless manages to link *The Tempest* to twenty-first century concerns. The debate regarding references to modern topics (such as its colonial implications)**(17)** along with the resourceful adaptations of the play undertaken by modern media effectively manifest the play's potential for transformation.**(18)**

In summary, it can be stated that the lack of a distinct approach combined with the detailed exploration of the play's various motifs that has occurred over the last decades has tended, perhaps, to supersede an interest in the overall meaning of *The Tempest*. From this viewpoint, the question of whether or not the play was developed on the basis of a coherent conceptual scheme remains unresolved. Thus *The Tempest* is still fundamentally open to interpretation, a circumstance which – with reference to Lytton Strachey's comments on Shakespeare's state of mind in his final period (1906)**(13)** – prompted in 1999 the following comments from Harold Bloom: 'What was Shakespeare trying to do for himself as a playwright, if not necessarily as a person, by composing *The Tempest*? […] There is an elliptical quality to *The Tempest* that suggests a more symbolic drama than Shakespeare actually wrote'.**(13)** The following account takes up this continuing possibility of a more symbolic meaning. An exploration of the details of Shakespeare's assumed "translation" of Pico for the stage may serve to uncover previously unconsidered dimensions of the play's thematic aspects.

Setting

If the quotations from Pico's text are taken as a subtext, then it immediately becomes apparent that *The Tempest's* setting, figures and action all seem to be based on a sophisticated conceptual scheme. Initially, Shakespeare employs the device of radical reduction to depict Pico's 'center of the world', limiting the set to a nameless and (with the exception of Prospero and Miranda) deserted island. The world is thus presented as an exact miniature model that is suited to illustrate all the more starkly the psychological processes to be examined. In fact, Shakespeare's approach shows a distinct similarity to that of a scientist closely observing his research objects through a microscope.

The conceptual framework of this dramatic universe, according to the Neoplatonic scheme, is the cosmic Chain of Being, comprising the two realms of sensible nature and higher spirits. However, without audible speech or visible appearance in a play, these realms would be no more than a silent backdrop. Following Pico's lead, however, Shakespeare's concern is to depict the development of his hero in relation to the surrounding world. Thus in order to stage this adventure not only on a physical level but also verbally, on the level of consciousness, and to present nature as an active and acting principle, Shakespeare draws upon the tried-and-tested dramatic device of personification. He can now do without a kingdom of elves, which he had previously employed in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Instead he invents two highly original creatures: Ariel, 'an airy spirit', as he is called in the list of the 'List of Roles', and Caliban, 'a savage and deformed native of the island'.

Caliban

To personify the realm of animated natural beings using just one figure, Shakespeare creates nothing less than a talking animal.**(21)** Viewed from the perspective of Pico's concept, Caliban is only human-like in that he has the basic ability to learn Prospero's and Miranda's language. His name is an anagram of the word 'cannibal'. Shakespeare was almost certainly inspired by contemporary reports of the discovery of the native inhabitants of America, who were considered savages by the Europeans. Despite being human beings, then, their nature-orientated lifestyle may have served as a model for Caliban. In order to dehumanize Caliban as much as possible from the very beginning, Shakespeare ascribes to him an especially dire complex of origins: his mother a witch in possession of strong evil powers and his father, according to Prospero's notion, "the devil himself" (1.2.320). This heritage supplies a fairly plausible justification for Caliban's strange being and appearance. As a representative of the animal world, he is able to communicate with humans as well as provide nourishment and

perform the more arduous tasks of everyday life. He is endowed with an indeterminate animal-human appearance that combines a kind of optical quintessence of various animal species with ordinary human attributes (having legs as well as fins, for example), a fact which makes him appear truly monstrous in the eyes of the castaways. Shakespeare has also based the characterization of Caliban's inner being on Pico’s ideas, according to which 'As soon as brutes are born, they bring with them […] what they are going to possess.' This emphasizes Caliban's instinctive behaviour as an animal without the possibility of further development or adaptation. His being, as Prospero realizes with rather unjust anger, ultimately remains impenetrable to external influence.

Here, Shakespeare deliberately goes beyond Pico, illustrating the reason for Caliban's rigidity: it lies in the fact that this natural being does not truly possess the full capacity for speech. He is basically able to speak – his partial human descent means that he has the physical faculty for verbal expression. However, his exclamation 'You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse' (1.2.364-365) makes it clear that he cannot understand its overall significance for his own faculty of consciousness. It is with such great sympathy, then, that Shakespeare alludes to the elementary fact that without language there can be no inner life in a human sense, no all-pervading comprehension of reality, no higher conscience and therefore no accompanying development of higher reason.**(22)** As demonstrated in his all-encompassing empathy with the isle's natural life – often considered some of the most beautiful lines in the play – Caliban's cognition is primarily bound to the sensible world. From today's perspective, his apprehension of the human sphere could, in some respects perhaps, be compared to the understanding of an ape that has been trained to perform simple work tasks.

Ariel

By way of an analogy with Caliban, Shakespeare personifies the whole of the immaterial and intelligible sphere on and above the island, by which the elements are ruled, using the figure of Ariel, a natural spirit visible only to Prospero and the audience. Compared to him, the other spirits of the isle (such as elves and goblins) are only 'Weak masters' (5.1.41) and 'meaner ministers' (3.3.87), associated with specific minor natural events. In established physical terms one could say that Ariel symbolizes something like a super-force or universal formula. Whoever commands him rules with unlimited power in the cosmos of the island. The phenomena of gravity and electromagnetism had not yet been fully explored at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and so Shakespeare did not encounter any fixed scientific dogmas when creating his poetic hierarchy of natural powers. One supreme spirit suffices to illustrate his concept of intelligible nature; in this way, the play keeps the aspect of the invisible sphere – thus conveyed to the audience without provoking unwanted inquiries – in sober perspective.

Despite his unerring abilities, Ariel too lacks the capacity for development which Pico had claimed for the higher spirits – those who 'have been, either from the beginning or soon after, that which they are going to be throughout everlasting eternity.' As a dramatic figure he displays few anthropomorphic features. Although he laments having to serve Prospero, his complaint is not clearly aggressive in character. Initially it appears as a general resentment about being forced to interact with anyone or anything. Ariel asserts of himself that he does not possess human characteristics or emotions and that he regards the human sphere with indifference. In contrast to the elves in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* he is not a more potent human being with miraculous abilities, detached from space and time yet nonetheless subject to higher cosmic powers. No divine being presides over the natural hierarchy, only the

universal power of Ariel. Like Caliban, he does not have a soul in the human sense. Free of any determination or fixity, Ariel can exist only in the abstract as an impersonal, undefined principle. In modern terms he might even be described as robotic, as a prototype of certain science fiction characters.**(23)**

Freedom of choice

Against the physical backdrop of Ariel and Caliban, Shakespeare now relates Pico's existential task as a complex dramatic plot – for there is, after all, one essential factor that separates humans from natural beings, namely, that stressed by Pico: 'Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer.' As demonstrated by the disposition accorded to Ariel and Caliban respectively, the principle of freedom applies to human beings alone, who are not subject to any limitation of consciousness or will; in other words, the range of their spiritual potential is indefinite. To put it in positive terms, man possesses free will. Rather than being constrained by rigid laws or being exposed to the arbitrary ways of the universe, he can make choices.

The play thus centres around the dynamics of this freedom to choose. Looking at Shakespeare's earlier plays one might easily get the impression that the dramatic figures (who represent types rather than characters), along with their stories, are only very loosely connected. Nothing much really happens. But from the perspective of Pico's words, the composition of the play reveals a surprisingly broad spectrum of moral attitudes and their consequences. The characters do not actually perform deeds. On the outward level they scarcely move. Instead, they adopt various conceptual positions – and in this sense it would be difficult to pack any more action into this highly emblematic account.

Prior to the characters taking up their positions, Shakespeare makes sure that the ultimate categories of human development are made manifest for the audience in his play. This occurs in the form of Miranda, a person resembling 'the higher natures which are the divine', and Antonio, a person who has sunk below his original level. From the very beginning, both figures symbolize maximum standards. This becomes quite apparent through the fact that, in contrast to all the others, they do not undergo any development. Rather than representing individual characters, they personify particular programmatic purposes and their determination is fundamentally non-negotiable.

Miranda

Shakespeare's Miranda symbolizes a quantum leap within human evolution. She appears neither as another Cordelia brought to perfection nor as the quintessence of former heroines; rather, Shakespeare depicts her as a simple young woman who pays no heed to matters of personal advantage, having sole regard for the welfare of everyone she encounters.**(24)** Her natural perspective is radically altruistic, so that in the world of Shakespearian plays she symbolizes an altogether different level of consciousness – even beyond the supreme awareness of other dramatic characters. Yet Miranda's active and unconditional support for the beneficial development of the whole community of humanity is not merely an inner attitude. In outward terms it seems to bring forth the energy of life itself. In fact, the encouraging effect on others might even be seen as an expression of the ultimate creative power. When Prospero recalls the first moment of his exile with the words 'O, a cherubin / Thou wast that did preserve me. Thou didst smile, / Infused with a fortitude from heaven […] which raised in me / An undergoing stomach to bear up / Against what should ensue' (1.2.152-8), and Ferdinand confirms 'The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead, / And makes my labours pleasures' (3.1.6-7), Shakespeare is highlighting this dynamic impact. The vital

power that lies in Miranda's union with Ferdinand is consequently idealized in Prospero's masque as no less than the possibility of 'Earth's increase' (4.1.110). A civilization based on her practical values would therefore be the perfection of what is humanly possible and would justify Ferdinand's praise of Miranda as being 'Indeed the top of admiration' (3.1.38). Thus, the play convincingly emphasizes that Miranda's outstanding position does not result from an advancement within the traditional natural hierarchy but from conscious self-transcendence on the horizontal plane, the human level. Prospero's expression of sober level-headedness in the final scene therefore serves in part to conceal what Miranda truly symbolizes, namely, a new dimension of being, a 'brave new world' (5.1.183).

The principle of caring about the well-being of others is also reflected in the central values of Christian ethics, which provide the foundation of traditional Renaissance thought. Miranda's view could therefore be described as an attitude of the heart, akin to love of one’s neighbour and charitable deeds as well as to the virtue of mercy and the ability to express sympathy toward others. This 'virtue of compassion' (1.2.27) is indeed reflected in almost all her statements. Therefore, by analogy to Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice,* for example, all that Miranda symbolizes rules superior to any other of the 'several virtues' (3.1.42) depicted in *The Tempest*.**(25)** In sum, it can be stated that, with regard to Miranda, Shakespeare avoids theological interpretations and remains in the human sphere. The fact that Miranda bears a resemblance to divinity is revealed just slightly when, during the final act of reconciliation, the recovering King Alonso wonders whether Miranda is 'the goddess that hath severed us / And brought us thus together' (5.1.187-8). According to Renaissance Platonism – also conveyed, of course, in Pico's *Oratio* – rebirth to divine likeness is generally understood to be a process of spiritual perfection and insight which ultimately leads to mystical approximation to God.**(26)** In contrast to this, Shakespeare remains less theoretical, but his integrative scheme is much

more philosophical in its thrust. The fact that, 400 years after the first staging of *The Tempest*, the all-encompassing attitude symbolized by Miranda is accorded ever greater significance in contemporary philosophy and science proves the unaltered relevance of this Shakespearian theme.

Antonio

Antonio, whose very name contains the prefix ‘anti-’, is diametrically opposed to Miranda, being depicted as a symbol of deliberately negative human evolution. The destructive, risky dimension of human existence inevitably also lies on the scale of freedom. It becomes manifest in the fact that human beings have the capacity to act in a ruthlessly egoistic way and to wilfully harm others.**(27)** Consequently, Antonio, being almost simplistically hostile and cold, concentrates only on his own personal advantage. He deliberately acts against the shared rules which make up the very foundations of human co-existence and of any benevolent political system. To illustrate such an attitude in a credible way, Shakespeare never provides a psychological explanation for Antonio's wickedness (just as he provides no interpretation of Miranda's position). The moment Prospero transfers his political duties to his brother, 'an evil nature' (1.2.93) arises within Antonio which remains unchanged throughout the play. Antonio has no guilty conscience about his deeds; in fact, he ignores the very existence of his conscience. At this stage it becomes clear that Antonio does not bear any demonic or sinister attributes that could point beyond himself. The lack of political necessity and of any other explanation for Antonio's plans confirms that his actions should not be misinterpreted as unfettered Machiavellianism.

With regard to Antonio, Shakespeare refrains from using well-known comparisons with a predator animal. Instead, Antonio is implicitly contrasted with the instinctive behaviour of Caliban, whose plot against Prospero consequently appears almost human. His actions do not therefore result in Antonio's degradation to an animal or even to the lower level of plants or stones. Rather they position him as 'Unnatural' (5.1.79) in a dimension of evil beyond the cosmic hierarchy. His sacrilege becomes manifest in his willingness to regress to the state of Cain at the beginning of human history. With this attitude he negates all development towards a higher level. He consciously abuses the gift of freedom, thereby placing himself, from the perspective of Pico's account, in direct opposition to the positive potential of the Creator's intention. Thus the figure of Antonio embodies the most destructive design ever: 'worse than devils' (3.3.36).

The foregoing analysis suggests the following approach to the play: Ariel, the higher spirit, and Caliban, the animal, constitute the physical scenery against which human actions take place. However, neither of them supplies any categories by which human rebirth to divine likeness or descent to unnaturalness can be defined. The ways of nature cannot be applied to human beings because nature itself is not endowed with sophisticated moral criteria. The principal point of correlation that thus emerges between *The Tempest* and Pico's *Oratio* is that man is not an animal-turned-human or an incarnate spirit. He is neither the highest of animals nor the lowest embodiment of a spiritual being.**(28)** Prospero, Miranda and the castaways are not a mixture of Caliban and Ariel; they are not a combination of animal being and *ratio*. Rather, they exist in a specific human reality insofar as they transcend all external nature. As a part of creation they are an absolute paradox or, in Pico's and Miranda's words, a 'wonder' (5.1.181). **(29)**

Dramatic plot

The play's actual plot can now be seen to be arranged, like the composition of a picture, around the momentary realization of spiritual development, as postulated in the *Oratio*. Before the inner eye of the audience, almost measurable on an invisible scale, the other characters take up their positions within the three-dimensional space of possibilities that exists between the framework of nature set by Ariel and Caliban in the background and the opposing poles of Miranda and Antonio in the foreground. The contradiction between these two schemes also establishes an imaginary horizontal dividing line: a choice in favour of either devotion to others or personal advantage. Ultimately, of course, the plot centres around Prospero. His decision is described in detail and results in the understated climax of the play. Yet before Prospero is able to change his mind, Shakespeare presents a spectrum of typical options for human action in the context of charity and selfishness, thus accurately illustrating Pico's statement: 'The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him.' In that sense the entire society of Italian noblemen is called to account in terms of moral decision making – including the self-proclaimed 'King Stephano' (4.1.221).

Ferdinand

If the audience of *The Tempest* were to set up a hierarchical order among the castaways, Ferdinand would probably occupy the highest position as the personification of an ideal sovereign. (It is possible that his name is intended as a homage to Ferdinando Stanley (1559-1594), a patron of playing companies and at one time considered as a possible successor to the English throne). Ferdinand immediately recognizes that Miranda's concern for the well-being of others and therefore of the commonwealth, is of ultimate value to him, 'worth / What’s dearest to the world!' (3.1.38-9). He pledges himself to her wholeheartedly and without hesitation, asserting: 'I, / Beyond all limit of what else i‘th’ world, / Do love, prize, honour you'

(3.1.71-3). Their engagement is celebrated as a 'contract of true love' (4.1.84) in Prospero's mythically transfigured vision of eternal bliss. Although having been able to prove his constancy, Ferdinand is by no means over-idealized, for at the next convenient opportunity he ignores his ideals, as when he tries to cheat when playing chess with Miranda. In this context chess is, of course, a symbol for political power-play which, in threatening circumstances, requires the use of morally dubious means. And it is for just this purpose that Miranda grants Ferdinand prior absolution by declaring: 'Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle, / And I would call it fair play' (5.1.174-5). Here, far from demonstrating a naïve understanding of politics, Ferdinand and Miranda reveal that theirs is a highly pragmatic view.

Gonzalo

Throughout the play Gonzalo symbolizes the loyal subject who is the natural counterpart to the ideal sovereign. He works for the common good and the welfare of others on a practical human level with his unconditional willingness to engage in 'charity' (1.2.162). This includes his previous help for Prospero as well as his enduring attempt to maintain hope that the adventure may take a favourable course. Again, Shakespeare refers directly to everyday life when illustrating the development of human nature toward divine nature. Accordingly, Prospero reveres the old counsellor as 'Holy Gonzalo, honourable man' (5.1.62). In the figurative sense of *The Tempest* Gonzalo could well be located toward the upper end of *The Tempest's* implicit scale of moral integrity.

Stephano

In contrast to Ferdinand and Gonzalo, Stephano and Trinculo are depicted as examples, respectively, of a despotic ruler who exclusively pursues his own personal aims and, in reaction to this, a reluctant subject. To enable this analogy to work as a credible simulation,

Shakespeare applies the device of portraying the two servants as utterly drunk. Self-proclaimed 'king' (4.1.242) Stephano, actually a butler of the King, reveals his natural inclination to violence and thus adopts elements of Antonio's position by warning Trinculo, whom he must suspect of interrupting his conversation: 'by this / hand I'll turn my mercy out o'doors and make a / stockfish of thee' (3.2.67-9) and, a short time later, hitting him. Moreover, Stephano appears to be prepared, at least according to his words, to murder Prospero with the intention of securing his rule over the island. In contrast to Trinculo, he fails to recognize that his helper Caliban is in fact an animal and not a human. But by acknowledging Caliban as a subject, Stephano unconsciously places himself on the same level as the animal. This equation inevitably implies the voluntary abandonment of human distinctiveness and also, paralleling Antonio’s and Sebastian's interpretation of Gonzalo's vision of a simple life on the island, the abandonment of human civilization. Although not the utterance of a sound mind, Stephano’s disposition is finally judged, even by Caliban, as outlandishly foolish and by the play as downright detestable. Stephano thus places himself within the negative domain beyond human or animal intelligence.

Trinculo

Stephano proves to be an aggressive tyrant who claims his position only by virtue of possessing a cask of wine, while Trinculo, the King of Naples' jester and likewise drunk, functions as the corresponding subject. Being most likely physically inferior to and less obtrusive than Stephano, Trinculo submits to the latter, adopting an ironic attitude in the process. Although not openly speaking out against the plot to kill Prospero, he does not actively support it. And by drawing attention to Prospero's garments he delays the deed. In an invisible hierarchy Trinculo could probably, therefore, be placed above Stephano. However, his drunkenness still confines him to the lower or sensuous realm.

Sebastian

Whereas the mental attitudes portrayed above are rather straightforward and influenced more by intuition and spontaneity than by anything else, the situation is much more complicated for the other noblemen. Sebastian, Alonso and Prospero seem to be in a precarious position near the dividing line between the realms of Miranda and Antonio. At this point Shakespeare refocuses his dramatic microscope by one degree: he now dramatizes individual, personal attitudes. The individual level, though, proves likewise problematic because humans are generally not aware of being bound by the demands of an existential task and are therefore liable to fail.

Viewed from this perspective, Sebastian may serve as an example of a person who, without having destructive ideas himself, is persuaded to act by others, under the pretext of alleged advantages and in a similar manner, perhaps, to his brother twelve years before. Sebastian does not have a lodestar like Miranda. The speed with which Antonio is able to coerce him into committing a murder demonstrates his frail mindset. After being exposed to Antonio's sophisticated slogans he drops his objection that the murder violates human conscience without much resistance. Here, Shakespeare expounds the problem of a decision which, although originally unintended, is nonetheless executed to the disadvantage of others and the permanent destabilisation of personal positions. Sebastian's attitude is constantly susceptible to outside influences.

Conscience

In the course of depicting the various stages of Prospero’s inner development, the play’s close focus on Sebastian explicitly highlights the fact that significant decisions are not made unconsciously after all. Sebastian's guilty conscience, symbolized by his 'inward pinches'

(5.1.77), clearly reminds him that his intention runs contrary to his inner disposition. In taking up this well-known aspect of common psychology, Shakespeare stresses the existence of danger along the invisible horizontal line dividing one moral sphere from the other. As often as possible he uses concepts associated with moral awareness as a leitmotif in key passages of the text, most of all the moral authorities of conscience, heart and mind. They jointly point towards the conviction that general principles for appropriate action are inherent within every human being. According to traditional Scholastic philosophy, these inner moral guidelines emerge from intuition and insights obtained by reason and experience, and they broadly function as an inner support for self-control and personal decision making.**(30)** Naturally, beings confined to the sensuous level, such as Caliban and the two drunkards, must lack such inner authority. In their case, Shakespeare re-translates the proverbial pricks of consciousness as actual physical pains such as 'pinches' (4.1.234) or 'cramps' (1.2.370) which are commanded by Prospero and executed by Ariel and other spirits. Using these witty devices, Shakespeare manages to convey the compass-like function of inner impulses on the psychological as well as the sensuous level.

Alonso

Human conscience, whose natural authority as a 'deity' (2.1.279) is only apparent to Antonio's heightened awareness, also extends to the domain below the play's division between good and evil. Its main function here lies in calling for the revision of decisions already taken. This feature is demonstrated by the development of the figure of Alonso, the highest ranking character of the play. His actions illustrate the act of revoking a prior wrong decision. Although not the instigator, Alonso has nevertheless tolerated Antonio's plot and benefited from Prospero's exile. After being reminded of this failing by Ariel's performance as a harpy, he suffers intensely from his guilty conscience. Consequently, he perceives the loss of his son as

rightful vengeance. Of the 'three men of sin' (3.3.53), then, only Alonso repents of his deed and subsequently asks for forgiveness. This act of recovery enables his restoration, which is celebrated in the final act of the play. At this point Shakespeare avoids too many obvious words and gestures. The line between possible realms of existence is thin. In the end, wrongdoing cannot be avoided but only forgiven.

Prospero

Prospero has also been manoeuvring himself into a dangerous position. As stated above, Shakespeare has placed him exactly 'in the center of the world'. Highly intelligent and well educated in the liberal arts, he is given the possibility of exploring everything that exists and, more than this, of commanding the natural world in godlike manner. At the same time, he is bound to the requirements of moral self-realization, as described by Pico. Prospero's previous history is marked by his failure as the Duke of Milan. In this act of negligence that directly contradicts what he later intends for Ferdinand, Prospero has broken the 'contract of true love' (4.1.84) and deliberately disregarded the welfare of his subjects. The consequence is his physical exile from the human community. For twelve years Prospero is exposed to nature, the realm of Caliban and Ariel, and is thereby forced to recognize the basic principles of his actions and to change his previous self-centred approach to life.

With the character of Prospero, Shakespeare focuses on a highly prominent topic whose novelty for the beginning of the seventeenth century can hardly be overemphasized. Natural scientists such as Giordano Bruno, Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler, William Gilbert, Francis Bacon, as well as the mathematician and magician John Dee, are Shakespeare's contemporaries.**(31)** Their empirical studies together with the findings of their predecessors ultimately trigger the beginnings of the comprehensive scientific analysis of the natural world.

Prospero, too, is an enthusiast of the wonders of the world around him and in this sense is fundamentally a positive figure. Only by reflecting on the play against the background of Pico's lines can we arrive at an accurate explanation of why he finally turns away from nature in the most radical way, a step which – taking only a cursory look at the plot – does not seem necessary in its utter finality. With regard to the challenge of moral self-realization and the two principles symbolized by Miranda and Antonio, it is inevitable that the nature and purpose of Prospero's scientific interests and methods will be subject to the highest moral requirements. Not only are the deeds of the castaways scrutinized in direct reference to fundamental existential questions; so too is Prospero's magic 'art' (1.2.291) (and, in a move of deliberate symmetry, Shakespeare hints here at his own creative work). In this sense, Prospero is constantly operating at the critical margins.

The reasons are obvious. Not only does Prospero neglect his political task; on the psychological level, too, he devotes himself exclusively to nature, thereby overestimating its importance in relation to the play's categories in every respect. One glance at Caliban's and Ariel's fixation and indifference reveals that the natural system itself cannot constitute a truly meaningful dimension for Prospero. Ultimately, his intellectual endeavours cannot lie within this rigid arena but only beyond nature in the imperfect, ever changing but nevertheless unbound human sphere and the welfare of its inhabitants. In accordance with such a fundamental misjudgement, the practice of Prospero's art on the castaways turns out to be a shift towards the negative. The crucial point here is not that magic should be judged as a reprehensible means of commanding nature.**(32)** Rather, Prospero's flaw lies in the fact that he practices unrefined magic – originally intended for non-human nature alone – on the castaways. On the emotional level his inner dissociation from other humans and his pretension to treat them as mere natural objects, thereby ignoring their inherently valuable

reality, become manifest as ruthlessness. But if the grace of charity is the ultimate objective – after all, Prospero has been educating Miranda precisely in that way – he will fail to fulfil *The Tempest's* inherent task in a twofold respect.

His conversion happens at the height of the dramatic action. At first he is unexpectedly confronted with his own ruthlessness by an external impulse conveyed through the words of Ariel. Ariel speaks with the voice of the principle of basic reason, which is, according to Scholastic doctrine, inherent in creation itself.**(33)** Immediately Prospero realizes that his inhumane attitude even surpasses nature, which is notably indifferent to questions of morality. Then comes the moment when Prospero consciously, deliberately pauses – followed by his spontaneous and thoroughly unforeseen decision to renounce all magic and his immediate implementation of its consequences. Up to this moment Prospero has remained in an insecure position, namely, at the point of transition between human kindness and inhumanity (or even below that point). With his choice in favour of pity and forgiveness and, resulting from this, his almost ceremonial abdication of his magical powers, he finally departs the negative realm. In Pico's sense this is a step forward to Prospero's rebirth into divine likeness, while on the level of the play it means the recovery of his dukedom. However, as highlighted once again by the epilogue, he has also gained a heightened awareness of the nature of his existence as a human being.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present interpretation has revealed that Shakespeare may have composed the elements of *The Tempest* in accordance with the imagery and philosophical account contained in the introductory passages of Pico's *Oratio*. It is suggested that in order to express the full complexity of this reflection on man's freedom to choose his own moral nature, Shakespeare designs his Adam using the model of a contemporary naturalist, with his encounters on the various levels of existence – the natural, the political, the social, the family and the spiritual – arranged concentrically around him.

Instead of adopting the hubristic motif of the classic figure of Doctor Faustus, Shakespeare's last play is centred on the problem of inner self-creation and the possibilities of the misapprehension of an essential human moral purpose. The play's multidimensional set-up, its nuanced reflections on conscience, but also the sophisticated figures of Caliban and Ariel and the incarnate ideas of Miranda and Antonio have proven to be artistic milestones in the history of playwriting. Furthermore, with the template from Pico's *Oratio* as a subtext, *The Tempest* constitutes a powerful imaginative experiment and, at the same time, a sober and earnest plea for the uniqueness of human life and the freedom of man's spiritual decisions. It is perhaps for this reason that *The Tempest* was given its prominent position in the First Folio.

References

(1) Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, 'Additions and Reconsiderations', *William Shakespeare: The Tempest,* ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, The Arden Shakespeare, rev. ed. (London, 2011), 139-160, p. 139.

(2) Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man. On being and the One. Heptaplus*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael, repr. (Indianapolis/Cambridge, MA, 1998), p. 19.

(3) William G. Craven. *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Symbol of his Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher,* Traveaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance CLXXXV (Geneva, 1981), pp. 45, 35. Craven explicitly notes that Pico's words are meant as a moral and not as a metaphysical statement that would free man from the bonds of creatureliness.

(4) Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (London, 1965), p. 71.

(5) Pico della Mirandola, *Dignity*, p. 5.

(6) Pico della Mirandola, *Dignity*, p. 5.

(7) Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and Arts* (New York, 1995), p. 62.

(8) James McConica, CSB, 'Thomas More as Humanist', *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge, 2011), 22-45, p. 28.

(9) Anne M. O'Donnel, SND, 'Erasmus Desiderius (c. 1466/1469-1536)', *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Tudor England*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney and Thomas W. Copeland (London, 2010), 237-8, p. 237.

(10) *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Alexander Dalzell (Toronto, 1974), vol.1, p. 261.

(11) All quotations from the play are from the Arden edition *William Shakespeare: The Tempest, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and* Alden T. Vaughan, The Arden Shakespeare, rev. ed. (London, 2011).

(12) The *Oratio* as a possible source is, for instance, indicated in *William Shakespeare: THE TEMPEST: An Authoritative Text, Sources and Contexts, Criticism, Rewritings and Appropriations*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Scherman, Norton Critical Editions (New York, 2004), pp. 86-8.

(13) James Russell Lowell, 'Shakespeare Once More', *The Writings of James Russell Lowell in Prose and Poetry, Volume 3: Literary Essays* (Boston, New York, 1910), 1-94, pp. 59-60.

(14) Elmer Edgar Stoll, *Shakespeare and other Masters* (Cambridge, MA, 1940), pp-281-2.

(15) Frank Kermode, 'Introduction', *William Shakespeare: The Tempest, ed*. Frank Kermode, The Arden Shakespeare , 6th ed., repr. (London, 1983), xi-xciii, pp. Xli-ii.

(16) Vaughan and Vaughan, 'Introduction', *William Shakespeare:The Tempest,* 1-138, p. 138.

(17) Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 145.

(18) Tobias Döring, 'Change and Strange: Transformations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. An Introduction', *Critical and Cultural Transformations: Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' – 1611 to the Present,* ed. Tobias Döring and Virginia Mason Vaughan, REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature, 29 (Tübingen, 2013), xi-xxi, p. xv.

(19) Lytton Strachey, 'Shakespeare's Final Period', *Books and Characters: French and English* (London, 1934), 41-56, p. 52.

(20) Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human* (London, 1999), p. 666.

(21) The highly original figure of Caliban has, of course, inspired a vast number of interpretations. Whereas earlier critics observe his non-human aspects, current discourse emphasizes the colonial references, and in this context Caliban is considered basically human. Vaughan and Vaughan, 'Introduction', p. 35.

(22) Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, (Garden City, 1954), pp. 152, 171.

(23) Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York, 1990), p. 87, also suggests that *The Tempest* can be labelled as a work of science fiction.

(24) Elmer Edgar Stoll, *Shakespeare's Young Lovers*, The Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto, 1935 (London, New York, 1937), pp. 105-106, even asserts: 'She exists in her relation to others, and takes her colour, positively or negatively, from her surroundings.'

(25) Although Miranda's function as daughter and future wife is often considered as subordinate to Prospero's, other critics suggest that Miranda - the virtue of *caritas* being essentially represented by her - is in fact the 'unifying principle' in the play: Patrick Grant, 'The Magic of Charity: A Background to Prospero', *Review of English Studies,* 27 (1976), 1-16, p. 14.

(26) Pico della Mirandola, *Dignity*, p. 6; Kristeller, *Renaissance Thoughts II*, p. 94.

(27) Rüdiger Safranski, *Das Böse oder das Drama der Freiheit [Evil or the Drama of Freedom]*, 4th ed. (Frankfurt, 1999), pp. 13-14.

(28) Pico della Mirandola, *Dignity*, p. 3.

(29) Pico della Mirandola, *Dignity*, p. 3.

(30) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate,* q. 17, art. 1, in *Truth*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert W. Schmidt, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1952-54, repr., Indianapolis, 1994), e-text, retrieved on 15 August 2015 from: http://dhspriory.org/thomas/QDdeVer.htm.

(31) Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays: A New Approach* (London, 1975), pp. 95-6, suggests that mathematician, astronomer and occult philosopher John Dee (1527-1608/9), former advisor of Queen Elizabeth, might have been a model for Prospero.

(32) Pico as representative of Renaissance Platonism, for instance, considers natural magic to serve as an important element in perfecting the philosophical study of the wonders of creation: Pico della Mirandola, *Dignity*, p. 29.

(33) St. Thomas Aquinas, 'Of the Various Kinds of Law', q. 91, art. 1, FS, *The Summa Theologica,* Benziger Bros. Edition 1947, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, 1947-1948), vol.1, e-text, retrieved on 15 August 2015 from: http://dhspriory.org/thomas/summa/FS/FS091.html#FSQ91OUTP1.