Thursday 17 May 2007. **210ENG257**

‘Fantastic projections in Renaissance texts allow underlying “realities” to be addressed’. Discuss.

‘How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, / That has such people in’t!’, exclaims Miranda in *The Tempest*[1], the admiring child expressing her wonder at Nature and its possibilities. Indeed, what is fantastic, by definition, challenges belief, appeals to imagination, and transcends the limits of reality, toward the grotesque or the sublime, the monstrous or the divine. However, as Miranda’s exclamation underlines, our world, our reality is a changeable concept: to wonder is to discover, to realise, and to modify this understanding of the world that constitutes reality. Reality is therefore not objective, but subjective, and it is more appropriate to talk about “realities”, different perceptions of the world by different individuals. As Greenblatt argues, reality is constructed, and ‘structures may be broken in pieces, the pieces altered, inverted, rearranged’[2]: it can be reconstructed, re-invented, although this is not automatic but requires labour. This discussion of the way fantasy is used in Renaissance literature to address reality will focus on three main themes: monstrosity and the supernatural; folly, carnival and subversion; and utopia. ‘The Two Inseparable Brothers’, *The Roaring Girl* and *The Tempest* will be analysed in conjunction with these concepts, but other contemporary texts such as Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* or Montaigne’s *Essais* will be used to understand the ‘Renaissance mind’.

[1] William Shakespeare. *The Tempest* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), V.i.184-185.
[2] Stephen Greenblatt. ‘Resonance and Wonder’. *Modern Literary Theory*. (Ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. London: Arnold, 2001), p.310.

Interest in monsters was widespread during the Renaissance, be it among scholars or common people. It was nothing new, since it was part of a long tradition going back to classical antiquity, with three main types of texts: scientific writing, interpretations of monstrous births as omens, and cosmographical, anthropological speculations[3]. However, during the Renaissance, there was a shift in perspective, from monsters as divine prodigies to natural wonders, from the Grotesque to the Supernatural. Monsters were shown to the public, and advertisement would take the form of the broadside ballad, such as 'The Two Inseparable Brothers', reaching a wide audience through cheaply printed leaflets and cried by street-vendors. A typical broadside:

> began with a provocative title, a schematic woodcut of the child or animal involved, and a brief description of the circumstances of its birth, while the bulk of the sheet was given over to an interpretative section, in poetry or prose, clarifying God's message in the particular instance[4].

This pattern can be seen in 'The Two Inseparable Brothers'. This is a 'true and strange description'[5], and the reader is enjoined to 'Admire the Creator in his Creatures': the monster as divine prodigy. The world, in the ballad, is limited to 'Christendome'[6], 'other Christian Lands'[7]; the monster is from Italy, a foreign land that is close enough while still retaining an exotic character, and has travelled 'Through *Germany*, through *Spain* & *France*': explicitly, it is not English, it is from outside and is now inside England, a geographical transgression mirroring the broken natural order. One of the main themes of the ballad is the opposition of Wonder and Truth, of dream and reality: it 'Makes all the

[3] Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston, 'Unnatural Conceptions: the Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England' (*Past and Present*, No.92, Aug. 1981) p.22.
[4] 'Unnatural conceptions', p.28.
[5] Martin Parker, 'The Two Inseparable Brothers' from *The Pack of Autolycus* (Ed. Hyder E. Rollins, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), in the introduction.
[6] 'The Two Inseparable Brothers', verse 1.
[7] Ibid., verse 17.

rest seeme but a dream', 'the world admires at it', 'this may much wonder win', 'this admiration breeds'[8] but 'pinch any part hee'l cry', '[...] that to ratifie this truth', 'Let admiration then suffice, / Sith theres no man that is so wise, / But of's owne wit may doubt'[9]. The ballad constructs a paradox: incredible but true. The detailed anatomical description is challenged by its monstrosity, its supernatural character. Monstrosity is awful and awesome. As Park and Daston remark, the message is that 'God shapes and alters the natural order in accordance with his pleasure, so that nature becomes a cipher, a mirror of his will'[10]. The goal of the ballad is not to explain or analyse, but to appeal to our attraction for wonder. It challenges our conception of nature and of reality.

Although the monster is presented as a divine prodigy, it is also undeniably human and within Nature. Lazarus is 'Like other men in each respect'[11]. Actually, the brothers are never called monsters in the ballad. They are both baptised, so they are both recognised as having souls, the attribute of humanity. The twins, the ballad hints, could also be seen as a parable of Christian brotherly love: they share one heart, and 'the brother beares the brother'[12]. Montaigne makes a similar point in his essay 'On a Monstrous Child'[13], where he sees the conjoined twin as a parable of unity of the kingdom. Whereas in the Middle Ages monstrosity would have been considered as a sign of God's wrath, Montaigne encourages his readers to see it as a revelation: 'Nothing is but according to [Nature], whatever it is. May this universal and natural reason drive

[8] Ibid., verses 2, 3, 4,9.
[9] Ibid., verse 7, 14, 19.
[10] 'Unnatural Conceptions', p.34.
[11] 'The Two Inseparable Brothers', verse 4.
[12] Ibid., verse 16.
[13] Michel de Montaigne, 'D'un Enfant Monstrueux', *Essais* vol.2 (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1972), Ch.XXX.

away from us the error and wonder that novelty brings us'[14]. This appeal to reason when confronted with the supernatural is a sign of the new spirit of the Renaissance. In *The Tempest*, Caliban repeatedly reclaims the humanity that the other characters deny him: to Prospero, he is 'not honoured with / a human shape'[15], 'got by the devil himself'[16], 'this thing of darkness'[17]; to Miranda he is a barbarian, a savage, 'a thing most brutish'[18]; Trinculo and Stephano keep calling him 'monster', or 'moon-calf'[19]; Sebastian and Antonio mock him as a 'fish'[20]; Alonso declares him 'a strange thing as e'er I looked on'[21]. Only Ferdinand and Gonzalo keep silent about him. Caliban asserts and assumes his own nature, his own world, which has been stolen from him: 'This island is mine'[22]. His reluctance to obey, his rebelliousness and his plot to overthrow Prospero all make him unmistakably human. His attempted rape of Miranda can even be understood: he wanted to people 'this isle with Calibans'[23], which to him is a natural impulse, not a wicked one. What is monstrous to others is natural to him. Is he then a fool, or the only true free spirit?

This inversion of values is characteristic of Carnival, when the world is turned upside down and the established order temporarily challenged. As Watson points out: 'the carnivalesque rage for excess through inversion and chaos is a necessary prelude to a

[14] 'D'un Enfant Monstrueux', p.443: 'Nous appelons contre nature ce qui advient contre la coutume; rien n'est que selon elle, quel qu'il soit. Que cette raison universelle et naturelle chasse de nous l'erreur et l'étonnement que la nouvelleté nous apporte.'
[15] *The Tempest*, I.ii.283-284.
[16] Ibid., I.ii.319.
[17] Ibid., V.i.275.
[18] Ibid, I.ii.357.
[19] Ibid, II.ii, 132.
[20] Ibid, V.i.263-267.
[21] Ibid, V.i.290.
[22] Ibid, I.ii.332
[23] Ibid, I.ii.351.

chorus of harmony [...]'[24] because by transgressing boundaries it makes unity possible. In *The Roaring Girl*, Moll Cutpurse transcends gender and class, by deliberately flouting the rules that keep men and women, aristocrats and the underworld separate, but she is useful as a mediator between them. She is a 'social monster', a hermaphrodite: as Tiffany explains, '"hermaphroditism" in a mythic sense means the agency of Hermes, the messenger or connector, combined with the motivational force of Aphrodite, or erotic love'[25], a suitable definition for Moll. On stage, she is an eccentric figure, which some perceive as monstrous: Sir Alexander sees her as 'a thing / One knows not how to name'[26]; but his son Sebastian thinks that 'Twixt lovers' hearts she's a fit instrument'[27]. She is subversive because she disguises herself, fitting the role of the "trickster" as defined by Hillman: 'all deception is more or less subversive, after all, and deception is the basic stuff of drama.'[28] In that sense, Moll as a character can be seen as an incarnation of the medieval "fool", who challenges the established order from behind his disguise. Middleton underlines this in his introduction to the play: 'For Venus being a woman passes through the play in doublet and breeches, a brave disguise and a safe one [...].'[29] The mix of coloured fabrics that he evokes also points to the "motley fool", so that any subversion in the play can be played down as a mere jest: a brave disguise indeed! Erasmus, in his *Praise of Folly*, had used the very same trick, hiding behind Folly to criticise the hegemony. Depicting the world as a theatre, he ponders what would happen

[24] Donald Gwynn Watson, 'Erasmus' Praise of Folly and the Spirit of the Carnival', *Renaissance Quarterly* (Vol.32, Autumn 1979), p. 344.
[25] Grace Tiffany, *Erotic Beasts and Social Monsters* (Neward, University of Delaware Press, 1995), p.13.
[26] Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, in *The Routledge Anthology of Renaissance Drama* (ed. Simon Barker and Hilary Hinds. London: Routledge, 2005), I.ii.128-129.
[27] *The Roaring Girl*, II.ii.205.
[28] Richard Hillman, *Shakespearean Subversion: The Trickster and the Play-text* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.7.
[29] *The Roaring Girl*, 'To the Comic Play-Readers, Venery and Laughter', p.330.

if someone pulled out the masks of the "actors": 'Woman would become man, youth an old man; kings, heroes, gods would suddenly disappear [...].'[30] The world is a theatre, and illusion sustains it. Similarly, Moll on stage is a fantastic projection of the real Moll, Mary Firth, and she is there a droll character (a man pretending to be a woman dressed as a man), not a menacing one.

Indeed, as Baston demonstrates, 'Moll's defiance is reinvented in *The Roaring Girl* in order to be contained, enervated, and eventually incorporated into the prevailing social apparatus.'[31] The real Moll was far more subversive and threatening than her stage namesake. In the play, Moll is more or less tamed: at the end, significantly, she is dressed as a woman, submitting to Sir Alexander's worldview. She remains fiercely asexual, rejecting marriage to the end. As Baston underlines, Moll's actions and words in the play 'reduce her to stereotype; they subtly undercut her political potency'[32]. In the same way, Carnival turns the world upside down, but the symmetry only reinforces the hierarchy. Hierarchies were omnipresent in the Renaissance, beginning with the fundamental one: Jacob's ladder, connecting Heaven and Earth, upon which Angels would ascend and descend[33]. Watson reminds us that Carnival was also a time of purification and of regeneration; a ritual intended to exorcise the sins of the previous year and prepare for Easter.[34] During the Renaissance, May-Fairs, morris dances and other 'feasts of misrule' became the targets of the Puritans, who saw them as pagan celebrations with an

[30] Erasme, *Eloge de la Folie* (Paris : Mille et Une Nuits, 1997), p.56.
[31] Jane Baston, 'Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion in The Roaring Girl', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* (Vol. 37, No.2, Tudor and Stuart Drama, Spring 1997), p.319.
[32] Baston, p.326.
[33] C. A. Patrides, *Premises and Motifs in Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), Ch.2 '"Ascending by degrees magnificient": Connections between Heaven and Earth', pp.31-51.
[34] Watson, pp.343-345.

ecclesiastical tinge (interestingly, the Puritans were also opposed to the theatre)[35]. These were country traditions as opposed to the urban reforms. The tableau in *The Tempest* (IV.i), depicting pagan rites of fertility and harvest, evokes such country festivals, linking the present with the ancient. In the Carnival, fantasy may challenge and question the established order, but mainly to uphold it and make it stronger, not to destroy it. Seen in that light, fantasy in the Renaissance can be seen as an ideological tool. It is not the hierarchy itself that is challenged, but the individuals in it: the abusive knight, the weak husband, or the outspoken wife.

Helgerson asserts that during the Renaissance: 'a New World *was* discovered and a new direction *was* given to European thought. In this double project, the reorientation of systematic negation had a significant and neglected part.'[36] Negating the world, imagining an alternative reality, leads to the idea of Utopia, literally "No-place", as for example in Thomas More's *Utopia*, located, as in *The Tempest*, on an island. For Foucault, Utopias 'present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces'[37], which links back to the notion of Carnival. Helgerson also argues that these anti-worlds come from dissatisfaction with the world[38]. In *The Tempest*, all these concepts can be found: the island is a surreal place, a microcosm. The play, obeying the classical unities of Time, Space and Action, intensifies the artificiality of this "non-space". Getting to the island

[35] L.G. Salingar. 'The Social Setting'. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: 2- The Age of Shakespeare* (ed. Boris Ford, London: Penguin Books, 1975), pp.33-34.
[36] Richard Helgerson. 'Inventing Noplace'. *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1982), p.103.
[37] Michel Foucault. 'Of Other Spaces'. *Diacritics* (Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring 1986), p.24.
[38] 'Inventing Noplace', p.106.

seems to involve a fantastic process: either a magical storm, or 'by Providence divine'[39]. In any case, it is reached through a spiritual, not a physical journey. Foucault stresses out that utopias act as mirrors; the fantastic projection encourages introspection, because we can see ourselves where (and as) we are not[40]. *The Tempest* deliberately plays with these notions of projection and illusion: the stage is a projection of the island, the island is a reflection of the world, and the world itself is imagined as an illusion. So the island may be seen as a reflection of the New World, of the Bahamas, with Caliban as one of the Caribs, a "cannibal". In his essay "On Cannibals", Montaigne challenges the prejudices of his time, where such natives were considered as barbarians. Montaigne instead introduces the concept of the "noble savage", who is naturally good without all the trappings of civilisation[41]. Gonzalo reuses the same arguments in Act II, scene 1, although he goes further to imagine a new Golden Age, and dismisses his utopia by calling it 'this kind of merry fooling'[42]. The island is also a miniature, idealised kingdom, where Caliban the subject is ruled and educated by Prospero the enlightened, absolute king, with Miranda a substitute for the aristocracy. It is also a projection of Jacob's Ladder, with Caliban at the bottom, representing the brute, Prospero the rising man, and Ariel the angel. The pagan ritual enacted by the spirits in Act IV, scene 1 is also an evocation of the Golden Age. The island is the stage of a multitude of plays within the play, progressively reaching out to the audience itself, who at the end is invited to join in

[39] *The Tempest*, I.ii.159.
[40] 'Of Other Spaces', p.24.
[41] Montaigne, 'Des Cannibales', *Essais*, Vol. 1, Ch.XXXI.
[42] *The Tempest*, II.1.181.

by Prospero: 'Please you, draw near'[43]. The mirror of Utopia is aimed directly at the spectator.

Beyond the invitation to introspection that lies within Utopia, however, *The Tempest* introduces ambiguities: there are negations, reflections, but also dissonances. Unlike other plays, which invite suspension of disbelief and encourage the spectator to imagine the action beyond the stage (see for instance the Chorus in *Henry V*), *The Tempest* puts forward its theatricality. By compressing time and space, it almost creates a feeling of claustrophobia. The island itself is perceived differently, depending on the beholder: to Gonzalo, 'here is everything advantageous to life', to which Antonio answers 'True, save means to live'[44]. This ambiguity extends to the characters, starting with Prospero himself, who is at the same time powerful, through his magic, but ultimately powerless in that he cannot alter minds: he cannot make Ferdinand love Miranda, shape Caliban to his liking, or change his brother, unrepentant to the end. Miranda, informed of the illusions, does not seem to be aware of them. Gonzalo appears as wise as he is foolish. All these dissonances introduce a note of chaos within the order that the island is supposed to represent. The island, 'the folly of this island', as Trinculo exclaims[45], is 'a maze trod indeed, / Through forthrights and meanders'[46], which traps the characters and the audience in its circumvolutions. Though Prospero seems in control, he might be possessed, in which case the whole ritual could be an exorcism, a rite of

[43] Ibid. V.1.319.
[44] *The Tempest*, II.1.55-56.
[45] Ibid., III.2.4.
[46] Ibid., III.3.2.

purification: 'The devil speaks in him', remarks Sebastian[47], and Prospero confesses his necromancy: 'graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers'[48]. Far from an ideal place, the island is a dystopia that must be rejected, from which everybody – including the audience, must ultimately be released.

At the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero declares: 'I'll break my staff' and 'I'll drown my book'[49], acts which seem necessary to escape from the stasis of the island. Medieval times had been dominated by the dogmas of the Church and the worldview of Aristotle, a world where Man and the Earth stood at the centre of the Universe. Monsters were God's prodigies, Folly was under a tight leash, and the only utopias where Heaven or Hell. There could only be one reality. The Renaissance was by definition a break from this period, an escape from this static way of thinking. In the real world, the Reformation was challenging the Church and breaking the bishop's staff, the physical eccentricity of the Earth was being considered, and new worlds were being discovered. Aristotle's wisdom, his 'book', could no longer be relied upon, and the literature of the Renaissance had to address these new realities, but with caution, under disguise. Fantasy allowed the author, poet or playwright to lure the audience through wonder. Projections of reality are also reflections on the world: they encourage subjectivity and create alternative realities. In time, as Montaigne had recommended, reason would follow wonder, but in this troubled

[47] Ibid., V.1.129.
[48] Ibid., V.1.48-49.
[49] *The Tempest*, V.1.54-57.

period, prudence was necessary. As Erasmus said: 'It is to fools only that the gods have given the gift of telling [the Truth] without offending'[50].

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[50] *Eloge de la Folie*, p.75: 'C'est aux fous seuls que les dieux ont accordé le don de dire [la vérité] sans offenser'.

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