



**“I thought that all things had been savage here” (As You Like It).  
 What is the significance of journeys into wild spaces in *The  
 Tempest* and *Bartholomew Fair*?**

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*Bartholomew Fair*<sup>1</sup>, by Ben Jonson, and William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*<sup>2</sup> both deal with the themes of journeys into wild spaces. In locating a direct textual reference to *The Tempest* in his Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, spoken by the Scrivener,

If there be never a servant-monster i’the fair, who can help it? He says; nor a nest of antics? He is loth to make nature afraid in his plays, like those that beget Tales, Tempest, and suchlike drolleries,<sup>3</sup>

Jonson creates a direct conversation between the two plays. I will argue that *Bartholomew Fair* is essentially a direct rewriting of *The Tempest*, which parodies its central motifs of domination and control by moving the politically orientated dramatic action from its island context, placing it in a setting characterised by misdirection and vice. The journeys that characters undertake allow them to question the fundamental paradigms of humanity, raising implications about the nature of societal control and the dangers of fully suppressing or fully submitting to temptations of the flesh. Mark Thornton-Burnett states that

Jonson stages in *Bartholomew Fair* a ‘translation’ of Shakespeare’s ‘monstrous’ preoccupations . . . for Jonson, ‘translating’ Shakespeare initially entails a de-‘monsterring’ or un-wondering of *The Tempest*,<sup>4</sup>

this creative ‘un-wondering’ serving to draw into sharp relief Shakespeare’s antagonistic Prospero/Sycorax pairing by enforcing an association with their baser alternatives, Overdo and Ursula. Through casting Overdo as fallible and Ursula as powerful, each character’s colonising journey into the wilderness at the heart of the locale becomes a journey into the dark heart of the self, the points of collision between the two plays resuscitating the self/other paradigm in order to break it down.

In analysing the significance of Overdo and Prospero’s journeys, the wild spaces themselves must first be defined. Liminal and resistant to categorization, the wilderness settings of both plays are envisioned as the antithesis to familiar mental spaces. Despite Jonson’s fairground locale’s spatial and geographical orientation in a discernible London, the

<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* in Gordon Campbell (ed.), *The Alchemist and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (eds.) (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> *Bartholomew Fair*, Prologue 147-151

<sup>4</sup> Thornton Burnett, ‘If there be never a servant-monster’: Translating ‘Monsters’ in *Bartholomew Fair* in *Constructing ‘Monsters’ in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture*, p. 157

dramatic envisioning of this sinister and brutal *Bartholomew Fair* represents a perceived moral wilderness for those who travel into and across its thresholds. Similarly, Prospero's uncharted island defamiliarises his dynastic and political preoccupations by transposing them to a nameless and shapeless territory. Each space functions psychologically as a receiver of control mechanisms which are enacted by Prospero and Overdo as they strive to articulate their own narratives in the spaces, redefining their own humanity in order to impose a distance between what they *watch* and what they *do*. Paradoxically, this desire to undermine similarities between the spaces and their action within them serves to increase a dark correlation with what they find.

In stating that 'one's reaction to Prospero almost inevitably determines one's response to the entire play',<sup>5</sup> Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan gesture to the ambivalent judgement a contemporary reading of Prospero's character elucidates. A problematic character, an interpretation of Prospero as a figure of learning and wisdom fails to appropriately acknowledge his deeply ambiguous morality. This unpacking of the dualisms Prospero adheres to is the problematized definition Jonson intended to provoke. Through transposing his traits onto Overdo, the figure of authority is shown to possess a power which is fractured and hypocritical. As a figure who loses respectability as he becomes entranced by the fair's temptations, Overdo represents a rewriting of Prospero's original descent into usurpation and exile during his time as Duke of Milan. In another allusion to Shakespeare, Jonson fashions Overdo as a hapless revisioning of Duke Vincentio; donning disguise in order to enact moral judgement but caught in the destructive pursuit of a blinkering desire for self-advancement. Prospero and Overdo are envisioned as twin anthropologists, arbitrating the spaces via the deployment of patriarchal control mechanisms which assume omniscience as a given. Surveyor of how others react to the space without ever considering its effects on his own humanity, Prospero brings the courtiers to the island as mere spectacle, never intending to exact real and dangerous revenge. Jeffery D. Mason's definition of the liminal street fair space is an accurate depiction of this mode of spectacle into which both Overdo and Prospero invest. He posits that,

The characteristic – and characterizing – mode of the street fair is display. The fair is set up so that people may observe and be observed . . . the point of their presence is not to finish but to be; not to pass through the space or the event, but to inhabit it,<sup>6</sup>

Thus, *The Tempest*'s island can be read as a own street fair of sorts, a double-pronged space into which Prospero lures courtly figures both for his own entertainment and, presiding over the action in his role of playwright-magus, creates a spectacle for the audience also. Littlewit's enunciation of the fair as a space of spectacle and fancy reinforces the drive to view and understand the uncharted space which also figures as Overdo's motive for professing moral judgements in *Bartholomew Fair*. His commercially-orientated definition of the space elicits such a reading, 'Win, good Win, sweet Win, long to see some hobby-horses and some drums and rattles and dogs and fine devices, Win. The bull with the five legs, Win, and the great hog'.<sup>7</sup> This desire to view and document the effects of the unknown allows Jonson to enact an ironic spectacle of self, in which Overdo does not realise that he has become indistinguishable from the vice he is professing to judge. Prospero's journey into the wild island space, situated twelve years before the play text begins, likewise initiates a reading of his similarities with all which he sets himself up as antithetical to.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, 'Introduction' in *The Tempest*, Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (eds.) (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2011), p. 24

<sup>6</sup> Jeffery D. Mason, 'Street Fairs: Social Space, Social Performance', *Theatre Journal*, No. 3, Vol. 48 (1996), p. 313

<sup>7</sup> *Bartholomew Fair*, III.vi.4-7

Beyond fantasies of domination, both Prospero and Overdo enact quests for knowledge, envisioning their own central control of the space through the elicitation of a supreme and god-like understanding. Jonson mocks Prospero's supposed dominance by supplying Overdo with a deluded self-confidence and a hugely inflated sense of his own analytical prowess. A character renowned for monologuing at length, Prospero's linguistic assertions of his own power are mocked through their association with Overdo's hyperbolic statements:

This later disguise I have borrowed of a porter shall carry me out to all my great and good ends, which, however, interrupted, were never destroyed in me. Neither is the hour of my severity yet come, to reveal myself, wherein, cloud-like, I will break out in rain and hail, lightning and thunder, upon the head of enormity.<sup>8</sup>

Jonson proclaims the delicate line between knowledge and self-delusion. Through enacting Overdo's journey into the wild space, this sense of self-delusion is reinforced and is transferred onto Prospero. Overdo's 'I cannot beget a project, with all my political brain'<sup>9</sup> has more than a ring of Prospero's imperative statement that,

My high charms work,  
And these, mine enemies, are all knit up  
In their distractions. They now are in my power.<sup>10</sup>

Bawdy Wasp, who mocks Overdo's philosophising with the statement, 'Heart of a madman! Are you rooted here? Will you never away? What can any man find out in this bawling fellow to grow here for?''<sup>11</sup> echoes Jonson's own frustrations at Prospero's lengthy philosophical musings. In parodying these linguistic assertions of control, Jonson further documents the mirroring between Prospero and Overdo, eliciting a creative refashioning of Prospero which further demeans him.

Jonson's translation of *The Tempest* into *Bartholomew Fair* in relation to this parallel also allowed for the creation of another character to be twinned with Prospero's alter ego Sycorax: Ursula, foil to Overdo. Embodying traits of the bodily and physical, these figures of matriarchal dominance hold real power over the wild spaces they inhabit. Significantly, the journeys of Sycorax and Ursula to island and fairground are never explicitly enunciated in the dramatic narrative, only discussed retrospectively. This encourages a conflation of character and setting, in which each figure appears to serve as an emblem of the space they hold control over. In *The Tempest*, Caliban substantiates this claim, reminding us of the bonds between the organic resources of the island domain and the potency of his mother's witchcraft;

As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed  
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen  
Drop on you both. A southwest blow on ye  
And blister you all o'er.<sup>12</sup>

This unity with the elements of the isle can be seen overtly in in Julie Taymor's 2010 adaptation of *The Tempest*,<sup>13</sup> in which Helen Mirren's female Prospera's volcanic isle

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, V.ii.1-5

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, III.v.1-2

<sup>10</sup> *The Tempest*, III.iii.88-90

<sup>11</sup> *Bartholomew Fair*, II.vi.82-88

<sup>12</sup> *The Tempest*, I.ii.321-25

<sup>13</sup> Julie Taymor, dir., *The Tempest* (Miramax Films, Touchstone Pictures, 2010) [on DVD]

influences the key medium of her powers, that of fire. Her staff and cloak, symbols of her power, glitter with obsidian. Likewise, Ursula's central position at the physical and symbolic hearts of the fair allows her a manipulative control over the gulls and lowlifes who congregate around her stall. The fundamental absence of a dramatic articulation of Ursula and Sycorax's journeys to the spaces invest in them a powerful allusion to the control that they hold over the space. However, their being firmly supplanted in their surroundings disguises the implications of colonisation from which they are not free. Seemingly intrinsic to the environments, these matriarchs have in fact enacted their own journeys in order to reap specific benefits. For Ursula this benefit is commercial, lending weight to the assumption that Jonson's play refigures the more substantial political preoccupations of *The Tempest*'s plot into something more light-hearted. Sycorax's journey is undertaken and her ownership claim to the island enacted in order to save her own life, an act which Prospero mirrors precisely some years later.

Ursula's characterisation reinforces a reading of Sycorax which highlights a fear of the monstrous within the human self which is only implicit in *The Tempest*. A human representation of the pig meat she sells, Ursula's fleshliness represents her association with the bodily and therefore her closeness to the bestial. Constantly sweating, she is terrifying to Overdo not just in terms of her gargantuan size but because of the unpoliced physicality she represents. She is a self without boundaries, a gross and contaminating female influence who is made a fearful spectacle by Overdo's male gaze. 'This is the very womb and bed of enormity, gross, as herself! This must all down for enormity, all, every whit on't'.<sup>14</sup> Willing Suspension's production of *Bartholomew Fair*<sup>15</sup> reinforced this connection between Ursula and the bestial, the modern-day *Bartholomew Fair* setting centring on a stall envisioned as a huge pig's head, its open mouth the dark threshold from which Emily Gruber's Ursula lumbered, yowling and sweating, to deliver her opening lines. This gargantuan image of the fair's fleshly temptations remained on stage for the remainder of the performance, inviting audience and character onlookers alike to link Ursula's corporeality, raising implications about the contagious nature of the fair's corruptions. This fear of contamination by the bestial and animalistic is an element of *Bartholomew Fair*'s subtext which creates unease for both characters and audience, as Gibbons states;

The fair-people live in their own absurd rival to the educated man's world, but it has its own consistent internal logic which refuses to separate human and animal . . . [encouraging] Rabelaisian associations of Ursula's booth with accommodated man, Adam [and] the instinctive appetites for food and sex.<sup>16</sup>

Gibbons thus reinforces the perceivedly insidious influence of Ursula's bodily desires; her appetites marking her out as a subhuman interpretation of the Eve figure, destined to fall due to her insatiable appetites and destined to bring Adam (Overdo simultaneously representing himself and the archetypal male spectator) down with her. Ursula reinforces this biblical reference when she simultaneously references herself as Eve whilst punning on the pork products she sells; 'I am all fire and fat, Nightingale; I shall e'en melt away to the first woman, a rib again'.<sup>17</sup> This religious reference serves to undercut the fear of the bodily which Overdo feels, proving human structures of control to be mere pretences at civility, fragile in

<sup>14</sup> *Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.69-70

<sup>15</sup> Willing Suspension Productions, *Bartholomew Fair* (Boston University, 2011) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAWk-DmINjA>> [accessed 1 May 2012]

<sup>16</sup> Brian Gibbons, 'Bartholomew Fair' and 'The Devil is an Ass': City Comedy at the Zenith' in *Jacobean City Comedy* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 147

<sup>17</sup> *Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.49-52

the face of darker bodily urges. As characters travel further into *Bartholomew Fair*'s murky depths, the only true governing forces are shown to be those that Ursula represents; desire and glutton.

Through aligning Ursula with Sycorax, Jonson also sheds light on the physicality of a character whose physical definition remains as ambiguous as her son's. We are told of how

The foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy  
Was grown into a hoop<sup>18</sup>

a description of deformity which implicates in Prospero's dialogue a pathological fear of obesity, and therefore a fear of excessive appetite. This fear also instructed Peter Brook's 1968 direction of *The Tempest*, as Margaret Croyden's review attests:

[Caliban] and his mother Sycorax represent those evil and violent forces that rise from man himself regardless of his environment. The monster-mother is portrayed by an enormous woman able to expand her face and body to still larger proportions – a fantastic emblem of the grotesque . . . variations of anal and oral intercourse convey a monster-sexuality, a Dantesque phantasmagoria: the "Garden of Delights" has been transformed into the "Garden of Hell."<sup>19</sup>

This nightmarish portrayal of Sycorax as symbol of fleshly evil, a deliberate revisioning of her original narrative in relation to Prospero, is mirrored in Derek Jarman's film<sup>20</sup> of 1979. In this adaptation, Sycorax is brought from textual reference to physical reality as flashback ensures that she is shown explicitly to the viewer. Sycorax is represented as a vision of the grotesque; huge and naked, she practises perverse and incestuous sexual acts with Caliban. As with Ursula and Overdo, the fear of the male spectator of contamination by these forces drives Prospero's dealings with Sycorax's character. In positing that 'it is true that Sycorax is invoked quite insistently throughout the play, but only as the disembodied symbol of the men's most terrible fears,<sup>21</sup> Abena P. A. Busia implies a link between Prospero's suppression of Sycorax's narrative, and his masculine fears of what she represents. Prospero's fear of excessive physicality is shown through his exodus from the island, the conclusion towards which his self-created sequence of events permanently pushes towards. Prospero silences Sycorax's story, replacing it with his own narrative, due to shame at the animalistic heritage she represents. He assuages these fears of regression to a similar state by revisioning her passage, removing all similarities of circumstance between their two journeys. Likewise, Overdo flees *Bartholomew Fair* after it reveals his moral falsity; on voyaging through the fairground domain he is transformed from a figure of power and respect to one who is mocked and humiliated. Ursula and Sycorax represent all that is corrupt about the environments into which Overdo and Prospero journey, reinforcing the perceived danger in each male character's mind of the contamination which could occur. Underlying this fear is a sense that Prospero and Overdo are terrified to observe their antitheses too stringently, fearing a reflection of their own suppressed bodily desires. In *The Tempest* these tensions and fears lie under the surface, whereas *Bartholomew Fair* revels in them, mocking and parodying in order to celebrate the base humanity of the fleshly underworld. Jonson's presentation of Ursula serves to make explicit something which is oblique in *The Tempest*; the dangerous celebration of the animalistic lures of the flesh significant in its envisioning of

<sup>18</sup> *The Tempest*, I.ii.500-503

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Croyden, 'Peter Brook's "Tempest"', *The Drama Review*, No. 3, Vol. 13 (1969), p. 127

<sup>20</sup> Derek Jarman, dir., *The Tempest* (Boyd's Company, Mainline, 1979) [on DVD]

<sup>21</sup> Abena P. A. Busia, 'Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female', *Cultural Critique*, No. 14 (1989-1990), p. 86

Sycorax's unstable and insatiable desires as bound up with her organic magic. This fluidity between the monstrous and the human mocks the fragile barriers of civility which characters enact, showing them to be little more than veneers set up in order to disguise a horrifying reality.

As indigenous characters, Ariel and the puppets of Leatherhead's show stand as the true emblems of island and fair. Able to shift forms and flexibly reshape their characters, they are colonised and controlled but have the independent power to mock and judge, thus reinforcing the difficulty with which they can be categorised. Representative of liminal spaces fundamentally opposed to easy modes of classification, these figures represent a challenge to my previous definitions of each environment's origins in a sexual perversity and animalistic baseness which the Sycorax/Ursula mirroring seems to imply. Ariel and the puppet's androgyny paradoxically marks the environs as associated with not ultimate baseness but with moral purity and sexlessness. Julie Taymor's *The Tempest* explicitly enacts this theme of androgyny, presenting us with a naked and ethereal Ariel, genitals airbrushed away. Prospera's masque was here envisioned as an image of an androgynous Vitruvian man/woman, making explicit its motive of distracting the young lovers and encouraging abstinence in their relationship, reinforcing Prospera's desire to distance herself from Sycorax's deviant sexuality. Likewise, in setting up Leatherhead's puppet show as the ultimate example of the fair's carnality and sin, Jonson gestures to the centre not of pure debasement at the heart of the fair, but of a hollow abyss of nothingness. Kernan states that

*Bartholomew Fair* consists of a series of images, each of which, like a box within boxes, is a reduction of its larger predecessor . . . Within the puppet play, the final reduction, the drawing of the last curtain, is the lifting of the puppet's costume to reveal – nothing. Even sex, which is at the basis of so much activity in the great fair, finally has no reality,<sup>22</sup>

thus indicating that in reducing the life of the fair to the point where all humanity disappears, the central image envisioned is one of genderless neutrality. The whole form of *Bartholomew Fair* mocks this interchange; at the culmination of the characters' journeys into the fair's central territory and the climatic dramatic event of the play you would expect the moral judgements to come from a figure of authority, yet it is the supposedly powerless puppets who in actuality deliver the judgemental verdict. Debora K. Shuger states that 'these Pauline puppets define the almost tragic gulf between men's ideals – their awesome sense of their own significance and vast potentiality – and their pitiful reality',<sup>23</sup> and through their relationships with these emblems of the spaces, Prospero and Overdo's visions of their own power are further mocked and demeaned. Prospero's blackmail of Ariel in order to maintain control over him reinforces this. In the RSC's 1993 production of *The Tempest*,<sup>24</sup> directed by Laurence Boswell, the antagonisms of this relationship were made explicit as a dominating Ariel, played by Simon Russell Beale, spat in Prospero's face on being rewarded his freedom. In believing that they alone have the moral power to judge and understand the spaces they travel to and by undercutting the narratives of the female representations of the spaces, Prospero and Overdo's self-deluded attempts at control are further mocked.

To conclude, Jonson's revisioning of *The Tempest* through *Bartholomew Fair* is akin a journey into the wild spaces of making explicit what is implicit in the text. Both spaces

<sup>22</sup> Albin B. Kernan, 'The great fair of the world and the ocean island: *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Tempest*' in *The Revel's History of Drama in English Vol. III*, p. 463

<sup>23</sup> Debora K. Shuger, 'Hypocrites and Puppets in "Bartholomew Fair"', *Modern Philology*, No. 1, Vol. 82 (1984), p. 72

<sup>24</sup> Laurence Boswell, dir., *Bartholomew Fair* (Royal Shakespeare Company, 1997). Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, December 1997

present masculine fears of the base humanities which seem to govern them, *Bartholomew Fair* celebrating the fundamental humanity of temptation and revelling in Overdo's hypocrisy as he makes his explorations of the temptations of the flesh in his journey to the fair's centre. Quarlous's reminder that 'you are but Adam, Flesh, and blood! You have your facility, forget your other name of Overdo'<sup>25</sup> reinforces this and in doing so, Jonson reveals the paradox behind this reading. He articulates not a condemnation of the fallibility of man but rather an acceptance of the human inability to resist temptation. In foregrounding these issues in his reaction to *The Tempest*, he brings to the forefront what in Shakespeare's play text only simmers beneath the surface.

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<sup>25</sup> *Bartholomew Fair*, V.vi.96-98

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