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"A third of mine own life": A Note on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the Four Ages of Man

Abstract I: Un verso della *Tempesta* di Shakespeare si è rivelato notevolmente problematico sia per coloro che hanno lavorato all'edizione del testo sia per la critica in generale. Il quarto atto si apre con le parole che Prospero rivolge a Ferdinando: "If I have too austerely 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" (4.1.1-5). Sebbene questi versi siano stati oggetto di dibattito accademico dal XVIII secolo a oggi, il significato preciso dell'affermazione di Prospero rimane sostanzialmente oscuro. Attraverso l'analisi di alcuni analoghi contemporanei, in particolare una poesia contenuta in *A Margarite of America* di Thomas Lodge, queste pagine intendono fornire nuovi elementi per la comprensione di questi versi: la chiave del loro significato si rivela infatti nel riferimento implicito al comune *topos* delle quattro età dell'uomo.

Abstract II: A line in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has proved significantly problematic for editors and critics alike. The fourth act opens with Prospero telling Ferdinand, "If I have too austerely 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" (4.1.1-5). Although these lines have been the subject of scholarly debate from the eighteenth century to the present day, the precise meaning of Prospero's statement remains elusive. Through an analysis of contemporary analogues, most notably a poem in Thomas Lodge's *A Margarite of America*, this paper sheds new light on these lines, arguing that the key to their meaning lies in their implicit reference to the common trope of the four ages of man.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Four ages of man, Editing, Shakespeare Criticism.

Notwithstanding its apparently uncomplicated plot and its elegantly symmetrical structure, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a highly compelling example of a play presenting a vibrant, almost overwhelming world of concrete objects and interconnected events. On this barren island every detail matters. Scraps of conversation, casual remarks, gestures, and references to food, items of clothing, or even fuel provide a semantic accumulation of words that allows

for an exploration of themes as weighty as freedom, slavery, love, and mercy. These details are, for the most part, clearly detectable; the text of this play, in fact, offers comparatively few problems of substance. Set from a transcript prepared by Ralph Crane – a professional scrivener who maintained a close relationship with the King's Men – the 1623 Folio text of *The Tempest* is generally considered to be relatively free from real cruces, that is, corrupt or ambiguous passages[1].

The precise meaning of certain phrases in the play, however, has sometimes been considered obscure and has engendered considerable discussion among scholars. One passage in particular has proved significantly problematic for editors and critics alike. It is found at the opening of Act 4, where Prospero tells Ferdinand: "If I have too austerely 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" (4.1.1-5; Loughnane 2024). Given that it would be typical for a parent to speak about their child as "half" of their life, this line has puzzled editors for centuries. The precise implication of Prospero's assertion remains a subject of critical debate. Lewis Theobald (1733, vol. 1: 50) appears not to have been able to make sense of it and emended "third" to "thread"; most subsequent editors, from Edward Capell (1767-1768, vol. 1, part 2: 56) to Rory Loughnane, have retained "third" (the Folio reading), explaining it in a variety of ways: as a reference to his personal life, his lost dukedom, or his deceased wife (cf. Furness 1964: 187-189; Loughnane 2024: sc. 8). Alternatively, Stephen Orgel (1987: 170) has suggested that the term "a third" is not a literal fraction but simply denotes a portion of paramount significance – a usage supported by Prospero's subsequent declaration that "every third thought shall be my grave" (5.1.311). Can any of these hypotheses be corroborated by concrete evidence?

One may well understand why philologists and critics seem perplexed by this passage. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, human existence is famously compared to a play divided into seven distinct acts. Life's journey begins with the helpless infant, transitions into the whining schoolboy and shifts into the dramatic lover. As individuals mature, they take on the roles of the hot-headed soldier and the wise, prosperous justice. Finally, life winds down into the lean and slippered pantaloon before ending in "second childishness" – the sad state of oblivion, "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (2.7.138-165). This division is well attested in classical and medieval traditions, rooted in Greek philosophy and medicine. Solon originally outlined the human life cycle in ten septenary blocks, and Hippocrates formally divided life into seven specific stages measured by these seven-year periods. Later, St. Augustine described the history of the world as divided into seven ages, corresponding to the seven days of creation. A widely used Renaissance school text, Pier Angelo Manzolli's *Zodiacus Vitae*, published under the name Palingenius and translated by Barnabe Googe as *The Zodiake of Life*, explicitly enumerates these stages of human life alongside astrological influences (cf. Manzolli 1565; Burrow 1988; Archambault 1966; Brissenden 1994; McPherson 1994).

Should we regard "third" as a typographical error, then? One may want to recall what

[1] Cf. Lindley (2013: 102-104, 237-268) on Crane, Wilson (1926: 194-215), Ioppolo (2008: 131-135), and Werstine (2013: 168-172). On Crane's non-dramatic manuscripts, see Bowles (2020: 287-312).

the prominent bibliographer and philologist R. B. McKerrow – author of the *Prolegomena for the Oxford Shakespeare* – asserted during his memorable Sandars Lectures of 1928:

> emendation is a risky business and […] in most cases it is best to let well, or even moderately well, alone. We are all of course far less given to reckless emendation of early texts than critics were a century ago, but I cannot help feeling that we still at times expect from writers of the Shakespearian period a standard of correctness in grammar, of clarity of thought and precision in statement that we certainly do not always find in the writers of our own day. There is, I think, no evidence whatever to justify us in any such expectation, and we must always before assuming that a text is erroneous do our utmost to interpret it as it stands (2000: 13)[2].

McKerrow's remark suggests that one should sift every scrap of evidence to try to understand the possible meaning of the text as it stands. When good sense and *divinatio* alike fail, however, one should try to find more analogues or witnesses for a chosen variant, turning to the evidence of contemporary texts.

In fact, the key to the meaning of this passage in *The Tempest* may lie in its implicit references to the common trope of the *four* ages of man – a tradition just as ubiquitous as the seven divisions from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages[3]. This division is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, specifically in the lengthy philosophical discourse of Pythagoras in Book XV (ll. 199-227), as well as in Isidore of Seville's *De natura rerum* (chap. 11) and his *Etymologiae* (Book XI, chap. 2, where *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *juventus*, and *senectus* are linked to specific humours, seasons, and elements) – works that deeply influenced medieval medicine and pedagogy. Similarly, the four stages of life are portrayed in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593; repr. 1602, 1603, and 1611), which provides emblematic descriptions of youth, adolescence, maturity, and old age, explicitly tied to humoral theory and moral qualities (cf. Miller 2015; Sears 1986: chaps. 1, 5).

While the traditions mentioned above do not appear to formulate the four ages in entirely identical ways, it is worth noting that the four ages of man are also mentioned in a text Shakespeare might well have known. In *A Margarite of America*, Thomas Lodge – the author whose *Rosalynde* inspired the plot of *As You Like It*, which itself contains the famous monologue on the cyclical nature of life and time – describes a chamber with a bed decorated with images of the four ages of man, each associated with a different humour and season. Here, the prose gives way to several lines of poetry – admittedly not of the loftier kind – that conclude with a rather predictable moralising lesson:

> O wretched man with many torments mangled,
> Since neither childe, nor youth, nor staid, nor aged,
> The stormes of wretched life may be asswaged.

[2] Interestingly, these topics were also central to McKerrow's *Prolegomena for the Oxford Shakespeare* (1939).

[3] The vitality of this *topos* is still evident in modern literature; cf., e.g., Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), a satirical reworking that structures cultural history as a progression through stages analogous to youthful beginnings, vigorous adulthood, mature refinement and senescent decline; cf. also Macpherson (1962).

> And with the Egyptian midst thy delicates
> Present the shape of death in euery member,
> To make thee know the name of all estates:
> And midst thy pompe thy nying graue remember,
> Which if thou dost, thy pride shall be repressed
> Since none before he dies is perfect blessed (Lodge 1596: sig. B3r-v)[4].

These contemporary analogues, one may object, still do not explain Prospero's lines ("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"). Why a third and not a fourth?

Once the link with the partition into four ages is established, the solution is rather simple. As the first act indicates, Miranda must be about fourteen or fifteen years old (cf. 1.2.40), and Prospero is not yet an old man, but *senectus*, with its "grave" thoughts (5.1.311), is about to come. His maturity – the third stage within a four-age model and, in fact, a *third* of the life he has lived *so far* (having lived through youth, adolescence, and maturity) – has been entirely dedicated to Miranda. Her lifespan has heretofore encompassed a third of his existence: she represents, appropriately, a third of Prospero's life.

The example provided by Lodge's *A Margarite of America* certainly contributes to validating the original reading in F, "third", by evidencing its use in a contemporary volume by an author who was known to Shakespeare. At the same time, it allows editors to avoid resorting to conjecture – a procedure that, as they know all too well, can sometimes be dangerous, if not disastrous. The case discussed so far, in fact, offers a good occasion for one final note on editorial methodology: going to great lengths to find contemporary evidence to justify a single, apparently minute variant does not equate to a waste of time. It helps us to change perspective. Of course, as W. H. Auden famously wrote, "the words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living" (1945: 49), but – *pace* post-structuralism and the "death of the author" – we do not necessarily want to project our own time and beliefs onto such words[5]. On two separate occasions, C. S. Lewis described what he believed was the right attitude towards understanding a literary work:

> The poet is not a man who asks me to look at him; he is a man who says 'look at that' and points; the more I follow the pointing of his finger the less I can possibly see of him […] To see things as the poet sees them, I must share his consciousness and not attend to it; I must look where he looks and not turn round to face him; I must make of him not a spectacle but a pair of spectacles (Lewis & Tillyard 1965: 11-12).

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[4] On this work, see Beecher & Janzen (2005), Vitkus (2011: 99-112). The four ages of the world may also have been in Shakespeare's mind at the time. Intriguingly, *The Tempest* and the first three of Thomas Heywood's "blockbuster" *Ages* plays (*Golden Age, Silver Age, Brazen Age* and the two-part *Iron Age*) were composed and staged around the same time as *The Tempest*, and the last *Ages* plays were jointly produced by the Queen Anne's Men and the King's Men; cf. Munro (2020: 128-129) and Arrell (2022: 127-142).

[5] On the "death of the author", see Barthes (1977: 142-148), Foucault (1977: 113-138), Bennett (2005). See also McKerrow's *caveat*, discussed above, regarding what we expect from "the writers of our own day" (2000: 13).

> You must, so far as in you lies, become an Achaean chief while reading Homer, a medieval knight while reading Malory, and an eighteenth-century Londoner while reading Johnson. Only thus will you be able to judge the work 'in the same spirit that its author writ' and to avoid chimerical criticism (1967: 64).

The case of this short passage from *The Tempest* is exemplary in this respect. As seen above, it is by exploring some of its contemporary analogues and their ideologies that one can examine the textual evidence and decide that no emendation is needed. The task of the textual editor requires that we sometimes look with different eyes at the text we are working on. By doing so, we will also get a glimpse of a vaster horizon. Editing requires, first of all, looking as far as possible at all the interconnected details in a text – taking into account its complexity and doing what we can to consider the full extent of the meanings engendered by such intricacy. This method is, no doubt, an effective way not only to edit but also to appreciate, and help others appreciate, a literary work.

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