

# Shakespeare in Outer Space: *Forbidden Planet* as Adaptation of *The Tempest*

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After one century of filmed Shakespeare there is no doubt that *The Tempest* is one of his plays that have always been adapted in very free ways. The countless liberties that filmmakers have taken when adapting *The Tempest* are explained by the fact that this is “one of Shakespeare’s most unrealistic plays” (Vaughan 1991: 200) and, as Jonathan Bate points out, “the play that more than any other enacts the power of imagination” (Bate 1989: 4). As if it were the character of Ariel, the spirit of imagination and fantasy ready to take whatever shape is necessary to perform any entrusted task, *The Tempest* has undergone all kinds of metamorphosis in the hands of the different directors who have approached the play. In this way, *The Tempest* has been transformed into a Western, a comedy in contemporary Greece, a drama, an underground film or a deconstructive artefact.<sup>1</sup>

Probably one of the most original and fascinating recreations of the play is the science fiction film *Forbidden Planet* directed by Fred McLeod Wilcox in 1956. In this picture we find a very particular version of *The Tempest* in which the island of Prospero becomes the planet Altair IV in the year 2257 and the sailors happen to be members of a rescue expedition that arrive in the planet in a spaceship. There they will find doctor Morbius, who lives with his daughter Altaira and Robby, his mechanical servant. At first sight the parallelism between the play and the film is clear: Morbius would be an updated Prospero and Altaira would constitute a new Miranda who, knowing no man except his father, falls in love with Commander Adams, the equivalent to Ferdinand in the film. Equally, Robby would be Ariel, Caliban would become a post-Freudian Monster of Id and in the Cook we can clearly recognise the character of Stephano. However, for most critics, aside from these parallelisms between some characters, there are no more similarities between *The Tempest* and *Forbidden Planet* (Vaughan 1991: 204). Without suggesting, of course, that the film is a literal version of *The Tempest*, it is my claim that there are a great number of elements in the film taken directly from the play, which have gone unnoticed for most critics because they appear significantly transformed.

As I have pointed out, the character of Morbius keeps unquestionable similarities with Prospero. Both are figures that, isolated from the rest of mankind, have devoted their lives to the study of some books which have granted them an extraordinary, almost supernatural, power. In both cases we also find a voluntary final renouncement to their power and knowledge. Although apparently different, the

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<sup>1</sup> These film adaptations are respectively *Yellow Sky* (William A. Wellman 1948), *Tempest* (Paul Mazursky 1982), *Age of Consent* (Michael Powell 1969) *The Tempest* (Derek Jarman 1980) and *Prospero’s Books* (Peter Greenaway 1991).

magic of Prospero and the science of Morbius are of a similar kind. The fact that Morbius is the only repository of the knowledge of an extinct superior race gives him a certain mysterious air that brings to our minds the figure of the magician. In fact, Morbius himself uses on several occasions the word “magic” to describe his creations and the character of Dr. Ostrow defines his power in the film as “Aladdin’s lamp in a physics laboratory” with the clear implication that science becomes the magic of the future.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Greenblatt has described Prospero’s magic as “a way to enact the fancies of the brain” (Greenblatt 1995: 120). This definition perfectly suits the power of Morbius since, thanks to the technology of the Krell civilisation, he will be able to give a material form to what only exists in his mind. But this Krell machine will also give shape and a local habitation to Morbius’s subconscious aggressive impulses. In this way we find the Monster of Id, a materialisation of the primitive destructive instincts of our nature which is going to be the equivalent to Caliban in *Forbidden Planet*. According to Freud, these primeval impulses manifest themselves through dreams and, in this sense, the link between the Monster and the dreams is continuously marked throughout the film. For example, the sequence of the attack of the Monster to the spaceship is alternated with some shots of Morbius sleeping and just when he wakes up the Monster disappears. In this case Prospero’s famous words “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on (...)” (IV. i. 156-57) become quite appropriate to this Calibanesque Monster of Id who literally inhabits our dreams.

In *Forbidden Planet* Morbius illustrates the duality of human beings through his double personality: he represents on one hand the rational part of the conscious mind and, on the other hand, the primitive animal instincts which are embodied by the Monster of Id. The fact that the Monster is a part of Morbius certainly reminds us of what Prospero says about Caliban in *The Tempest*: “(...) this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (V. i. 275-76). One of the interpretations of these words is that Prospero admits that Caliban’s negative force is essentially human and, consequently, constitutes a part of each one of us, including Prospero himself. Although this interpretation of *The Tempest* is not new at all (W. H. Auden, for example, supplied a similar conception in *The Sea and the Mirror*), it is true that *Forbidden Planet* seems to forecast the trend of later criticism, especially over the last thirty years, which has emphatically remarked all the negative features in the character of Prospero and have destroyed his traditional image as a benevolent magician to reveal a darker side of the character. Consequently, *Forbidden Planet* is closer to the original text of the play as it has been understood in the last decades than it may seem at first sight.

Another character in the film clearly paralleling another one from the play is Robby the Robot. Like Ariel, Robby is somewhat of a possession inherited from former inhabitants who thanks to his futuristic technology becomes a faithful servant ready to carry out any task ordered by his master. This link between Robby and Ariel is consciously underlined through a visual allusion in the first appearance of Robby in the film, when the only thing we see of him is a cloud of smoke moving along the desert at high speed, which makes us think of Ariel’s airy nature (in the play Prospero tells Ariel “thou, which art but air (...)” [V. i. 21]).

Robby also appears performing some of Caliban’s tasks in *The Tempest*. Instead of Caliban fetching wood or cleaning the cave (I. ii. 313-14), we see Robby carrying heavy isotope sheets, doing the housework or tailoring Altaira’s dresses. Similarly the Cook, a character equivalent to Stephano in *Forbidden Planet*, also takes advantage of Robby to get some whiskey. Significantly enough, these actions attributed to Robby are just those that reveal the positive side of Caliban as a servant or as a

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<sup>2</sup> We should also take into account that for the audience of Shakespeare’s times magic was, as Kenneth Muir points out, “no more impossible than nuclear physics would be to a modern audience” (Muir 1979: 187). This comparison between magic and nuclear physics proposed by Muir is very appropriate in the discussion about *Forbidden Planet*, given the special emphasis on nuclear energy as symbol of scientific progress that we see in the film.

victim. No negative behaviour is attributed to the robot and, consequently, the contrast between Robby and the Monster of Id is remarkably emphasised. While the Monster is the embodiment of Morbius's primitive savage subconscious, Robby becomes the image of his well-intentioned conscious mind who applies scientific advances to good purposes. In a certain way, *Forbidden Planet* makes explicit on screen Harry Berger Jr's interpretation of *The Tempest* according to which Caliban and Ariel come to represent "the beginning and the end of civilised man (...) the two figures are separated by the whole of human history, civilisation, and development" (Berger 1988: 21). This is exactly what there is in *Forbidden Planet*, where we have on one hand the Monster of Id, the primitive uncivilised human instincts, and on the other hand Robby, the result of the knowledge compiled throughout millions of years by the Krells.

Another character from *The Tempest* easily recognisable in *Forbidden Planet* is Altaira, who becomes a futuristic Miranda, although a little bit older (she is said to be nineteen since her relation with Adams would have been quite scandalous with the original age of Miranda in the play, that is, fifteen years). Altaira will also get frightened by the vision in dreams of the attack of the Monster to the spacecraft. This attack is the equivalent to the storm that opens the play since it is a spectacle of horror caused by the extraordinary power of Morbius. Like Miranda, Altaira feels sympathetically moved by the suffering of the soldiers and asks her father to stop it. These visitors will also get enthralled by Altaira's beauty and will attribute a divine nature to her like in *The Tempest* (I. ii. 422; V. i. 187).

This divine nature is also manifested in her power to tame wild animals, a power which has another interesting implication in the film since this control over the beasts is a gift traditionally attributed to young maidens, like, for example, in the legend of the Unicorn. In this way, the first sequence where we see Altaira taming the tiger comes to reveal her purity. She is going to lose symbolically this purity when she meets Adams, as it is subtly suggested by the fact that the same tiger is no longer gentle to her but now tries to attack her, implying then that she has lost this power which was closely linked to her chastity.

This concern with Altaira's purity is not accidental but it is reflection of the deep concern with Miranda's virginity in *The Tempest*. For some critics, mainly feminists, this concern represents a central issue in the play since, as Lorrie Jerrel Leininger points out, "the most elusive yet far reaching function of Miranda in the play involves the role of her chastity in the allegorical scheme. Most critics agree that the chastity of Miranda and Ferdinand in the fourth act symbolises all human virtue" (Leininger 1980: 289).

As I have pointed out, the storm at the beginning of *The Tempest* is transformed into an element apparently different, albeit in some ways similar. This kind of transference is quite common in *Forbidden Planet* and in fact, as Kenneth Rothwell points out, "part of the fun of watching this film lies in picking up all the connections with *The Tempest*" (Rothwell 1990: 283). Let's see some examples of these interesting transformations which have surprisingly gone unnoticed for most critics. For instance, the moment when Morbius shows the visitors the secrets of the Krells can be clearly understood as "his particular masque" (Vaughan 1991: 205). In fact, Morbius himself begins his tour along the galleries by playing a recording of the music of the Krells, emphasising in this way the theatrical and spectacular nature of the situation. For him this is like a show to delight and amaze his guests.

The usurpations of *The Tempest* also appear wisely transformed in *Forbidden Planet*. Apart from Ostrow's fatal attempt to appropriate Morbius's knowledge, which clearly parallels Stephano and Caliban's conspiracy to get Prospero's books, we have a not-so-obvious symbolical treachery equivalent to Antonio's in *The Tempest* when he expelled his brother from Milan to get his dukedom. In the film we are told that when Morbius arrived in the planet and in order to get the knowledge of the Krells he eliminated all the members of his expedition (in a way his symbolic brothers) who were

an obstacle for his thirst of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In this way Morbius becomes not only an alter-ego of Prospero but also a representation of Antonio. This fact is clearly linked to what I have said before about the tendency of twentieth-century criticism to emphasise the darker side of Prospero.

Another element of *The Tempest* apparently absent in *Forbidden Planet* is the character of Gonzalo. However, his comments in praise of the beauty of the island (II. i. 41-48) are clearly echoed in Ostrow and Farman's remarks about the extraordinary conditions of the planet and, even more interestingly, Gonzalo appears reflected in the extinct Krell civilisation. His famous speech on the republic of Utopia (II. i. 142-60) reminds us of the Krell fantasy about a perfect world free from any material ties where the power of our mind is just enough to perform any task. Gonzalo proposes:

No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil,  
No occupation; all men idle, all;

All things in common Nature should produce  
Without sweat or endeavour.  
(II. i. 149-50, 155-56)

In this case *Forbidden Planet* makes explicit what in *The Tempest* is just suggested: as the failure of the Krells demonstrates, a world like this would be condemned since it does not take into account the inherent evil of human beings. In the same way as the Krells forgot the monster that lives within each one of us, which led them to destruction, Gonzalo with his great ideals does not seem either to perceive the threatening presence of Antonio and Sebastian, who put in danger his life and the king's. With this, *Forbidden Planet* can be considered an example of what could have happened to the utopian world described by Gonzalo.

In the same way, Morbius and his Monster of Id are a representation of what could have happened if Caliban's conspiracy had succeeded and Prospero's magical power had been at the disposal of human primitive instincts. In this sense *Forbidden Planet* becomes a commentary of *The Tempest*, an alternative *Tempest* fully impregnated with the yearnings, desires and fears of the time it was made. In 1956, during the Cold War, after the nuclear holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and under the permanent threat of an atomic war between the superpowers, it was evident that a strong feeling of pessimism about the evil use of knowledge was in the atmosphere. Science and technology were no longer a means to control nature for man's own benefit, like Prospero's magic, but they had become a menace to civilisation in the hands of human brutality. While in *The Tempest*, as Merrell Knighten points out, the power is used by Prospero to order chaos (Knighten 1994: 36), in *Forbidden Planet*, as a reflection of twentieth-century savagery, this power itself provokes that chaos. As it is visually suggested in the spectacular scenes of the Krell machinery in which the characters look tiny in comparison with the extremely huge artefacts, man is such an insignificant creature that he is not ready to control the extraordinary power that technology offers him. In this way it is not strange that the film closes with Commander Adams reminding us that "we are not god".

All in all, *Forbidden Planet* constitutes a fascinating recreation of *The Tempest* that, retaining more elements from the play than may appear at first sight, represents a commentary on it which inevitably reflects the historical moment of the film. Graham Holderness points out that certain filmed adaptations of Shakespeare's plays operate simply as vehicles for the transmissions of ideology (Holderness 1985: 186). In a certain way this is also true of *Forbidden Planet* and its pacifist message. Thus, in a sense we could think of Shakespeare's works as that Krell machinery that, in

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<sup>3</sup> At the same time this can also be understood as a re-staging of Prospero's usurpation of the island and his cruelty to Caliban.

spite of the passing of time, is eternally fresh and ready to project and shape the thoughts of the countless generations who approach it and who find in it a perfect mirror for their concerns, yearnings and fears.



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