

## Truth and feigning: story and play in Shakespeare

The distance in time and culture between the oracular *Dream of the Rood* in eighth century Northumberland, and the window into the magical world of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* and *The Tempest* which Shakespeare opened in sixteenth century London, may seem enormous, but for all the differences between the worlds they inhabited the Elizabethan play-wright and the Anglo-Saxon poet still have a great deal to connect them. Shakespeare is as aware as the anonymous poet, of the Classical and Patristic tradition that saw dreams as giving potential glimpses of a Heavenly Realm which both transcends and undergirds our own. They both offer us truths which can only be apprehended through story and image. They have also in common the notion that the stories of a pagan past can be transformed into moving figures whose ultimate significance can harmonise with the Christian Faith, and Christian Faith is of course the other common strand stretching unbroken from the Cross at Ruthwell to the Globe in London. Shakespeare enjoyed a cultural freedom to play with language, to play with stories and dreams, to play in the end with even the most sacred things, and yet through that very playfulness to re-state the great themes of *Transfiguration*, *Death* and *Resurrection* in a new and wonderfully life-enhancing way.

We noted in the introduction how much truth there was in the light-hearted remark Shakespeare gave his fool Touchstone: *The truest poetry is the most feigning*, in this chapter we shall explore in more detail the way in which fable and story, far from being the "delightful *deceit*" of Spratt's assertion are in the hands of Shakespeare a lasting embodiment of *truth*.

Faced with the works of Shakespeare we obviously have an *embaras de richesse* and everywhere we could find elaborated the theme of this book, the theme of transfiguration, of finding the true *through* the seeming. What I propose to do therefore in this chapter is to begin with a consideration of the possibilities of play and fiction as they are open to the dramatist and how these relate to truth, and then to focus in on two specific moments in the works of Shakespeare where we can see some of these themes most clearly. Since we are considering the role of story and the *play* itself I have chosen two plays in which Shakespeare himself plays with the idea of a play within a play, and specifically those points in those plays where he addresses the idea of imagination and how it relates to truth. We will look at these themes first in the comedy of a *Midsummer Nights Dream*, and then see how Shakespeare returns to and develops them, after all the experience of the histories and tragedies, in the Romance of *The Tempest*, so that we see the ideas transposed between two distinct genres of play.

### 1) The purpose of Play and fiction

In one sense all poets enjoy the freedom and possibilities of fiction, the stories they tell need not be outwardly true, nor need the voice and tone in which their poem speaks be their own. On the other hand if they are to succeed in moving us, everything in their poetry must be full of truth, it must, as we shall

see, *grow to something of great constancy*. We are so used to the conventions of fiction, so used to engaging in what Coleridge beautifully called the willing suspension of disbelief, that we miss the paradox beneath our noses, that truth arises not from the labouring *reason* of the poet, but from his playfulness, his freedom to invent. The poet of the *Dream of the Rood* achieves his effect by feigning the speech of the cross, by assuming a voice and speaking with an accent not his own, but hereby he not only conveys truth, but conveys it in a way he could not have done had he spoken in with his own voice. A poet who is also a playwright obviously enjoys this freedom to an even greater degree and is perhaps even more conscious both of the deliberate feigning and of the presentation of truth which his art represents.

### 1) Playfulness and truth in a Midsummer Night's Dream

We shall begin with the *playfulness* in every sense of a Midsummer night's dream and allow Theseus and Hippolyta's famous dialogue about truth and imagination to set some of our themes. Before we engage with this dialogue its worth remembering the context in which it takes place. It functions as both an epilogue to the main action of the play, and as a prologue to the play within the play. The four lovers, it will be remembered, leave the day-lit rationalism of Theseus' court to encounter the moonlight transformations of Puck, and find themselves caught up in the elemental quarrel of Oberon and Titania. They leave the court mis-matched and miserable, caught in a chain of frustration and betrayal, they return rightly matched and joyful, ready to enter into the fruitfulness of love, of which the play's closing nuptials are a sign. Puck has so cast a spell on the lovers who are now at last, through the play of magic, rightly linked again to one another, so that on waking they imagine that their transformations have only been a dream. They tell their story to Theseus and Hippolyta, not knowing whether they will be believed or whether to believe themselves:

HIPPOLYTA

'Tis strange my Theseus, that these lovers speak of.

THESEUS More strange than true: I never may believe

These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,

Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend

More than cool reason ever comprehends.

The lunatic, the lover and the poet

Are of imagination all compact:  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,  
That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:  
The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
Such tricks hath strong imagination,  
That if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;  
Or in the night, imagining some fear,  
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

HIPPOLYTA

But all the story of the night told over,

And all their minds transfigured so together,  
More witnesseth than fancy's images  
And grows to something of great constancy;  
But, howsoever, strange and admirable. (Act V scene 1 lines 1-27)

Like the quarrel between Oberon and Titania, the quarrel between Theseus and Hippolyta is not simply a matter of individuals disagreeing. These characters embody great truths and principles which are, in all of us also, quarrelling and also, perhaps through our imaginative participation in this play, on their way to being reconciled. So it is at this moment of the play that in and through the meeting and the words of Theseus and Hippolyta we have a meeting in our minds of *Reason* and *Imagination*. Let us first look at what Theseus has to say on *Reason*'s behalf against, or apparently against, *Imagination*:

(i) *literal meaning*

On the surface and most straightforward level he is simply saying: I don't believe it! I deny that these events, which the lovers have narrated, actually took place. I think they have been deceived by their over-wrought imaginations, and their imaginations were over-wrought because they were in love.

But Theseus goes on to describe the way imagination itself works, and in so doing concedes almost everything his reason hopes to deny, and he generalises from this particular denial to a denial of all "antique fables" and fairy toys and in so doing, cuts off, with delicious dramatic irony, both the branch on which he is sitting and the stage on which he is standing. For here is *Theseus*, whose entire existence to us and to our minds and imaginations rests on the fact that he has come down to us from antiquity through the medium of *antique fables*, saying "well of course you can't believe these antique fables, I don't believe them myself." Here is Theseus re-made in the imagination of Shakespeare, and engendered or embodied in us by the power of Shakespeare's poetry, telling us, in the very medium of that poetry, "well of course you all know there's nothing in poetry."

(ii) *Dialectic between **apprehend** and **comprehend***

In the course of this speech Theseus twice makes a distinction between comprehension and apprehension, and in many ways these are key terms not only for the play, but for theology, and especially perhaps for theology in the present age. Theseus is choosing now to confine reality to that which he can *comprehend* and to deny reality to that which he can only *apprehend*, but his distinction, though not his opposition, between these two modes of knowing is potentially helpful and worth examining more closely.

In some ways Theseus' speech, with its distrust of antique fable and shaping fantasies, and its emphasis on cool reason and comprehension might be seen as an anticipation of the coming view of the new or modern world, exemplified in those passages from the Royal Society whose language is in fact almost exactly anticipated

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,

Such shaping fantasies, that *apprehend*

More than cool reason ever *comprehends*.

The most striking thing about his attack on imagination is not a failure of *imagination*, which in fact animates the whole speech, but a failure of *reason*. There is a serious logical flaw in his speech. He begins with a proper and useful distinction between *apprehension* and *comprehension* as modes of knowing: we have "shaping fantasies" which *apprehend* more than cool reason ever *comprehends*. But he then goes on to *imply*, without ever *proving*, that what we *apprehend* is not real. And he implies that it is not real first by a sleight of hand and then by a suggestion of motive. The sleight of hand is in the elision from *things unknown* to *airy nothing*:

As imagination bodies forth

the form of things *unknown*, the poets pen

Turns them to shapes and gives to *airy nothing*

A local habitation and a name.

Just because a thing is *unknown*, or unknown to reason, it does not follow that it is simply *nothing*. The very fact that imagination is able to discern a form which bodies it forth and find a name for it, may suggest that it not only has its own mode of existence but that its existence is able to impinge on, and to have effects, to operate as a cause within, the realm of things which reason can in fact comprehend. We require the strong imagination to be active in bodying forth the form of things unknown precisely because, far from being *airy nothing*, these things however incomprehensible, may have a huge influence on things we do comprehend, just ask any mathematician or physicist. The purpose of imagination, in its playfulness and poetry in particular, is to be a bridge between reason and intuitive apprehension, to find for apprehension just those shapes, those local habitations and names which make for comprehension. Indeed you could argue that all great poetry operates out of a creative holding in tension of these two ways of knowing. It is generated between the apprehension of the hitherto unknowable, which gives it its depth, resonance and meaning, and the comprehension of the shapes and images in which its bodies forth its apprehensions which is what allows it to communicate at all. We can see poems failing when they capitulate to either one of these poles: when they are so comprehensible as to lead us nowhere, give us nothing, and remain on a trite surface, or when they are so full of unclothed or un-embodied apprehension that they offer us no common bridge in language or picture to the poet's truth and so remain obscure and opaque. But we can equally see, when a poem succeeds, when its knowable images, the glassy surface

of its mirror of imitation, is suddenly a window that lets us pass through into the new world the poet has apprehended.

(iii) *Hippolyta's reply*

So Theseus on the literal level denies the lovers story and makes the case against imagination and for cool reason. how does Hippolyta reply?

But all the story of the night told over,

And all their minds transfigured so together,

More witnesseth than fancy's images

And grows to something of great constancy. . .

Just as at a literal level, and in terms of the plot of the play, Theseus speech attacks the veracity of the lovers' story, so at the same level, Hippolyta defends it. At a literal level she is simply saying: "when we look at these stories over again, and especially when we put them together, they cohere, they make sense, and all the lovers seem to be referring to the same thing. Their minds are transfigured so together, and their separate stories " grow to something of great constancy," so they can't have been making it up. But there is more: her defence of "the story of the night told over" amounts to a defence of imagination and of the poet's art, as well as spelling out the criteria by which its success might be judged. Let us look then in more detail at what Hippolyta says:

*And all their minds transfigured so together*

The achievement of art is, the *transfiguring* of our minds by means of imagination so that we see both what the poet sees and what he *sees through what he sees*. In the case of the playwright's art it is the *transfiguring* of our minds *together*. There is a *corporate* transfiguration, a corporate entering into the world of the poet's imagination and a corporate seeing through it, of the truth he intends. This is in fact happening at the very moment that Hippolyta speaks of it and through the very means of her speech. When this speech is spoken by an actress, what is happening is that we the audience have voluntarily succumbed to the enchantment of the play-wright, whose art, like Puck's love potion, has so worked on our eyes that our vision is altered. In one sense we know perfectly well that we are sitting in a theatre watching a well-known actress , but at another level we have ourselves been in the fairy wood and lived its moonlight scenes, and we are seeing these two characters who combine in their persons antique fable and

fairy toy, and who represent in their characters reason and imagination, working as forces both within the plot of the play, and in our own lives and minds. Our minds are indeed transfigured, for through the costumes and the lights and the greasepaint and the outer sounds of the familiar speeches we are seeing into the heart of language itself, into the very forge and generative place of poetry, as Shakespeare celebrates the mystery of his art.

v) *inner coherence and growth in a work of art*

Hippolyta goes on to say that there must be some truth in the lovers' tale because when we return to it, when it is *told o'er* it *grows to something of great constancy*. And this is true not just of an episode in this play, but of all great works of art. Once it has been finished a work of art develops a life of its own which is in some sense independent of its author. A good work of art has an independent inner coherence which does indeed "grow to something of great constancy" the more often we "tell it o'er", that is, enter into its world, allow it to transfigure our minds. How does this work? How is it that a single play, like this one, a finite collection of words composed by a finite mind, can take on such a life of its own, can seem to gather to itself and embody so much, and to do so consistently and with such inner cohesion and integrity? The best hint as to how this happens is to be taken from Shakespeare/Hippolyta's choice of the word *grows*. The work grows in our minds because its structure and unity are *organic*. The principles of its inner organisation, the way all its parts are related to its whole is like the organisation and accommodation of a living thing. The sense that a work of imagination might grow and develop according to its own inner laws in just the same way that in the outer world life itself grows and develops is hinted in Shakespeare's choice of the word *bodies*. *Imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown*.

vi) *relation between art and nature leading to the conjunction of opposites*

Part of the way in which the parts and elements of this play are all organically related to the whole can be seen in the way the structure of the plot develops the meaning of the poetry. Theseus and Hippolyta each make a speech defending a particular way of knowing, Reason on the one hand and Imagination on the other, but the context in which they set out their different viewpoints is a preparation for marriage, the entire play is a kind of preface to their marriage and it concludes with a blessing of their marriage bed. Indeed you could argue that the play, which ends with three marriages in the realm of the visible, and a reconciliation in the invisible realm, is about marriage, about the fruitful conjunction of opposites at every level, the bringing together of contraries that seem to quarrel, but in whose conjunction is not only harmony but a kind of overspill of creative energy into fruitfulness and blessing.

So the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta represents the necessary and fruitful union of Reason and Imagination. It is saying that the divorce between reason and imagination which Sprat was to propose

will only injure us, and prevent us really knowing and being blessed by truth. Rather we must find a way of knowing which involves *both* the way reason *comprehends* and the way imagination *apprehends*. This applies just as much to our understanding of the mysteries of life and growth in the outer world of nature as it does in the inner world of art. Allowing poetry to transfigure our vision heals the false fragmentation our culture has endured since the enlightenment. To find a way of making a marriage, a fruitful union of the apparent opposition of Reason and Imagination is perhaps the most urgent task of our own time.

vii) *Performance and the play within the play*

The exchange between Theseus and Hippolyta forms an interlude, between the magical transfigurations of the moonlit wood, and *the play within the play*, the ludicrous enactments of Bottom and his friends, the "rude mechanicals". In a way the contrast could not better illustrate the difference between the true work of art, with its imaginative invitation to a willing suspension of disbelief, and a mere outward imitation which, failing to engage the imagination, fails equally to please the reason. The success of Shakespeare's play depends on a kind of invited feigning, on a mutual consent that our minds should be transfigured together. In some sense we have to agree to be deceived in order to reach a truth. But the authors and actors of the play within the play cannot grasp this. They are afraid it would be wrong to deceive the gentry with the appearances of their play in case they frightened them. But all their special efforts *not to feign*, or rather to *undecieve* with each of the players solemnly informing their audience, in the middle of the action, as to who they *really* are, actually prevent them from telling their story at all, and at no point is anybody's mind transfigured. Their concern with accuracy about the bodily surface of reality prevents them from embodying anything real at all. So, for example they introduce the moon as a physical character in the play. There is a wonderful irony here, for *moonlight* is perhaps the central and most beautifully embodied and imagined thing in the whole of Shakespeare's play. *The Midsummer-Nights Dream* is flooded with a most unearthly and magical moonlight from its very opening lines, *but oh methinks how slow this old moon wanes* through to the *glimmering light* in which Oberon and Titania give the house its final blessing. So it is a moment of rich comedy when into the midst of this imaginatively moon-enchanted play Shakespeare introduces another play in which a man stands physically in front of people carrying a lantern they can all see with their outer eyes and announcing solemnly that he is the moon, and thinks that this will be a better embodiment of moonlight than any mere words can be.

In a way the "mechanicals" attempt to keep reminding everybody that they are not really Pyramus or Thisbe or a lion or the moon, but only Snug or Snout or Bottom and thus destroying their own art, stands as a parable for the whole poverty of our way of knowing the world since the enlightenment. The poverty of reductionism. We look at the mystery of the world, its moonlight and sunlight, it rains and rivers, and we dissect it all and say its not *really* this, its not the sublime mystery it seems to be hinting at, its *really* only *x* or *y* or some other such formula. Its as though someone at the performance of a great piece of music were to take along an oscilloscope and insist that nothing had happened but the movement of wavy

lines on his instrument. But the realism of the "rude mechanicals", the realism of our own age, is not only shallow, it is also false, as this very play shows. The reality is that we live not in a dead world of mere surfaces, but in the midst of a mystery which, if we will let it transfigure our minds,

grows to something of great constancy

but howsoever strange and admirable.

### **3) Such stuff as dreams are made on; Appearance and reality in *The Tempest***

It is instructive to turn now from the early enchantments of the *Dream*, standing as it does near the threshold of Shakespeare's major work, to *The Tempest*, that other magical play concerned also with the relation of inner and outer, of reality and appearance, which comes at the end of his career and whose epilogue is believed by many to be Shakespeare's own farewell to the stage. Like the *Dream*, the *Tempest* uses magical or imaginary characters to embody aspects of our inner nature and also hidden aspects of the outer nature which surrounds us. Just as Oberon and Titania are in some sense the hidden forms, the "parents and originals", of much in both the outer and inner worlds of the *Dream*, so Prospero's two servants Ariel and Caliban are the local habitations and names given by Shakespeare to profound aspects of our own human nature, with its greeds and resentments on the one hand, and yearnings for flight and freedom on the other. We are certain to recognise Ariel within ourselves, but equally bound, under the searching light of Shakespeare's poetry, to say of Caliban, as Prospero does, "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine".

Just as we found the themes of truth and imagination, which are woven throughout the *Dream* focused in the exchange between Hippolyta and Theseus, which precedes the play within the play, so we can find many of the themes of the *Tempest* focused in a speech of Prospero's which happens just after the play within the play, or more accurately the Masque within the Masque, which occurs at the beginning of Act IV in the *Tempest*. But first *The Tempest* itself, and then Prospero's speech need to be set into context.

The *Dream* is a comedy, and for all its extraordinary profundity in the matter of imagination and poetry, there is in its lightness of touch, an absence of engagement with the deepest issues of suffering, sin and mortality, especially with the great issues of Judgement and Mercy. Whilst in the late romances, of which the *Tempest* is the last, Shakespeare can in some sense be seen to return to some of the themes of his earliest plays, it is not a naive return. Between *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* lie the Histories and Tragedies. By the time he writes *The Tempest* he has faced and outfaced the self-doubts and searching of *Hamlet*, *Othello's* terrible twisting of the energy of love, *Macbeth's* uncanny mapping of the degradation of the soul, and *Lear's* encounter, in himself and others, with humankind's "monster's of the deep". The power of *The Tempest* comes from the fact that it is not a fantasy of escape, but one in which the darkest themes explored in the tragedies can find their resolution. The final affirmations,

explicit and implicit, at the end of *The Tempest* have a special value. "We can say of them what Karl Barth says of the enormous *Yes* at the centre of Mozart's music, that it has weight and significance because it overpowers and contains a *No*."

Indeed the *Tempest* both begins and builds as though it were a revenge tragedy. It has all the classic elements; the Prospero the wronged Duke, manages by his magic art to summon together all those who have wronged him. Their guilt is proved many times in the course of the play, both by their own confession and by the subsequent scenes Prospero has himself contrived to test their characters. Prospero does not reveal his hand until the very last act, but by the beginning of the fourth act we have a strong sense of the coming denouement and a Jacobean audience might reasonably have expected a last-judgement-type scene in which Prospero is justly avenged on the guilty, rewards the faithful. But running throughout the play is a counter-theme of *mercy*, of unexpected graces and salvations, of being given up for lost only to be saved at the last minute from the wreck. This is true of the original story of Prospero and Miranda's survival in the drifting boat, it is true of the opening tempest and the apparent wreck of the ship and loss of its crew, when they are in fact all restored and recovered, it is true of the love between Ferdinand and Miranda with Prospero's apparent opposition giving way to the reality of his loving purpose and good will to them both. This theme of the sudden revelation of mercy and restoration in the midst of apparent catastrophe, is seamlessly woven together with the other two pairs of apparent opposites, Control and Release, and Truth and Illusion, whose tension and interplay does so much to generate the play's energy and meaning.

By the beginning of Act IV theme and counter-theme are hung finely in the balance, we do not know, and perhaps Prospero himself does not know, whether when he reveals the truth to his brother and the other conspirators he will find it in himself to forgive them or not. When the tension is at its height it is relieved by a sudden *jeu d'esprit* on Prospero's part, when he suddenly kindles his own and our imaginations to "bestow upon the eyes of this young couple, some vanity of my art." That "vanity" takes the form of a play or masque in which the goddesses Iris, Ceres and Juno appear to bless the proposed marriage between Ferdinand and Miranda, and fill the stage suddenly with music and images of union and fruitfulness, as though the curtain of the world had for a moment been drawn aside to give us a glimpse of a heaven in which there is at last a resolution of all the tensions with which the play is charged, and we wonder whether it was as much for his own benefit as for Ferdinand and Miranda's that Prospero summoned the vision, but it vanishes in noise and confusion as suddenly as it had come, and then Prospero speaks these words:

PROSPERO  
As if you were dismay'd: be cheerful, sir  
. . .  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,

You do look, my son, in a moved sort,  
Our revels now are ended. These our actors,

The cloud-capp'd 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. Sir, I am vex'd;  
Bear with my weakness; my brain is troubled:  
Be not disturb'd with my infirmity:  
If you be pleased, retire into my cell  
And there repose: a turn or two I'll walk,  
To still my beating mind (ActIV scene1)

Like the exchange between Theseus and Hippolyta in the *Dream*, this speech works simultaneously at a number of different levels, and the *revels*, the *insubstantial pageant*, to which it refers may be understood, in this context, in at least five different ways. Firstly *Our revels now are ended* refers to the *insubstantial pageant* or masque which they, (the characters) and we (the audience) have just been watching. These "actors" were, as Prospero had forewarned, invisible spirits of the air summoned by his art, and they, and the magical glimpses of heaven which were their scenery, have faded back into the air whence they were woven. However to hear Prospero, at this point in the play, saying that the revels are ended, the dream-playing is over, is bound to carry a reference to the way in which Prospero has in fact been orchestrating the plot of what happens in the play so far. He has been the playwright within the play. He has brought the characters together, he has set the scenes in which they have encountered one another, he has led them through these scenes with each other and with the illusions of his art, till at last they come to a moment of real encounter with him, whom most of them have not seen yet. This encounter is to come in the final act when Prospero lays asides his robes and appears to his brother and the other conspirators plainly as the person he is. The revels are ended ,there is a reality of personal encounter, with its perils and its possibilities of redemption for all of them to face. The insubstantial pageant is broken by the arrival of that moment for encounter.

But there is a third level of reference, for here we have an actor in a play, one who has been presenting appearances of reality to us through the medium of his performance, and his words carry beyond the fellow characters to whom they are directed, out to the audience itself, and we cannot help hearing this reference to vanishing actors and beautiful scenery that suddenly fades away, as a reference to the very play that we are watching. For a while Shakespeare has filled our minds with cloud-capped towers, with gorgeous palaces and solemn temples, and now through one of his characters he is reminding us that this beautiful vision will fade from us and return us to those other encounters and confrontations for which the fading vision may perhaps have been preparing us. For the original audience, sensing the widening

ripples which the flung stone of this speech cast in their minds, there must have been a particular frison on the outward movement from *towers* through *palaces* to *temples* and finally *the globe*, which led them to a fourth and particular level of understanding:

The cloud-capp'd 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.

If the tradition which maintains that Shakespeare intended this play as his farewell to the theatre, and that he himself played the part of Prospero, is right, then his contemporaries would have felt the reference to the *great globe itself*, the Globe Theatre the scene of so many extraordinary visions, and here the artist who had conjured those visions for them, was resigning from his art, dissolving the pageant before their eyes and strangely implying that they themselves will be dissolved with it. And this sense of a wider dissolution brings us to the fifth and deepest reference of these lines, for they refer to the end, or the apparent end, not simply of this episode, this play, or even Shakespeare's art and theatre, but to the end of all things, the end of our lives and the end of the world.

What does Shakespeare intend us to understand by the two key metaphors he uses here for the relation between our present experience and what might lie behind or beyond them, the metaphor of a play and its ending, and of dream and awakening?

In one sense Prospero is alluding to and developing the idea which Shakespeare had used in many other plays that "all the world's a stage", an idea which had been given very forceful expression in Raleigh's brilliant little poem *What is our life?* which gives a good sense for the sort of feel the life/stage metaphor had for Shakespeare's contemporaries, and is worth quoting here in full:

What is our life? A play of passion.  
And what our mirth but music of division?  
Our mother's wombs the tiring houses be  
Where we are dressed for this short comedy.  
Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is  
Who sits and marks what here we do amiss.  
The graves that hide us from the searching sun  
Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.  
Thus playing post we to our latest rest,  
And then we die, in earnest, not in jest.

Raleigh here picks up on the brevity and comedy, the illusions and delusions, of our lives, but although the potential bleakness of his juxtaposed womb/tomb imagery has been developed by some moderns, (most notably by Becket whose lines in *Godot* "they give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant then all is night once more" probably owe something to this poem) Raleigh's poem is not bleak in the modern sense, because for all its judicious sharpness, *heaven* is nevertheless the spectator of the play of our lives, and there is at least implicit in the notion of dying *in earnest* some sense that beyond the illusions and tragicomedies of our lives, we may encounter a heaven so real that in comparison with it all that seemed real before was no more than *a play of passion*. The notion of our present life as a *play* is fundamentally ambiguous; it can be used to suggest falsehood and futility, something that doesn't ultimately matter, or to suggest that, just as a play is a beautifully wrought work of art which allows us to engage with a feigned truth in such a way as to enable us for a deeper truth (our truest poetry is our most feigning), so the world and all our experiences in it, may be a great work of art and imagination beyond which is a reality for which the play of the world has been preparing us. Shakespeare had explored the bleakest side of the metaphor in many of his plays most notably in *Macbeth*, where *Macbeth's* soul has been so brutalised and alienated by the course of violence on which he set himself that he greets the news of his wife's suicide not with grief, but with indifference and futility, expressed through the metaphor of life as a play:

She should have died hereafter  
 There would have been a time for such a word  
 Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
 To the last syllable of recorded time  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle  
 Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.- (Act V scene5 lines 12-28)

*Macbeth's* speech here expresses the alienation from life which is the consequence of the dehumanising choices he has made, choices which demand that "blood will have blood", that from a bloody course once chosen there is no going back "I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go oer" . By contrast *Prospero* is on the threshold of choosing mercy, and for him the ending of our revels and the dissolution of this insubstantial pageant, is itself a prelude to something more, something to which, as the epilogue of *The Tempest* makes clear, mercy is the only

key. Whereas for Macbeth the actors in the play of life are walking *shadows*, Prospero's choice of word is *spirits*, *these our actors as I foretold you are spirits*, they are the natural inhabitants of a realm beyond the one in which they have been playing. Although they melt into thin air, and like the baseless fabric of this vision leave not a rack behind, there is a strong sense that they, and the cloud-capped canopies, melt from us into something else, or in their melting reveal something else. This sense is carried by the placing of Prospero's speech in the play. These lines occur at the beginning of act *four* not the end of act *five*. We witness the dissolution of the pageant but it leaves not a blank stage or a falling curtain, but a stage set for a moment of encounter, judgement and reconciliation in which Prospero confronts and forgives his brother. But if, on our fifth and final level of reference, the *insubstantial pageant* is not only the play within the play but *the whole world and all of us in it* then the strong implication is that when

The cloud-capp'd 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 ourselves will step from the seemings of this world, from the theatre of the great globe, not into the nothingness of Macbeth's alienation, but into an encounter as potentially fraught, but also potentially fruitful, as that which occupies act five of *The Tempest*. This motif of the re-surfacing of the lost, is there in Shakespeare's choice of the ambiguous *rack* in *leave not a rack behind*, for his play opens with the apparent wreck of a ship and all its crew, who re-surface marvellously and for their own redemption in the rest of the play. Likewise the device of the play within the play itself directs the energy of the life/play metaphor Prospero is using. The play is over he is saying, and yet by virtue of his continued presence on the stage we know that the play goes on. We might of course object that when the whole play itself is over then indeed there will be no surviving of the characters beyond it, then indeed they will *leave not a wrack behind*. But Shakespeare has something further to add. He ends his last play and his whole work in drama, and his life in London with what must have been, when it was first performed, a stunning *coup de theatre*. All the characters are gathered on stage at the end of act five, Prospero gives his peace and blessing to Alonso and co for their voyage home, and in the beautiful last lines, at last sets Ariel free. The reconciled company prepare to follow Prospero into his cell to hear his full story before they sail to Italy, with Prospero's last words "please you draw near" the play is over, the curtain falls. And then, as the audience are preparing to leave, the curtain moves and Prospero appears again and speaks this epilogue:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,

And what strength I have's mine own,  
Which is most faint: now, 'tis true,

I must be here confined by you,  
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,  
Since I have my dukedom got  
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell  
In this bare island by your spell;  
But release me from my bands  
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 pardon'd be,  
Let your indulgence set me free.

At one level this is simply the actor/play-write graciously asking for applause, pretending to be confined to the island of the stage unless released by the applause of the audience:

But release me from my bands

With the help of your good hands

But, in the context of all that has gone before, it is far more than that. For a second time the revels have ended and still Prospero, who has forgiven and delivered his enemies, survives the dissolution and stands in need of deliverance himself. He steps as it were from the Great Globe, from the whole theatre of life, to find that he is still himself and still has an audience. (Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is, they would all remember from Raleigh) And so he appeals to his audience for Mercy on the grounds of Mercy, both the Mercy he has shown and the Mercy his auditors might themselves hope for; *let me not, since I have.. pardoned the deceiver dwell in this bare Island by your spell*" and, in the final and telling couplet:

*As you from crimes would pardon'd be,*

*Let your indulgence set me free*

Something astonishing is happening here. If we accept the sense we have given to the play/life metaphor in Prospero's earlier speech, then by emerging from the curtain *after the play is over* to sue for prayer and mercy in the epilogue the character Prospero has, as it were, died from the world of the play and

emerged into the other transcendent world of the audience, to appeal for mercy and to be released to freedom by them, as surely as he has himself just released Ariel. His dying out of the world of the play into another world must of course set the audience in mind of the ending of the play of this life and their dying out of that to face what? what audience? to ask for what release? The play/life metaphor hovers again between its potential as an alternate expression of despair or of hope and Prospero/Shakespeare, who had after all given those famously despairing lines to Macbeth, picks up the ambiguity in a direct appeal to the audience:

And my ending is despair,

Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
Which pierces so that it assaults  
Mercy itself and frees all faults.

If my prayer, says Prospero, pierces and assaults your mercy as I encounter you beyond the world of the play, how much more might our prayers pierce and assault a Mercy which undergirds and is beyond the play of this world, the baseless fabric of this vision. For as surely as this play has ended and I have had to leave it, so surely shall both you and I find one day this great globe dissolve around us, as we leave it. Then we ourselves will have an encounter! Then we will look for pardon! How he brings that home with the flourish of the final couplet before he leaves the stage:

As you from crimes would pardon'd be,

Let your indulgence set me free.

Throughout this play, as throughout all his works, Shakespeare has been playing with ideas about truth and feigning, appearance and reality, the relation between the nature to which his art holds a mirror and that other nature, beyond or behind the nature reason measures, from which so much light shines through the window of his art. In this final epilogue he throws out a bridge from the reality of the play, through the reality of the actor/playwright, to the reality of the audience's own lives, and the keystone of that whole bridge, binding all these realities together and allowing them to communicate with one another, is the over-arching Presence and Mercy of One who is present to every level of reality and who is to be engaged and pierced by prayer.

As You Like It III: 3:line 20 see above p.??

See above Introduction note i

Midsummer Night's Dream ActV Scene 1 line 26

*The Tempest* Act V scene 1 line 275

Seamus Heaney alludes to this passage in Barth in praising one of Yeats' last poems in his book of essays *The Redress of Poetry* (Faber and Faber 1995) p. 163, but I think his insight applies as much, if not more, to Shakespear's last plays

*The Tempest* actIV scene1 line 41

Collected in *Silver Poet's of the Sixteenth Century* Everyman 1960 p.296

*Waiting for Godot* Faber and Faber 1956 Act II p.89

*Macbeth* ActII scene 4 line137-8