 The Influence of personal context on texts – Shakespeare as Prospero

To some extent, all texts reflect the lives of their composers. Shakespeare wrote The Tempest in 1611, at the end of his illustrious career, while he lived in semiretirement in Stratford, just five years before his death. As a result some have seen The Tempest through the lens of Shakespeare’s personal context as a text which Shakespeare’s uses to examine his own “art”, a career as a playwright.

When Prospero gives up his staff and magic book at the end of the play, one is reminded of Shakespeare giving up his art as a dramatist. In his final speech, delivered directly to the audience, Prospero asks to be released from the bonds that hold him to “this bare island” (or the stage), so that he can embark on the last leg of his journey — to Milan, retirement and ultimately death.

Gentle breath of yours my sails

Must fill, or else my project fails,

Which was to please.

Could this speech be Shakespeare’s farewell to the stage as he, like Prospero, contemplates the final journey ahead?

While this interpretation of the play as personal allegory is controversial, there does seem to be more to the Epilogue than simply an appeal for applause.

Consider:

* the characters: Prospero can be seen as a theatrical impresario or director and the other characters the actors within his performances.
* the setting of the island cut off from the real world: The stage cut off from the reality of life
* the plot: Prospero is the mastermind and manipulator of multiple subplots on the island, much like Shakespeare the director masterminding the plots on his island stage. Prospero’s commanding of Ariel ‘Hast thou, spirit, Perform'd to point the tempest that I bade thee?’ reminiscent of director instructing his actors.
* “Brave new world” reference to his own exploration of humanity in his work
* Shakespeare – snapping of staff and drowning of book can be seen as symbolic of Shakespeare’s snapping of pen and farewell to writing and the stage.
* The Tempest is also a dramatic celebration of the art of writing and dramatic spectacle, a metatheatrical play -examples of this are the opening tempest, the masque and antimasque and the final circle of enchantment.
* recurring motifs throughout the play:
  + Music and sound effects of theatre- Solemn and strange music; and Prospero on the top, invisible. Enter several strange shapes... (3.iii)
  + Magic of theatre- I have bedimmed / The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds, / And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault / Set roaring war' (5.i)
  + Book as the stories of theatre- I’ll drown my book (5.i)
  + Magic Garment as costume of theatre- And pluck my magic garment from me' (1.ii)
  + Staff as pen-I’ll break my staff (5.i)

Consider these three speeches from Prospero in The Tempest:

a) Our revels now are ended. These our actors,

As I foretold you, were all spirits, and

Are melted into air, into thin air;

As I foretold you, were all spirits and

Are melted into air, into thin air:

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Ye 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. (IV.i.148–158)

1. What intertextual reference appears in this speech which supports this reading of the play?

Some commentators have noted the use of the phrase ‘the great globe itself’ as a reference to The Globe Theatre which the audience would have been familiar.

b) Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves,

And ye that on the sands with printless foot

Do chase the ebbing Neptune and do fly him

When he comes back; you demi-puppets that

By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,

Whereof the ewe not bites, and you whose pastime

Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice

To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid,

Weak masters though ye be, I have bedimm'd

The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,

And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault

Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder

Have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak

With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory

Have I made shake and by the spurs pluck'd up

The pine and cedar: graves at my command

Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth

By my so potent art. (V.i.32-57)

1. What intertextual references can you find in these final last lines of the play that invite you to see the texts through the personal context of Shakespeare’s life?

References to A Midsummer Nights Dream (in the references to fairies and spirits), and references to Macbeth (in, “by the spurs pluckt up/The Pyne, and cedar” -Birnam Wood) should be easily recognisable. Appearance of ghosts and spirits which appear in much of Shakespeare work, ‘graves that ‘have waked their sleepers’ is alluded to. Topics that Shakespeare focused on in his earlier plays such as the attempts to overthrow a king (Macbeth, Richard II, and Julius Caesar), nature versus nurture (The Winter's Tale and King Lear), and innocence (Twelfth Night) are evident throughout the play both thematically and dramatically.

c) 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 pardoned 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 pardoned be,

Let your indulgence set me free.

3. Annotate this speech through the lens of a personal context of Shakespeare’s life.