

Education of the Soul in *The Tempest* Viewed in Light of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"

Perhaps it is both a blessing and a curse for scholars gripped by Shakespeare's work that so little is known about his life and personal convictions. As a result of this limitation, one can *forget about* having certain knowledge of Shakespeare's intended impact in presenting his work to a mass audience. But at the same time, this lack of historical information has provided a rich interpretive ground that has allowed viewers (and philosophers in particular) to examine various insights, morals, and lessons that Shakespeare has explored throughout his plays; each being simultaneously valid on different levels and in different ways. In accord with this tradition, I cannot help but view some of the main motifs explored throughout *The Tempest* in light of Plato's famous passage found in *Republic* VII known as the "Allegory of the Cave." For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on how the allegory portrays the process through which humans attain the ripening effects of education and illumination for the psyche and how this education leads the individual to achieve union with a source of goodness. I will begin by summarizing the allegory as well as the aspects of the play to which I will most directly relate it. I will then argue that the educational process through which one gains the ability to exit Plato's "cave" is exemplified in two ways in *The Tempest*. First, it is illustrated through the hardships that certain characters on the island are put through by the magician Prospero so that they may receive some form of goodness (depending on the situational context of the character), and second I will show that Prospero *himself* goes through a similar educational process at the end of which he forgives others, receives absolution for his mistakes, and gains wisdom.

In the "Allegory of the Cave," Socrates begins by suggesting a certain perspective from which readers should view the allegory: "Next, then, compare the effects of education and that of the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this" (514a). This statement suggests that the

means through which a person makes his or her way out of the cave is by an education of some sort. Socrates then proceeds to sketch the allegory: he describes a cave in which human beings have lived all of their lives, and in the cave they are chained to the ground in such a way that they can only see the wall that directly faces them (514b-c). On the wall the chained humans can see shadows of themselves and others who walk behind them because of a large bonfire located above and behind where they are located, but since they have only seen these shadows all of their lives and nothing else, they think that the shadows *are reality* (515a). If the chained humans can be broken free from their bonds, they are first able to see real bodies and sensible objects firsthand, and then they are gradually able to ascend out of the cave and into the sunlight so that they may understand the true nature of reality (515c-e). Their ultimate goal is to attain the ability to look directly at and understand the sun, because it is the true, ultimate source of life itself (516b). Socrates states that these chained humans are “like to us,” which means that we, Plato’s readers, only see the “shadows” of the sensible world and value them most highly, when really we should be trying to break free from our chains to see, understand, and strive to attain what is *most truly real*, or the source of truth and wisdom (515a-517c). The true source of all goodness in this world, namely the Form of the Good as Socrates argues, is like the sun in the allegory, but The Good is beyond the sensible world and humans can come to attain its goodness only through education for the “eye of the mind” (517c).

Now, in the “Allegory of the Cave,” Socrates partly describes what the sun (The Form of The Good) is and its effects: “... [The Form of the Good is] the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this” (517c). For the purpose of this argument, I will focus on the aspect of illumination described above, namely reaching a certain level of enlightenment *in one’s lifetime* so that one can act

wisely and attain some manifestation of goodness. I will not be interpreting the ability to look at the sun as "... the soul's ascension to the intelligible region..." after bodily death as Socrates suggests might be a possible interpretation, because *The Tempest* does not directly portray any *literal* bodily death or afterlife (517b). However, at the end of the play the audience sees that certain characters receive a kind of figurative rebirth of character through their freely choosing virtuous actions like forgiveness.

As I will later argue, the educational process one needs to exit "the cave" can be recognized in the actions of various characters of *The Tempest*. But first, I will first summarize the aspects of the play that most clearly illustrate this similarity. In act I.II, the protagonist Prospero recounts events important to the plot that took place before the time in which the play begins to his daughter Miranda (she was too young to remember what happened when they occurred). Prospero explains that he was the Duke of Milan, but he spent most of his time studying magic and other arts, which allowed for his ambitious brother Antonio to usurp him and take over the position of Duke of Milan. Prospero and young Miranda were exiled to sea on a leaking ship, but managed to land safely on an uninhabited island where they have remained since. As fortune would have it, a ship containing Antonio, his ally Alonso the King of Naples, Prince Ferdinand, and others has recently sailed by the island, so Prospero has conjured up a storm to bring the ship and its members to the island by force so that the passengers of the ship are scattered and stranded. For the rest of the play, the audience watches as Prospero uses his magical powers to manipulate the circumstances of each group of men, including Antonio, until Prospero finally reveals himself to them at the end of the play (II.I- V.I). In what way and for what reason Prospero manipulates the external circumstances of the men on his island will be examined next.

As I have mentioned, the first sense in which the play mirrors the pathway to personal illumination expressed in the allegory is through the example of the men on the island undergoing difficult trials caused by Prospero, so that some of them gain the ability to obtain some manifestation of goodness depending on their context. But what is the exact process that these particular characters undergo on the island that help move them beyond their own selfish desires? Alonso, King of Naples, and one of Prospero's slaves, Caliban, are the two characters that most clearly demonstrate a reformed character by the end of the play, so perhaps an examination of these characters and their experiences will yield greater insight into the positive effects of education on the psyche as the play portrays them. Alonso was a major helper to Antonio when he stole the position of Duke of Milan from Prospero (V.I.71-73). Because of the separation from his son Ferdinand during the storm caused by Prospero, Alonso assumes that his son is dead which causes him great anguish (II.I). Additionally, Alonso is part of the group of men that were tortured by the vision of the dinner table in the woods in Act III scene III.

Caliban was found on the island when Prospero and Miranda landed there, and they treated him as an equal until he attempted to rape Miranda (I.II). As the audience sees in the play, Caliban also plots with two other characters to murder Prospero (III.II). Caliban is made a slave to Prospero and Miranda after his attempted rape, and after his plot to murder Prospero is discovered, he and his companions are chased by spirit-dogs into a nearby swamp (IV.I). Grinding, and at times devastating experiences like these often lead those who have experienced them to have a greater sense of humility and respect for greater powers, and this is no doubt part of Prospero's intention in doling out such tribulations to characters such as Alonso and Caliban.

The painful nature of such trials is acknowledged by Socrates in the allegory: "And if, said I, someone should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep, and not let him

go before he had drawn himself out into the light of the sun, do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it..." (515e-516a). If those in the cave are ignorant of their own misconceptions, it is likely that they would not even start to try to break free from their chains themselves. It may take someone who has escaped to descend back down into the cave in order to break them free and rouse them to rise out of the bonds of their own ignorance through education (517a). Although the measures taken by the educator for his or her students may be challenging and painful at first, they are necessary for the habituation of the students to eventually gain the ability to understand the truth that the educator wants them to see. The ultimate goal of a share in goodness is a noble enough cause that it is well worth all efforts (within reason) that help to achieve it.

The crucial scene in which Alonso and Caliban show the effects of their education and display their changed nature begins with Prospero making an important proclamation: "...The rarer action is/ In virtue than in vengeance. They being penitent/ The sole drift of my purpose doth extend/ Not a frown further. Go, release them Ariel" (V.I.27-30). Here, Prospero explicitly states his intended effects for Alonso, Antonio, and their companions; the men that have wronged him most. Acknowledgment of their past wrongdoings, asking forgiveness for them, and changing their evil ways because of it is certainly a good that Prospero wishes for these men. Their near death experiences on the island caused by Prospero have helped some of them to reach this end. First, after Alonso is told about Ferdinand's marriage to Miranda (who now is his daughter-in-law) he exclaims: "I am hers./ But oh, how oddly will it sound that I/ Must ask my child forgiveness!" (V.I.197-199). In other words, Alonso recognizes that his past actions to banish Prospero and his daughter were wrong and he asks for Miranda's forgiveness, which also implies that he wishes to embrace the love of this newly-formed family moving forward.

Similarly, when freed from his slavery and the threat of punishment, Caliban proclaims: "... I'll be wise hereafter/ And seek for grace" (V.I.297-297). If we take these statements from the characters as a sign of a rebirth in character (which is all we can do since a character's thoughts are only known through their lines in a play), then we see that Prospero's efforts to help correct and reform have been successful on these characters.

Again, it becomes clear that the difficult trials the characters went through were worth the goal, and according to the allegory, it is no wonder that this process could not happen instantly: "And if he were compelled to look at the light itself, would not that pain his eyes... Then there would be need of habituation, I take it, to enable him to see the things higher up" (515e-516a). This process through which Prospero has put these characters has helped them to realize their own ignorant faults, similar to light dispelling darkness. In Prospero's soliloquy just before he disenchant's Alonso and his companions, he explains that his charms are about to wear off on the men, but the language that Shakespeare uses here is startlingly reminiscent of Plato's cave and can be interpreted in like fashion: "The charm dissolves apace/ And, as the morning steals upon the night/ Melting the darkness, so their rising senses/ Begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle/ Their clearer reason" (V.I.64-68). This imagery helps readers understand in what way Prospero's trials have come to illuminate the minds of those characters who show a noticeable difference in state at the end of the play – by giving them a fresh perspective on their wicked habits via the "brightening" challenges that he applies to them.

Alonso and Caliban are not the only characters that Prospero wishes to inspire a sort of refinement. We also see him put Ferdinand (Alonso's son who Miranda has recently met and fallen in love with) to the test before Prospero will consent to the two lovers' marriage, and the servant-spirit Ariel is released from Prospero's enslavement by following his orders correctly.

In Act III scene I, Prospero gives Ferdinand the laborious and burdensome task of moving logs to Prospero and Miranda's dwelling place, during which Ferdinand and Miranda's mutual love for one another seems to grow even deeper. This allows Prospero to witness and give approval to Ferdinand's true feelings and intentions for Miranda (III.I.92-96). After Ferdinand overcomes this obstacle, Prospero addresses him with a very insightful proclamation of his purpose: "If I have too austere punished you/ your compensation makes amends, for I/ Have given you here a third of mine own life - / Or that for which I live – who once again/ I tender to thy hand. All thy vexations/ Were but my trials of thy love, and thou / Hast strangely stood the test" (IV.I.1-7). This telling statement by Prospero reflects his education and assessment-oriented mindset that he acts on throughout the play. Similarly, through the fulfillment of tasks assigned by Prospero, Ariel achieves freedom from his bondage to Prospero because of a deal that was made betwixt them (I.II). These cases differ from the characters under Prospero's influence already discussed, because the good to be gained is not necessarily greater wisdom, virtue, mercifulness, or absolution but consent to marry the beloved Miranda or freedom from slavery. Nonetheless, these are further instances of Prospero's actions of setting difficult, character building tasks for characters on the island to deal with as an example of how he educates them to become stronger, more virtuous individuals who use this education to break free from their bonds and exit their respective "caves."

Although Prospero seems to succeed in helping the characters mentioned above be educated in the ways of wisdom, why do other characters under his influence show no such change? First, perhaps we should understand Plato's description of the nature of education from one human to another: "... our view of these matters must be this, that education is not in reality what some people proclaim it to be in their professions. What they aver is that they can put true knowledge

into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes” (518c). So, the implication is that an educator cannot simply give wisdom to the student, since it seems that the educator is not the *source* of wisdom, “The Good” is. In this way, an educator is very limited in his or her power to help the student gain knowledge. The best the educator can do is to create circumstances in which a turn toward knowledge or wisdom in the student is made possible; the student must ultimately seize this wisdom or not on his own. Thus, we can conclude that Prospero has tried his best to stimulate each character under his influence to gain some share in wisdom through the manipulations he applies to their circumstances, but some choose to gain a share in goodness because of this, and some do not.

Not only is Prospero the hand by which tribulations are given to the characters on his island, but he himself is subject to this same process of personal growth through which he gains a greater share in types of goodness such as wisdom, forgiveness, and absolution for his mistakes. In order to see this personal growth most clearly, one must look at how Prospero is portrayed at the beginning of the play and compare it to his words and behavior at the end of the play. In Act I scene II the audience receives a basic sketch of what Prospero was like during his dukedom; a devoted father and an even more devoted scholar, especially in his studies of magic, but he was “neglecting [of] worldly ends” and paid little attention to the individuals surrounding him (I.II). It is later revealed in this scene that after he landed on the island, he discovered and enslaved the spirit Ariel, who he found trapped inside a tree. Throughout most of the play, the audience sees instances of his rash temper. For example, he gives an inappropriately angry response to Miranda in which he unjustly insults Ferdinand when she demonstrates her infatuation with him (I.II.474-479). However, these character faults are ones for which Prospero will seek forgiveness and renounce after he has had his transformative experiences on his island.

As Prospero brings his sorcery-fueled plans to a close in act V, the audience notices a turn in his convictions for the better. First, in regard to his reclusive lifestyle dominated by his studies, Prospero declares that this is seemingly the end of this phase of his life: “But this rough magic/ I here abjure; and when I have required/ Some heavenly music – which even now I do -/ To work mine end upon their senses that/ This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff/ Bury it certain fathoms in the earth/ And deeper than did ever plummet sound/ I’ll drown my book” (V.I.50-57). Although his work in magic and other arts were not intrinsically evil and were able to be used for good, Prospero suggests that he has moved past his reliance on them to embrace a more humble, simple, and wise lifestyle. Evidence for his true forgiveness of those who have wronged him and his remorse for his wrongdoings is located in his famous epilogue:

... Let me not,
 Since I have my dukedom got
 And pardoned the deceiver, dwell
 In this bare island by your spell,
 But release me from my bonds
 With the help of your good hands.
 Gentle breath of yours my sails
 Must fill or else my project fails,
 Which was to please. Now I want
 Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
 And my ending is despair,
 Unless I be relieved by prayer,
 Which pierces so that it assaults
 Mercy itself and frees all faults.
 As you from crimes would pardoned be,
 Let your indulgence set me free
 (Epilogue 5-20)

Prospero’s requests echo Christianity’s “The Lord’s Prayer” – he mentions his forgiveness of others who have wronged him, and at the same time he asks for his audience to pray for him so that divine mercy may be granted to him. That he believes his “ending is despair” unless he is “relieved by prayer” is evidence that he acknowledges that he did not go about accomplishing his

“project” in the most virtuous way. So, at the end of the play Prospero leaves behind an old stage of life and embraces a new one through leaving old debts behind, accepting his mistakes with penitent intentions, and more firmly grounded wisdom.

Despite his flaws, Prospero seems to be the wisest character found anywhere in the play (except arguably Gonzalo). But according to the allegory, a person does not meet his or her full potential for wisdom until the soul can comprehend the source goodness as much as it possibly can: “... the true analogy for this indwelling power in the soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends is that of an eye that could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body” (518c). In light of this statement, Prospero and the other characters mentioned may have a partial view of what it means to be truly wise, but until they can turn their entire bodies, or reform their characters to their fullest ability, they will not have fully completed the process of gaining the wisdom of “The Good” that one can have in his or her lifetime (according to the allegory). This idea suggests that the path to personal illumination does not stop until death – one must constantly work to be personally developed or reborn.

Now, I will try to address any apparent holes or inconsistencies in this examination of the process to illumination depicted in the allegory as exemplified in *The Tempest*. First, one may argue that the allegory is meant to mean that persons only break free from their chains and exit the cave through practicing philosophy and virtue in the way that Socrates does, and that exiting the cave means having knowledge of the realm of The Ideas or Forms. It is not apparent that any of the characters in *The Tempest*, aside from maybe Prospero, go about gaining wisdom in this way. However, I do not think that the allegory limits the ascent to wisdom to *one distinct* way of getting there; on the contrary, I hold that Plato made this allegory vague enough to compensate for *many* ways one can reject their desire of worldly goods and embrace wisdom instead, because

each person's life is in a unique context. Next, one may follow this first objection with a second arguing that the characters do not fully exit the cave in the way that Plato meant, because the allegory suggests a sort of transcendental unification with a singular source of Goodness that presupposes both bodily life and death. But again, my focus was more to show how the gradual, often painful educational process is manifested through various aspects and characters of *The Tempest*, and less on their destinations which can be seen as various manifestations of Goodness itself. The allegory can be interpreted as a spiritual transcendence, but I was more focused on the goals that this educational process can achieve during a person's lifetime. Correlatively, I have chosen to not deal with what would be considered the ultimate source of Goodness in *The Tempest* even though it is important to the allegory. This is because my focus is more on the manifestations of goodness that can be attained by the characters in this lifetime and how they gain the ability to achieve them. An examination of what could be interpreted as the ultimate source of Goodness falls outside of the scope of this project.

Without the painful trials given by Prospero to the characters under his control, they could not have developed their virtues by overcoming such burdens or gained a fresh perspective from which they can look back and understand the faults of their past choices. Likewise, those chained to their seats in the cave could not have known that the true reality lay within their grasp had not somebody helped them to break free from their chains. Correlatively, Prospero increases his own virtue, understanding, and wisdom in assigning lessons to others just as he who breaks free from the chains in the cave must continue to exercise his capabilities by helping his fellow man, lest he recede back into ignorance. As final idea to reflect on, for those who interpret the character of Prospero as Shakespeare's depiction of himself in perhaps the last play he wrote on his own, my interpretation of Prospero may transfer to Shakespeare's life; in giving timeless

lessons and inspiration to the many individuals who watched his plays, Shakespeare has gone through a lifetime of personal growth and has attained wisdom enough to retire with.

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