Things of Darkness: Enduring Evil in Shakespeare's Late Plays

Davide Del Bello

This paper examines the workings of evil in Shakespeare's late plays – *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* – through the dual lens of the theological *mysterium iniquitatis* and Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil". Unlike the stark dramatization of wickedness in the tragedies, Shakespeare's romances present evil as at once pervasive and insubstantial, mysterious yet mundane. It operates both actively – as a persistent, enduring force – and passively – as evil that is endured, destabilizing conventional dichotomies between passivity and activity, suffering and resistance. Close analysis of key characters and narrative developments shows how Shakespeare not only foreruns Arendt's insight that evil often arises from thoughtlessness rather than malice, but also suggests that rational demystification alone falls short of containing evil's return. The endurance of evil complicates binary understandings of human responses to iniquity, suggesting that within a redemptive framework, destructive forces may paradoxically catalyze processes of reconciliation and renewal when met with critical thought and moral imagination.

Keywords: Late Plays, *mysterium iniquitatis*, demystification, Hannah Arendt, metatheatre

It is a critical truism that the depiction of iniquity in Shakespeare's late phase ventures into a subtler, more rarefied territory than in his tragedies or histories. In the Late Plays dramatized evil loses its stark contours and overwhelming gloom, compelling us instead to reckon with its more elusive dimensions. This shift diverges from the standard Elizabethan staging of evil. Early modern theatre, notorious for its unvarnished dramatization of wickedness, fed its eclectic audiences an unrelenting diet of gore: decapitations, dismemberment, cannibalism, incest, rape – a carnival of horrors that, for all its jadedness, never ceased to titillate. Shakespeare's production was hardly exempt from

these theatrical imperatives[1]. Evil seeps into his corpus through unexpected byways, inhabiting both poem and play under various guises. One might instinctively turn to the tragedies and histories for dramatic illustrations of wickedness: Iago's twisted machinations, Hamlet's derangement, Lear's blind hatred, Richard III's ruthless resolve, Titus Andronicus's perverse vengefulness. Yet it is the late plays, those enigmatic works once grouped under the contested label of "romances", that I propose offer the richest ground for probing what we may call Shakespeare's mature characterization of evil: no longer an engrossing tapestry of fiery threads, burning passions and searing acts of violence; rather, a more muted scenery, a landscape that deliberately tempers the stage's immediate sensory thrills to accommodate disparate places, distant lands, picaresque shipwrecks and improbable adventures; a performance which calls audiences to accept (and possibly reflect on) the clunky compression of time, where hours, days, and years share the same backdrop with seemingly nonchalant disregard for dramatic unity; the allegorical aesthetics of the Masque; and even the meta-theatrical – Alessandro Serpieri would say ultra-theatrical – proclivities of its language (Serpieri 2008).

This transition from the visceral immediacy of tragedies and histories – also prominent in the 1594 *Rape of Lucrece* – to the ethereal modes of Romance is no mere theatrics. Where tragedies thrust evil into the glaring spotlight of spectacle, the romances allow it to seep unobtrusively – uncovering its shallow roots in human frailty and bureaucratic inertia. The ultimate dramatization of evil, Shakespeare seems to suggest, can only emerge through forms that acknowledge our incomplete grasp of evil itself, of the "*mysterium iniquitatis*" which has long preoccupied theologians and philosophers[2]. The sylvan wilds of these

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1   Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is a prime example. Clark Hulse talked about an "aesthetic of mutilation" and noted that "even among revenge tragedies *Titus Andronicus* is especially brutal (Hulse 1979, 1). For comprehensive treatments of violence in Elizabethan and Early Modern theatre see Dessen 1984, Allard and Martin 2009, and Hiscock 2022.

2   The passage appears in the Latin Vulgate as "Nam mysterium iam operatur iniquitatis" (2 Thess. 2:7 Vulg.) and in early English translation as "For the mystery of iniquity doeth already work: only he which now withholdeth, shall let till he be taken out of the way" (2 Thess. 2:7 GNV). It is understood to refer to a mysterious, ongoing force of evil at work in the world that will ultimately

late plays serve as fitting metaphors for scenes where one might easily 'miss the forest for the trees'. What is needed is a 'double focus': one eye on the immediate psychological reality – which Shakespeare had already mastered in *Lucrece* – and another on the broader landscape of possibility that only these late plays dare explore. For if a narrative poem like *Lucrece* reveals evil's genesis in exquisite psychological detail, the late plays show how its full reaches and motives forever elude comprehension. And yet these remain woven in the common fabric of everyday life – not solely in grand displays of violence, but in the hushed moments of self-betrayal that Shakespeare had already begun to dissect in his poems, and which find their fullest, most nuanced expression towards the end of his career.

My readings of evil in the romances – necessarily selective and exploratory – revolve around two key concepts, which for the sake of brevity can be condensed into two formulas. The first is the *mysterium iniquitatis* mentioned earlier, which brackets the theological, philosophical and ethical debate around 'the problem of evil'. This mystery lies at the heart of theodicy – efforts to reconcile divine goodness with the existence of evil – and continues to inform the modern "ponerological" approaches that empirically investigate evil's origins and mechanisms[3]. While framing evil as an inscrutable mystery may seem to concede too readily to eschatological fatalism, this approach does not retreat from critical inquiry. Rather, it acknowledges the inherent lim-

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lead to the Antichrist's arrival and a final confrontation between good and evil before Christ's Second Coming. The original Greek τὸ μυστήριον τῆς ἀνομίας has been variously rendered as "the mystery of iniquity" in early modern translations (GNV; KJV) and as "the mystery of lawlessness" (ESV; NRSV) or "the secret power of lawlessness" (NIV) in contemporary versions. Today, theologians, philosophers, and literary critics explore this concept not only in terms of eschatology and theodicy but also in political theology and analyses of systemic evils like totalitarianism and societal moral decline.

3 Ponerology (the empirical study of evil) and theodicy (reconciling evil with divine benevolence) are interrelated, but they offer distinct frameworks. Though the term "ponerology" is rarely used explicitly in Shakespeare criticism, scholars like Greenblatt (1991) and van Oort (2016) may be said to use ponerological principles to probe evil's structural and psychological aspects. Others, like Cefalu (2004) and Cox (2007), focus more on theodicean questions. A clear distinction is hard to maintain, but the contrast captures the diverse critical perspectives on evil in Shakespeare, with ponerology's potential in this field remaining a goal for future research.

its of rational explanation in the face of evil's manifestations – both transcendent (*metaphysical*) and immanent (*empirical*). Within this interpretive model, the *mysterium iniquitatis* functions not as an abdication of moral responsibility or negation of human agency, but rather as a hermeneutic lens that magnifies the complex dialectic between transcendent mystery and temporal accountability – a dynamic that the romances deftly interrogate, as they set grand, cosmic malevolence against the mundane lapses of ethical imagination. These plays dramatize evil as both a *mysterium* and an immanent human failing: cosmic forces like Sycorax's lingering curses (*The Tempest*) or the bear's savage indifference (*The Winter's Tale*) embody metaphysical evil, while Leontes's self-destructive jealousy and Posthumus' misogynistic rage (*Cymbeline*) root wrongdoing in empirical moral collapse. At the same time, the romances resist fatalism by intertwining these dimensions. Evil's origins may elude understanding, yet its effects demand ethical reckoning and repair. Prospero's magic (transcendent) sets the stage for reconciliation, but human acts of penitence and forgiveness (empirical) ultimately redeem. Emphasis on dull ethical failures as the breeding ground for evil resonates with the second key concept informing my analysis: Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil" (*die Banalität des Bösen*). Coined in her 1963 analysis of Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann and expanded upon in her later moral philosophy, the phrase has been read to convey the idea that evildoing often stems not from diabolical malice but from a prosaic "inability to think" (*Gedankenlosigkeit*, Arendt 1963, 57) – particularly Eichmann's striking "inability […] to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (49). The "word-and-thought-defying banality of evil" (252) crystallizes a broader phenomenon: the way evil operates less through demonic will or profound malice, than through shallow, automated actions divorced from substantive moral reflection. In her subsequent writing, especially *The Life of the Mind* (1978), Arendt explored how this banality stems not from stupidity but from what she called "absence of thinking" – a failure to engage in genuine dialogue with oneself[4]. This dialectic between evil as metaphysical mystery

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4   Both books were originally written in English (as Arendt was living in the USA) and later translated into German. I use the German *Gedankenlosigkeit* because Mary McCarthy pointed out that 'thoughtlessness' did not capture the nu-

and evil as bureaucratic banality offers a productive model for examining how Shakespeare's romances navigate between supernatural and humdrum forms of wrongdoing, between cosmic villainy and the stock failures of moral imagination that characterize so many of their antagonists. The plays dramatize evil's banality, as characters like Cloten (*Cymbeline*) or Leontes wreak destruction through petty viciousness born of truncated self-understanding. Yet significantly, even the most reflective figures in the plays, those who urgently pore over their own motives, are unaffected – witness Posthumus' self-lacerating anguish or Prospero's conflicted machinations of vengeance. Thinking too narrowly, the plays suggest, may breed its own kind of ethical near-sightedness. Between the *mysterium* and the banal, Shakespeare's romances open up vital questions around the wellsprings of evil and the possibilities and limits of moral reckoning. *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* share key preoccupations and motifs, yet stage distinctive visions of malevolence and the thorny path to its redress.

Black villainy, soft flattery

Shakespeare's romances challenge our notions of how evil takes dramatic form. Even in its fragmented state, Pericles's episodic setup mirrors the dispersed, iterative nature of evil. Rather than relying on sensational villainy or wily scheming, *Pericles* uses a layered, quasi-medieval framing that both highlights and distances moral corruption. At the outset, the "old song" of Pericles's misadventures is conjured on stage by a revenant poet (Gower) who claims to have come back from the dead (though not to actual life) to offer his tale as a possible restorative, with the aim "to make men glorious" (I.0.9)[5]. The moral lesson is clear: Pericles's endurance of many trials will test and strengthen the audience's mettle in the face of life's inevitable adversities, in view of a "glory" to be achieved either on this earth or

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ance of the term Arendt intended. The essential question was whether the act of thinking – examining events regardless of results or specific content – could condition people to refrain from evil. (Arendt 1978, 4-5; 14)

5   All parenthetical Act and Scene references in each section of this paper correspond to the Arden edition of the play under discussion, as listed in the references, unless otherwise noted.

beyond. The tenor of the scene is that of miracle plays, with hints to the Lenten liturgy (ashes, ember days) and a purposeful use of archaic language (holy hales) and Latin lore. Gower himself, who wishes he could live, acts as a temporally distant but spatially close reminder of life's fragility: a *memento mori* of sort that comes to engage and quite possibly challenge the "riper wit" of his Renaissance audience. We should note that, as "latter times" people, the members of this audience are explicitly juxtaposed to the "olden" customs, possibly also the superstitions, evoked by Gower, to which they are now implicitly said to be immune. The contrast is meaningful, because it also projects the story onto the historically charged 16th century stage where the ethical narratives and the theodicies of Protestant (Latter-day) modernity and Catholic tradition compete. No sooner has Gower taken us to Antioch than we are faced with an "evil", Gower chides, that "should be done by none" (I.0.28), and it is with the scandalous backdrop of incest that the long chain of trials facing Pericles, but also his wife Thaisa and daughter Marina begins. The whole play is a tableau-like dramatization of endurance against fate – Hamlet's "outrageous fortune" given lurid new shape. If, as critics have suggested, Hamlet's dithering anticipates the qualms of modernity, Pericles may be said to offer a distinctive response to modern anxieties by presenting evil less as an unfathomable metaphysical vertigo – the kind that paralyzed Hamlet's will – than as a phenomenon whose extensive reach across the landscapes of human experience belies its tenuous ontological foundations. The reframing of evil's nature, both thematic and formal, deserves closer examination in select passages of the play.

Antiochus's riddle – "I am no viper, yet I feed / On mother's flesh which did me breed" (I.i.65-66) – masks iniquity with rhetorical paradox only to reveal it as a hollow, human transgression rather than an unfathomable mystery. Pericles's reaction to Antioch's "foul incest" marks how *Pericles* stages evil less as a metaphysical abyss than as a threadbare force. His theodicean protest – "O, you powers […] Why cloud they not their sights perpetually / If this be true?" (I.i.73-76) – strongly echoes the traditional question of why heaven tolerates evil. But the play persistently demystifies that quality of evil, whether through Antiochus's easily unravelled riddling, Dionyza's thwarted attempt to murder Marina, or the brothel-keepers' venality. Even Cleon's complaint that "heaven slumber while their creatures want"

(I.iv.16) veers from cosmic indictment toward immediate, practical concerns about suffering. In this way, *Pericles* anticipates what Arendt would later call the "banality of evil": for all their disorienting ubiquity and formidable excesses, evil's tendrils in this play sprawl wide but fail to root metaphysically. What we encounter are shallow depths – a paradox that captures the Arendtian representation of evil in *Pericles*, where iniquity's reach is simultaneously vast and insubstantial. Radical evil this is not[6]: it is as if, having plunged the mental depths of malevolent introspection, Shakespeare had re-emerged to an outer scenery of worldly perils; a landscape tinged with the allegorical features of chivalric quests – of travels and travails, temptations and trials, violence and vice – a drama that, unexpectedly, is morally, if not literally, familiar to its audience. The dangers (*pericula*) prince Pericles's story incurs, be they human or natural, resonate with our experiential (*experiri*) history as onlookers. Shakespeare's romance plays have been found wanting in realism, a feature that is instead readily praised as a virtue of the tragedies and the histories. But dramatic realism is obviously a contentious notion, and the propensity to label the staging of graphic violence or the rhetoric of bleak brutality as truer to life than the staging of comedies or romances is at the very least dubious. Comedies and romances do stage situations that are true to life. The enduring and endurance of evil imagined in a romance like *Pericles* ring true; the play's episodic structure may lack the stark formal economy of classical drama but is congenial to the sprawling developments / reaches of experienced life, which, like Pericles, knows times of healing and redress, opportunities for reconciliation and redemption. As hinted above, Serpieri used the term "ultra-theatre" in reference to Shakespeare's romance plays, to describe what he sees as a "progressive distancing of the playwright's gaze from the first-hand rendering of turbulent action" via "a never-ending series of illusionistic perspectives" (Serpieri 2008, 38). For him this occurs in *The Tempest* foremost, via the pervasive and demiurgic gaze of Prospero, who still fails to achieve moral closure and gives up his own panoptic power.

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6   Arendt revised her view on evil's nature after the Eichmann trial. While she initially characterized evil as "radical" in the context of totalitarian atrocities, her controversial "banality of evil" observation led her to reconsider. In her unfinished *Life of the Mind* (1978), she developed this latter concept, which partly aligns with the Patristic view of evil as privation rather than an ontological force.

But to a different degree we also find meta- and ultra-theatre in *Pericles*, via Gower who acts as the ordainer of events dictated by Fate. By foreclosing all pretense to realism and consciously rehashing the outdated plots, themes and motifs of romance, Shakespeare's late plays instantiate an ultra-realist aesthetics, a sort of double take on the very real existence of suffering and evil previously explored and exploded in the tragedies. Following Serpieri's lead, we would propose that a signal aim of such ultra-realist aesthetics is to trace the meanderings of iniquity, its manifold existential "visitations", yet via a distant, reflective lens and a broader, wide-angle scope. Such ultra-realist lens makes it possible for characters (Pericles, Marina, Thaisa) and narrator (Gower) to tell of the reoccurrence – predictable but always disconcerting in its outcomes and mystifying in its reasons – of "actions blacker than the night" (I.i.136) without being compromised by the outrage of their force, stunned by their graphic horrors, or altogether dragged deep down into their mire. As highly choreographed and self-contained performances, both the initial riddle contest at Antioch and the tilting match in Pentapolis exemplify how the play's meta-theatrical framework serves to simultaneously contain and expose evil's presumptuous claims to metaphysical depth. When Antiochus compares Pericles's task to the labours of Hercules in Hesperus's Garden (I.i.27-28), the *hortus conclusus* topos does more than merely conflate classical and biblical imagery – it strategically deploys allegory to reveal how evil's apparent mysteries mask more prosaic realities. The garden's guardian dragon, a terrifying archetype of threshold-keeping in the Hesperides myth, is diminished in Antiochus's riddle to mere rhetorical ornament – its ostensibly threatening presence dissolving under scrutiny, much like the riddle's own hollow pretensions to inscrutable mystery. This deliberate deflation of mythological *gravitas* serves the play's broader strategy of exposing evil's claims to metaphysical depth. Similarly, the tilting contest, with its deliberately archaic pageantry and ritualistic Matachin movements, frames human encounters with evil not as metaphysically charged battles but as stylized tableaux whose very formality underscores their constructed status. That Pericles prevails despite his rusty armor, bearing the impress "In hac spe vivo" (II.ii.43), suggests how hope – defined theologically as "the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1) – operates by seeing through evil's ordinary mystifications.

Viperous slander, lingering poisons

If *Pericles* strips evil of metaphysical grandeur, *Cymbeline* exposes its viral spread through language itself. Evil slithers its way into Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* in the guise of poison, both as a potion that causes physical illness or death and, more pervasively, as toxic language, harmful to the moral or psychological integrity of individuals, of households and of the body politic. Cymbeline's second wife, an unnamed Queen, is the play's prominent *empoisoness*, determined to use Doctor Cornelius's "poisonous compounds" (I.v.8) to her bitter ends. Early in the play, when questioned by Cornelius about her intents with the drugs she requested of him, the Queen claims she needs them for her "confections", compounds whose "several virtues and effects" (I.v.23) she wishes to try. The lexicon is that of early science, with explicit reference to animal testing, so much so that in the Queen's stated aim to "amplify [her] judgement in / Other conclusions" (I.v.17) critics have discerned dismissive allusions to the Baconian augmentation of science via controlled experiments (Shakespeare 2017). Doctor Cornelius, rebuked for thinking her "devilish", warns her of the side-effects, physical and moral: the danger of contamination and a hardened heart.

> QUEEN
> I will try the forces
> Of these thy compounds on such creatures as
> We count not worth the hanging – but none
> Human –
> To try the vigour of them and apply
> Allayments to their act, and by them gather
> Their several virtues and effects.
> CORNELIUS
> Your highness
> Shall from this practice but make hard your heart.
> Besides, the seeing these effects will be
> Both noisome and infectious.
> (*Cymbeline*, I.v.18-26)

Poison "lingers" in the play in many forms. Posthumus becomes Cymbeline's moral bane, but he is also banished for his literal tainting of the royal blood line in his pursuit of Innogen: "Thou'rt poison

to my blood" (I.i.129). Iachimo provides a lurid description of the "diseased ventures" of Italian brothels, whose venereal rottenness "as well might poison poison" (I.vi.122-28). Posthumus's letter instructs Pisanio to kill Innogen for her supposed breach, provided Pisanio's own faith has not been "tainted" by her conjugal infidelity (III.iv.26). And Sicilius Leonatus, appearing to his son Posthumus in his sleep, chides him for letting Iachimo "taint his nobler heart and brain with needless jealousy" (V.iv.48-49). The extent of corruption – individual, social, political – brought about by noxious language is summed up in a telling aside by Pisanio, for whom "slander […] out-venoms all the worms of the Nile" (III.iv.35):

> Pisanio [*aside*]
> What shall I need to draw my sword?
> The paper Hath cut her throat already. No, 'tis slander,
> Whose edge is sharper than the sword, whose tongue
> Out-venoms all the worms of Nile, whose breath
> Rides on the posting winds and doth belie
> All corners of the world. Kings, queens and states,
> Maids, matrons, nay the secrets of the grave
> This viperous slander enters.
> (*Cymbeline*, III.iv.33-39)

Malicious gossip cuts across all social ranks and polities in a pervasive reach that defiles "All corners of the world". And the play provides multiple instances of this reach, most notably in the hardships of Innogen, the target of the Queen's venomous machinations; a victim of Iachimo's voyeuristic lust and ruthless muckraking; the object of Cloten's rapist fantasies. Since she is synecdochically associated with Britain as a nation (Posthumus is said to have "forgot Britain", I.vi.112), all real or imagined attempts to violate her or smear her reputation have long been read as "the proleptic penetration of Britain by Latin and by Roman culture" (Kerrigan 2008, 64). Accordingly, "not-fearing Britain" (II.iv.19) is repeatedly set up against "drug-damned Italy" (III.iv.15). Italian women – "the shes of Italy" (I.iii.29); "the jay[s] of Italy" (III.iv.49) in Innogen's disparaging words – and Italian men partaking of the "Romish stew" (I.vi.151) are pointed out as equal symptoms of unredeemable decadence. Shakespeare intentionally rehashes contemporary bias against Italy as the ultimate seat and site of evildoing. But the

Popish straw-man is staged only to show that the contrast between the two countries is surreptitious, for Britain's own Queen is in fact the master *empoisoness*, even if her much vaunted arts eventually come to nothing. Like the venom of slander, the Queen's poison spreads out, but fails to seep through. Its shallow action lacks potency and its threat ends with the Queen's fateful – yet bathetic – demise.

The play's resolution demotes evildoing from metaphysical force to contingency. Iachimo's pardon – "The malice towards you to forgive you. Live, / And deal with others better" (V.v.418-19) – suggests that evil loses its hold when met with performative acts of reconciliation. Likewise, the abrupt cessation of war with Rome implies that political conflicts, often shrouded in the aura of impenetrable historical or ideological necessity, can instead collapse into a practical, interest-driven negotiation. This is not to suggest that the "fierce abridgment" (V.v.381) of strife trivializes the depth of suffering evil produces – evil persists in the play's world: it endures and must be endured. It rather implies that evil's power is largely derivative and contingent: an insight long explored in the theological debates of Western theodicy, notably on the scriptural *mysterium iniquitatis* mentioned earlier, which grapple with evil's apparent inscrutability even as they deny it any independent, transcendent essence. In more overtly political terms, the *translatio imperii* motif embedded in Cymbeline's final decision over the tribute to Rome attests to the ongoing presence of evil. Yet the swift and unexpectedly easy resolutions – "Never was a war did cease, / Ere bloody hands were washed, with such a peace" (V.v.483-84) – remind us that what looks like a grand, intractable struggle may be but a passing episode in the shifting patterns of human history and, from a theological perspective, in divine providence.

This demystification of evil's supposed grandeur extends into the play's treatment of gender and power. The Queen's scheming, initially impressive in its cunning, ultimately proves an illusion. Hastily dismissed by *Cymbeline* as "naught" (V.v.270), she becomes an unwitting agent of the final joyful reunion, thereby exposing the instability of her supposed command over life and death. Conversely, Innogen's empowerment comes via the unfashionable paths of constancy, a humility that facilitates both familial and national reconciliation. The anticipated threat of the "villain mountaineers" (IV.ii.71), follows a similar pattern, as these "rustic" men turn out to be agents of restoration rather than

corruption. Confronted with the encroaching forces of evil that shadow Shakespeare's late romances, the mountain-dwelling princes of *Cymbeline* behave with a steadfast moral dignity that transcends their uncouth upbringing. Removed from the artifices of courtly life and its hidden traps, they acquire virtues honed in the rough crucible of nature, where survival depends on courage, honesty, and resourcefulness. In this elemental classroom, deeds, not titles, reveal who a person truly is. Thus, their unadorned moral sentiment – shaped by contact with the earth's seasons and the raw struggle for sustenance – functions as a subtle yet forceful rebuttal to the notion that moral refinement flows solely from aristocratic breeding. Rather, the brothers' innate decency (III.iii.79) is cultivated through the straightforward demands of their rural existence, forging an ethic of robust mercy that does not falter when confronted by cruelty. We see this virtue come to the fore in their handling of evil: where courtly conspiracies would confound more delicate souls, they stand firm and act decisively, countering malign intentions with strength, insight, and a sense of justice. At the same time, their mourning the presumed dead with tenderness, as in the "wench-like words" of Arviragus (IV.ii.229), or via the imaginative ritual of strewing flowers and singing elegiac songs, imply that moral worth emerges where moral imagination meets lived experience. In doing so, the play affirms that the bedrock of goodness resides not in one's sex or in lofty birth, but in the patient cultivation of humane instincts – those which, born of rustic necessity and tempered by sorrow, can rise, however humbly, to meet the darkness and help dispel it.

This same logic applies to Cloten's fate. Guiderius's swift and utilitarian neutralization of this ostensible threat demonstrates how seemingly metaphysical menace can dissolve under decisive pragmatic intervention. His calculated intervention manifests not an eruption of metaphysical malevolence but an unmediated response to imminent threat, standing in marked contrast to the elaborate, self-conscious displays of power that characterize tyrannical authority both within and beyond Shakespeare's corpus. Such theatrical displays of power, exemplified by the severed heads adorning Lud's Town and their analogues in *Pericles*, reveal evil's fundamental anxiety about its own transience while exposing its compensatory reliance on spectacle to mask an underlying absence of metaphysical substance. The interplay between death, ritual, and renewal further contributes to

evil's gradual exposure as a shallow construct. The false funeral for Innogen/Fidelio and the rites performed by Guiderius and Arviragus (IV.ii.257-80) serve not only as plot devices but as meditations on evil's ephemerality. Arviragus's reflections on flowers, echoing passages in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, invoke the tradition of pastoral elegy. These forms both acknowledge loss and resist the notion that evil's reach is deep. As Warren notes, "the language and rhythms convey a haunting impression that the body is itself becoming a part of the natural world" (Shakespeare 1998, 24) – yet this dissolution into nature is temporary, much like the Queen's supposedly potent poisons that ultimately fail to secure enduring harm. Nature's ongoing processes – signified by the robin, the blossoms, and the rhythms of the season – persist indifferent to human efforts to invest death or evil with cosmic significance. The ritual elements of the play's conclusion – prophecies, tablets, offerings, and the reconciliation with Rome – further frame evil as something that can be addressed, if not fully comprehended, through human institutions. The very formality of these proceedings, with their emphasis on "crooked smokes" rising to divine nostrils and peace ratified in Jupiter's temple, suggests that evil's *mysterium* can be addressed in the very human and very real modes of policy and liturgy, even as its workings remain ultimately opaque to finite understanding and impervious to definitive treatment. This may very well be the dramatic device that upholds this and later Shakespearean plays: a dynamic tension between the alternating allures of demystification and mystification, between the exposure and the unveiling of evil's shallow ways – a much needed act of Arendtian thinking that attests to our human ability for repair and redress – and evil's nagging persistence, which the human daily experience of suffering, pain and death must acknowledge.

The same tension is evident in the quick resolutions and smooth closures of *Cymbeline*'s final act, which seem suspiciously easy. Coupled with the play's emphasis on misrecognition and revelation, such resolutions hint that the underlying conditions that breed evil may still persist, partially concealed in the folds of social order and hierarchy, even in its apparent defeat. Questions of legitimacy and recognition brought about by the play suggest as much. Innogen's warning that "Men's vows are women's traitors" (III.iv.54-57) comes as a reminder that evil may lurk, entrenched in the long-standing institutions of

patriarchy and empire, exerting its power well beyond the contingent remit of malevolent individuals. Yet to reduce Shakespeare's late plays to mere dramatizations of social inequality or psychic malaise is equally misguided. *Cymbeline*, like other romances, insists that there is a dimension of human life and moral experience – call it the numinous or the spiritual – that resists purely materialistic readings. Even as the play strips evil of its metaphysical pretensions, it admits that fully transcending evil's mystery lies beyond human reason. The soothsayer's cryptic pronouncements and Jupiter's tablet suggest that confronting evil involves not only rational judgment but an openness to forms of knowledge that dwell at the limits of reason: modes of understanding – of "standing under" or "in the midst" of evil deeds – that both inhabit and transcend human initiative and thought[7]. *The Winter's Tale* extends this insight through its more explicit treatment of faith and redemption, where Leontes's "fond jealousies" will require not merely resolve but soul-searching and personal transformation across time. *Cymbeline*'s episodic progression allows for evil's gradual exposure through geographic dispersion – from court intrigue to wilderness exile. *The Winter's Tale*'s will use temporal distance – its notorious sixteen-year gap – to suggest a more radical confrontation with time's transformative power in the face of iniquity.

Fond jealousies, heavy matters

Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* stages a peculiar form of evil that arises less from grand villainy than from the relentless corrosion of trust and reason. The hazy boundaries of evil retold and evil experienced, or the narrative of exceptional malevolence and the everyday experience of it, are at the centre of *The Winter's Tale*, that self-reflective "sad tale's best for winter […] of sprites and goblins" (II.i.25-28) which a story-telling child – doomed Mamilius – is only allowed to begin. His hackneyed story of a man "dwelt by a churchyard" is brutally cut off by Leontes "whose real-life story of mysterious deaths, lingering be-

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7   The English verb "understand" carries a complex etymological heritage. While its Old English root *understandan* clearly contains "under" and "stand", scholars debate whether it emerged from standing under, among, or before something. The possible implied link between intellectual grasp and endurance in uncertainty remains compelling. (*OED*, Etymology)

side graves and reanimations, now begins" (Shakespeare 2014b, 189). From the outset, Shakespeare invites us to witness how a seemingly commonplace feeling – jealousy – curdles into violence, aligning with the pattern of *Pericles*: evil often emerges through ordinary impulses that turn monstrous under fear and suspicion. The core theme is one of irrational jealousy, that "green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on" in Iago's warning to Othello (*Othello*, III.iii.168-69), the same "green-eyed jealousy" (*The Merchant of Venice*, III.ii.110) Portia was learning to let go in her ecstatic abandon to actual love for Bassanio. Leontes's self-feeding account of jealousy against his wife Hermione and his childhood friend Polixenes flares up early on in the play and quickly festers: "an infection of [his] brains" causing distress, suffering, and death. In an outburst of imagined violence, Leontes threatens to burn both mother and her newborn baby (Perdita) at the stake, or even "dash out" the child's brains with his bare hands:

> Leontes
> [to Antigonous] If thou refuse,
> And wilt encounter with my wrath, say so;
> The bastard brains with these my proper hands
> Shall I dash out. Go, take it to the fire,
> For thou set'st on thy wife.
> (*The Winter's Tale*, II.iii.136-39)

Leontes's contorted soliloquy in Act I gives us a measure of the overwrought state of his soul[8]. The notoriously obscure lines reflect on – or possibly give vent to – the unsettling reaches of "Affection", Leontes' provisional label for naming the cause of his sudden distress. It comes as no surprise that the conflated senses of "Affection" should be far from transparent[9]. If anything, Leontes's speech short-circuits

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8 Early modern definitions of "mind" cover semantic branches that its current equivalent has largely cut off, including aspects of volition, spirit, and moral character. Hence my deliberate choice of "soul" here (*OED* sense II.iii.15).

9 Pitcher (Shakespeare 2014b, 40) describes these as "the most obscure lines in Shakespeare". He also argues that in the play, "affection" – the presumed addressee of Leontes's soliloquy – is a key word with varied meanings, including deep fraternal love, overwhelming sexual desire, the power of the mind, intense emotional longing, and disposition (147, n. 24). See I.ii.137-46; IV.iv.384; 485-86; V.i.219; V.ii.36; 100, and IV.iv.425 with Pitcher's introduction (39-42).

the semantic gamut covered by such vague a term as affection (as both familial love for his "collop" Mamilius and *erotic* attachment to his wife) with the "infection" of mind (I.ii.145) he claims he has been tainted with as an "effect" of adultery. Shakespeare's layering of senses around the affection/infection binary is a major core of meaning-making in the play, giving multiple dramatic utterances to an emotional tension that is potentially both active and passive, either *in bono* (that is active cultivation or passive acceptance of feeling and emotions), or *in malo* (actively destructive force, or passive resignation to fate or forces, instinctual, cultural, social that lie beyond one's sphere of influence)[10]. Leontes's affection is quite unlike the mild fondness, tender or "favourable disposition" the word now usually conveys (*OED* sense II.8). It is a controlling emotion, taking over "beyond commission", a violent passion that seizes and "stabs". Affection strikes at the heart of one's being ("stabs the centre"): it pierces through the hazy domains of lust (as an instinct to "co-join with", which would result in offspring) and desire (an "unreal", transcendent communication with one's dreams and what is yet to come to fruition, which would "fellow nothing"). By doing so, affection engenders infection and disease, an "abnormal state" of body and mind of which Hermione herself has fallen victim[11]. The final "And / And / And" anaphora servers well to convey the piling up of emotions and the irresistible spread of infection:

> LEONTES
> Sweet villain,
> Most dearest, my collop! Can thy dam? May't be
> Affection? – Thy intention stabs the centre,
> Thou dost make possible things not so held,
> Communicat'st with dreams – how can this be? –
> With what's unreal thou coactive art,

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10   Affect studies are obviously well placed to shed light on the dynamics of affection/infection in the play, with the proviso that ideological underpinnings of affect theory may more readily align with a discussion of the passive, mechanical entanglements of affect. For a perceptive discussion of evil as a form of sinful contamination see Parvini (2018, 269).

11   *OED* sense II.7. The conflation of affection with infection mirrors the blending of sin and sickness – a point Leontes later echoes about Hermione: "Were my wife's liver / Infected as her life, she would not live / The running of one glass" (I.ii.302-04).

> And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent
> Thou mayst co-join with something, and thou dost,
> And that beyond commission, and I find it,
> And that to the infection of my brains
> And hard'ning of my brows.
> (*The Winter's Tale*, I.ii.136-46)

Leontes's experience of coexisting emotions is, ultimately, an experience of the tangle of good and evil that is human life. His all-consuming jealousy can be traced to his unsettled concept of "Affection". In Act I, he grapples with an amorphous passion for Hermione, Polixenes, and their child Mamilius – both a familial bond and an erotic or possessive impulse. He deploys the same word, "Affection," to denote a suspected "infection" of his brain (I.ii.145). Shakespeare's conflation of these terms shows how quickly love and trust can invert into suspicion, which tarnishes moral judgment. Leontes's evocative speech – "Affection? – Thy intention stabs the centre […] And that to the infection of my brains" (I.ii.136-146) – juxtaposes creative potential ("co-join with something") with diseased imagination. This duality captures the working of the play's evil: a generative force (affection) twisted into self-destructive paranoia (infection). Leontes's paroxysm triggers real harm: he threatens to burn Hermione and their newborn daughter at the stake or "dash out" the child's brains with his bare hands (II.iii.136-39). His frenzy colours every relationship, implicating friends like Camillo, who becomes a "hovering temporizer" merely for seeing "good and evil" at once (I.ii.300-01). These outbursts recall the "incest riddle" in *Pericles*: in both plays, Shakespeare shows how the seeds of evil – incest, jealousy – fester when cloaked in murky rhetoric. But whereas *Pericles* demystifies wrongdoing by exposing its shallowness from the start, *The Winter's Tale* immerses us in the escalating folly of Leontes's mind. His unbalanced "diseased opinion" (I.ii.295) latches onto trivial "notes infallible" of wrongdoing, forging a warped logic that scorns all evidence to the contrary. Leontes's rhetorical strategies highlight how easily fear overrides sense. In a barrage of insistent questions – "Is whispering nothing? Is leaning cheek to cheek? […] Is this nothing?" (I.ii.283-90) – he insists these minor gestures prove Hermione's guilt. Shakespeare deploys a device akin to *apodioxis*,

a rhetorical figure of scornful rejection which "chases away" or dismisses an opposing view by sidestepping shared knowledge (*apodixis*, in fact) in favour of literal sophistry[12]:

> Leontes
> Is whispering nothing?
> Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?
> Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career
> Of laughter with a sigh? – A note infallible
> Of breaking honesty. Horsing foot on foot?
> Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?
> Hours, minutes? Noon, midnight? And all eyes
> Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,
> That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?
> Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,
> The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
> My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
> If this be nothing.
> (*The Winter's Tale*, I.ii.283-94)

By repeating the word "nothing," Leontes paradoxically escalates the importance of trifles until they eclipse everything else: "Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing" (I.ii.290). If Hermione's supposed adultery is "nothing", then Sicilia, Bohemia, and indeed reality itself must also be null – a logical contortion that ironically cements his erroneous conviction. This literal-minded obsession recalls the Pauline warning that "the letter killeth" (2 Corinthians 3:6). For Leontes, external signs – hand-touching, laughter, "meeting noses" – become rigid "letters" of proof, killing the spirit of empathy and faith that might have rescued him from error. Leontes's madness sets in motion "heavy matters, heavy matters" (III.iii.109): a lost daughter, a dead son, a consort thought to have perished, a loyal friend torn to pieces by a bear, a whole crew perished in a harrowing storm at sea (III.iii.85-99). Even Paulina, who heroically defies Leontes, temporarily succumbs: her impassioned announcement of Hermione's death uses similarly gruesome imagery. The tone of her rhetorical questions

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12   The *apodixis/apodioxis* pun opens up an intriguing byway into issues of knowledge, wisdom and common sense that would be relevant to Shakespeare's dramatization of good and evil but must be left unexplored here.

is apparently one of challenge and sarcasm, but in their visual intensity, they may also be said to partake of the wider infection propagated by Leontes, to which not even Paulina is entirely immune.

> Paulina
> What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
> What wheels, racks, fires? What flaying, boiling
> In leads or oils? What old or newer torture
> Must I receive,
> (*The Winter's Tale*, III.ii.172-75)

Once unleashed, this ethos of cruelty infects speech, dragging the community into a shared paranoia: Antigonus, for instance, muses that if Hermione truly were unfaithful, he would "geld"[13] his own daughters to avoid "false generations" (II.i.143-49). His lurid threat conflates bodily harm with moral purification – echoing Leontes' puritanical flames (II.iii.136-39). Nor is violent language limited to Leontes and his court. Polixenes's blood turns to "an infected jelly" (I.ii.413) when he hears of Leontes' jealousy and laments that people will shun him "worse than the great'st infection / That e'er was heard or read" (I.ii.418-19). Later in the play, Polixenes threatens the helpless Shepherds "with divers deaths in death" (V.i.201), a *mise-en-abyme* of bodily torments which promises infinitely regressing, excruciating suffering. The shift to Bohemia's pastoral setting initially promises relief from Sicilia's claustrophobic suspicions, but the spectre of evil persists. The "satyrs' dance", though outwardly joyful, signals a primal, Dionysian energy that might veer toward chaos if unchecked. Shakespeare's portrayal of the shepherds likewise complicates the notion of a perfect pastoral: the Old Shepherd initially weighs how Perdita might profit his family, while his son (the "Clown") tries to reckon with the grim necessity of burying Antigonus's remains. These figures reflect an earthy pragmatism that is neither purely good nor evil; rather, they inhabit the same moral continuum where fear and opportunism can feed destructive choices. Into this mosaic of infected minds and tragic consequences enters Autolycus, a roguish trickster whose name links him to the cunning "lone wolf" of myth. He pilfers and lies, yet never aspires to the

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13   Gelding usually refers to the castration of male animals or men (*OED* sense 1.a).

catastrophic harm caused by Leontes's blind wrath. In self-mock-
ing candour, he calls himself a "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles"
(IV.iii.26), implicating only petty larceny, not tragic betrayal.

Where Leontes's jealousy metastasizes into cosmic dread, Au-
tolycus's evil flourishes in the cracks of everyday thoughtlessness.
Shakespeare thus draws a contrast between moral flaws that remain
small-scale – grounded in opportunism or self-awareness – and those
that swell into a tyranny of the "letter", refusing any introspection.
Autolycus's presence complicates the categories of good and evil.
His manipulations do not stem from cruelty but from a self-forgiving
acceptance of his own failings – an outlook diametrically opposed
to Leontes's righteous indignation. This suggests that evil in *The
Winter's Tale*, as in *Pericles*, often hinges on the refusal to acknowl-
edge human frailty. Leontes tries to eradicate any possible taint in
his court through violence, and Autolycus glides along with a shrug,
acknowledging his roguery yet avoiding true malice. Yet the play's
most devastating critique of evil emerges not in these male figures
but in the silent, spectral suffering of Hermione – a shift from moral
hypocrisy to the systemic erasure of female agency[14]. Her collapse
during the trial (III.ii.144) is not merely a bodily ailment but a vis-
ceral embodiment of the play's central evil: the annihilation of her
voice and autonomy through slander. Leontes' jealousy, framed as
an "infection" of the mind (I.ii.145), metastasizes into a literal and
figurative unravelling of familial and political order, leaving Hermio-
ne's "death" as both consequence and indictment. And her eventual
resurrection complicates this narrative of evil: her silence and stasis
become a rebuke to Leontes's destructive certainty, transforming her
"loss" into an interstice where grace is possible. Unlike the overt vil-
lainy of Iachimo or Antonio in other romances, Hermione's ordeal re-
veals evil as a structural force – one that demands not just individual
repentance (Leontes's grief) but collective reparation, a re-weaving
of bonds severed by distrust. In this way, Shakespeare contrasts the
destructiveness of rigid moralism with the redemptive potential of
soft resilience – a tension that redefines evil not as mere malice but
as the violent denial of humanity itself. Ultimately, *The Winter's Tale*
resolves in a performance of renewal. Lost Perdita returns, Hermione

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14   Altman speaks of Leontes' "reification" of Hermione (2023, 152-53).

reappears in a moment of near-miraculous resurrection, and Leontes, chastened, must face the weight of his actions.

This late-play change of direction signals Shakespeare's interest in exposing evil's "infection" only to reveal that it is less metaphysically profound than tragically human. Jealous rage, though devastating, can be overcome through atonement and communal support. Like *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* ends by suggesting that, while evil may spread quickly through emotional disarray and social panic, it cannot uproot deep-seated capacities for forgiveness and love. In the final act, family and community re-form around contrition, reunion, and a faith in what is not seen – precisely what Leontes had initially denied. In this sense, *The Winter's Tale* shares *Pericles*'s simultaneous recognition of evil's persistent banality and Shakespeare's refusal to grant its lasting dominion. If *Pericles* unmasked incest as mere mortal corruption, *The Winter's Tale* exposes irrational jealousy as a similarly human failing, dramatized through violent words and paranoid logic rather than by the cunning plots of a Machiavellian villain.

Nimble spirits, high charms

In the controlled environment of Prospero's Island, Shakespeare's treatment of evil takes on a distinctive philosophical and meta-reflective flavour. As thinking about thinking itself – a higher cognitive process that questions assumptions, critiques epistemic structures, or deepens self-awareness, meta-reflection involves nested layers of cognition ('I think that they think that I think') which illuminates how the "scheming mind" justifies its ends in the context of conspiratorial thinking. Plotters must consider how others think and how they themselves think; schemers must maintain awareness of their own thought processes while manipulating others, which calls for constant meta-level analysis of both their own and others' perspectives. It is no surprise that meta-reflection as plotting should be a key feature of *The Tempest*, starting with Prospero, both character and quasi-director, the 'Meta-Plotter' who orchestrates events and manoeuvres other characters. To start with a tentative generalisation, one could say that *The Tempest* stages evil as conspiracy: the dramatic architecture of the play foregrounds conspiratorial machination as its primary manifestation of malevolence. The text's narrative structure relies on intersecting networks of seditious

plotting, a layered presentation of conspiracy that serves to interrogate both the nature of political power and the moral features of its subversion. Empirically observed, tweaked and tested via the powerful magic of Prospero, evil comes most immediately to the surface in the murderous plotting of Antonio and Sebastian, in the parallel, foolish yet foul conspiracy of Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban and in the guilt-ridden derangement of Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian and Gonzalo. But instances of iniquity are by no means limited to the present: they reach back into the past, "in the dark backward and abysm of time" of Miranda's unsettling recollections (I.ii.50); into the "foul play" of Antonio's usurpation and Prospero's banishment (I.ii.60, 62); in Caliban's attempt to "violate the honour" of Miranda (I.ii.349); in Sycorax's black magic, which imprisoned Ariel in cloven pine (I.ii.293), and before that in the banishment of pregnant Sycorax herself (I.ii.269). All the while, Prospero plots to loosen all plots while reflecting on the nature of plotting itself.

The problem is that Prospero's own meta-plotting is not exempt from the malevolent proclivities he empirically observes and directs. To start with, even though Prospero "construes his own magic as benign" (Shakespeare 2011, 26) and insists that "There is no harm done" (I.ii.15), the initial storm and its attending trials on the island may be magical simulations, but the physical suffering, the mental distress, and the emotional upheaval they cause is very real, so much so that Prospero will in the end feel the need to renounce his "rough magic" and bestow pardon. Also, despite its panoptic power, Prospero's utter enthrallment with the effective power and latent potential of his "high charms", whereby his "enemies, are all knit up / In their distractions" and are "in [his] power" (III.iii.88-90), has obvious Faustian and Machiavellian implications, long noted by critics and acknowledged by Prospero himself, as he admits being "rapt in secret studies" (I.ii.77)[15]. Such implications present a variant of evil, whose reaches far transcend Prospero's coarse ("rough") practices of re-direction and containment, which must eventually be suspended and renounced. At this extreme meta-reflective level (*ultra-theatrical*, in Serpieri's insight), evildoing in *The Tempest* is ambiguously entangled with the systematic deployment and swift exercise of expedient "instruction" (III.iii.85) meant to trig-

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15   Critics remain divided over whether Prospero's magic should be regarded as benign, evil, or inherently ambiguous (Shakespeare 2011, 62, n.2).

ger specific results. Prospero repeatedly congratulates himself and his spirits, most notably Ariel, over such "nimble" or "brave" effectiveness, which entails "observation strange" (III.iii.87) on the part of the "subjects": a measure of estrangement (or derangement) from life reflected in Alonso's "strange stare" (III.iii.94) and more generally in the recurrent motif of strangeness throughout the play:

> Prospero
> Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou
> Performed, my Ariel; a grace it had, devouring.
> Of my instruction hast thou nothing bated
> In what thou hadst to say. So, with good life
> And observation strange, my meaner ministers
> Their several kinds have done. My high charms work,
> (*The Tempest*, III.iii.83-88)

His "high charms" Prospero works with meticulous precision, as he takes evident pride in Ariel's literal adherence to his instructions, which leave "nothing bated" (III.iii.85), and duly notes the performance of other entities who "their several kinds have done" (III.iii.87-88). Beyond the magician's satisfaction, one may detect a tone of methodical (Arendt may say bureaucratic) relish in procedural compliance and in swift, unhesitating execution, modes of action that the initial "bravely" effectively conveys[16]. This interplay between magical efficacy and administrative efficiency invites fresh perspectives on both Prospero's ambivalent approach to moral testing and the play's broader meta-exploration of evil. The many "strange" phenomena in *The Tempest* have often been read either as partaking of the courtly aesthetics of the masque or as dramatizing – and potentially questioning – the period's appetite for exotic novelty[17]. To these well-trodden paths of research I would add an investigation of "strange" alongside "brave" and "nimble" as

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16   "Brave" in *The Tempest* – notably in Miranda's "O brave new world" – carries layered meanings beyond its often-highlighted positive or exotic connotations (see Orgel 1988; Shakespeare 2011; Hulme 1986). Historical uses hint at a more ironic, morally vacant efficiency, a nuance that Aldous Huxley later underscores in *Brave New World* as a chilling marker of an ethically empty order (*OED*).
17   For an exploration of strangeness as a theatrical modality in *The Tempest* see Demaray 1998, and Hall 1996.

unstable terms that encapsulate the emerging forms of knowledge Prospero initially embraces against the backdrop of moral judgment. "Strange" might also point to the detached or estranged gaze that marks a utilitarian, morally indifferent way of looking at the world, with all the risks it entails.

The punning exchange between Sebastian and Antonio in Act II is a case in point. Sebastian comments on the "strange drowsiness" overcoming Alonso and Gonzalo, and later describes his own state of being "asleep with eyes wide open" as "a strange repose" (II.i.199-214). The strangeness here, as elsewhere in the play, has obviously to do with Prospero's working magic, which has conveniently put Miranda to sleep and, via Ariel, has arranged the same for all the sailors aboard the King's ship. But there is a twist to Prospero's wondrous magic, regardless of whether it is part of Prospero's own design. This "strange repose" also suggests a hypnotic suspension of conscience, required of Sebastian to go along with Antonio's plan: to murder King and Councillor and seize control of Naples.

> Antonio
> My strong imagination sees a crown
> Dropping upon thy head.
> Sebastian
> What, art thou waking?
> Antonio
> Do you not hear me speak?
> Sebastian
> I do, and surely
> It is a sleepy language, and thou speak'st
> Out of thy sleep. What is it thou didst say?
> This is a strange repose, to be asleep
> With eyes wide open – standing, speaking, moving
> (*The Tempest*, II.i.209-15)

The common Early Modern notion of sleep as the mirror of death (Shakespeare 2011, 202, n. 261) is expediently deployed in Antonio's murderous *double entendres*:

> Antonio
> Here lies your brother,
> No better than the earth he lies upon.
> If he were that which now he's like (that's dead)

> Whom I with this obedient steel – three inches of it
> Can lay to bed forever
> (*The Tempest*, II.i.281-85)

Earlier in the same passage, when Antonio insists that he, like Sebastian, feels no need for sleep because his "spirits are nimble" (II.i.202) he is echoing Gonzalo's earlier rebuke of him and Sebastian for being flippant, "of such sensible and nimble lungs that they always use to laugh at nothing" (II.i.174-75). Nimbleness here becomes a sign of moral agility stripped of ethical grounding – an expedient readiness to take advantage and commit crimes without hesitation, in direct contrast to Gonzalo's utopian dream. Antonio's nimble spirits are maliciously alert to the opportunity for regicide and they move swiftly to catch it, persistently eroding Sebastian's scruples[18].

Though Ariel is often cast as a benevolent intermediary, a closer look reveals unsettling undertones. Take, for instance, Ariel's "full fathom five" song. Ostensibly consolatory, it envisions the drowned body of Ferdinand's father not as a soul progressing toward transcendence, but as an assemblage of mineralized remains: bones turning to coral, eyes to pearls, the entire corpse reduced to "something rich and strange" (I.ii.397), a marvel one might find in a cabinet of curiosities[19]. Ariel, who once languished in a cloven pine at the hands of Sycorax, may be no innocent wanderer. And the spirit's liberation by Prospero may have simply transferred servitude from one master to another, further complicating the moral frame of Ariel's role. Far from radiating pure spiritual unity, Ariel's perspective bears the chill of a clinical observer, one who sees the human subject as a mutable object – a phenomenon ripe for cataloguing rather than compassion. This reading finds resonance in Hannah Arendt's brief but incisive reference to the song in *The Life of the Mind* (1978). For Arendt, "those are pearls that were his eyes" (I.ii.397) exemplifies modernity's epistemological rupture, the dis-

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18   The *OED* traces "nimble" to "nim" (a thief), underscoring qualities of quickness, cunning, and opportunity-seizing. Its metaphorical use extends to efficiency, rapid action, and cleverness – nuances recognized by thinkers such as Montaigne and Bacon.

19   For discussions of Renaissance wonder cabinets – sites where the "rich and strange" could be collected, cataloged, and displayed – see Harris (2009, 1; 187).

integration of the "thread of tradition" (212), which fractures the past into scattered, inert fragments.

The metamorphosis of Alonso's eyes into pearls symbolizes a world where history is a collection of dismembered relics. Arendt does not frame this fragmentation as inherently malevolent; rather, she identifies it as modernity's existential condition, where the "certainty of evaluation" (212) afforded by tradition dissolves, leaving behind remnants "rich and strange" precisely because they are severed from their original context. For Arendt, this rupture is generative – a *sea-change* that invites us to rethink the fragments of the past as materials for new meaning[20]. Yet where Arendt emphasizes the creative potential of thinking, I argue that Ariel's methodical description of Alonso's transformation exposes the darker implications of this epistemological shift. His clinical gaze reflects not spiritual transcendence but a materialist taxonomy, reducing the dead to specimens in nature's cabinet. This detachment, akin to the empiricist's dispassionate scrutiny, underscores a world where moral imagination yields to curiosity – a shift that insidiously estranges us from human kinship.

While Arendt's "dismantling" technique seeks to reanimate the past's fragments through thought, Ariel's song suggests a more insidious outcome: the normalization of a perspective that objectifies human subjects, rendering them inert curiosities in a disenchanted world. In this light, Ariel's characterization as a "malignant thing" (I.ii.257) resonates with the subtler evils of Shakespeare's late plays: not overt malice, but a normalization of disengagement, where life becomes matter and individuals transformed into objects. Such a viewpoint aligns less with the consolations of spiritual transcend-

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20   Arendt's reference to Shakespeare (see Pitkin 1998; Dahlgren 2006; Lupton 2011) centers on Ariel's "sea-change" as a metaphor for the transformative power of thought rather than loss. The imagery of the drowned king's bones becoming coral and his eyes turning to pearls illustrates how thinking reworks relics of the past into "something rich and strange" – a process that transcends linear history. For Arendt, as for T. S. Eliot, this metamorphosis involves a "dismantling" of tradition: inherited fragments become materials for reinterpretation. Ariel's detached, clinical gaze exemplifies thinking's ability to confront the past without nostalgia, using a materialist taxonomy to intersect old narratives. Like the sea that reshapes everything it touches, thinking's creative transformation reflects modernity's fractured relationship with tradition, demanding new ways to find meaning.

ence than with the detachment of a materialist gaze. T. S. Eliot's echo of Ariel's "full fathom five" in the "Death by Water" section of *The Waste Land* (Eliot 1922, 315-18) picks up and intensifies this sinister undertone, reducing human life to the bare fact of physical dissolution and change, cast adrift in the indifferent churn of the elements[21]. This is not evil in the grand, demonic sense – Ariel's detachment is all the more unsettling for its subtlety. Stripped of overt malice, it threatens to normalize a world in which moral imagination and empathy are replaced by curiosity and dispassionate scrutiny. A "tricksy spirit" (V.i.227) in Prospero's words, in fact Ariel conveys a light-hearted, mischievous perspective. Traditional scholarship long viewed Ariel as a benevolent foil to Caliban's primal savagery, but contemporary critiques have increasingly dismantled this binary interpretation, revealing a figure enmeshed in the ambiguities of power[22].

Postcolonial readings further destabilize Ariel's innocence and ethereal detachment[23]. Collectively, these perspectives frame Ariel's

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21   Garber (2008, 859-60) contrasts this passage with the death-by-drowning dream in *Richard III*, suggesting that "Clarence's horrific vision of decay becomes Ariel's blithe assurance of eternal change". I challenge labeling eternal change as "blithe", and would say that such a term overlooks the latent menace in the metamorphic imagery. I would argue that Shakespeare's death-by-water motif persists in *The Tempest* as a cyclical, self-contained materiality, starkly indifferent to human consolation. Mukherji (2016, 273) addresses the macabre, materialistic aesthetics of this passage.

22   Andrew Gurr (1996, 194), locates Ariel and Caliban within the theatrical *topos* of the "idle and industrious apprentice", contrasting the former's "industrious" servitude with the latter's "idle" recalcitrance – a framework that implicates Ariel in Prospero's authoritarianism, its zeal inseparable from subjugation. Orgel (Shakespeare 1998, 18; 27) deepens this tension, characterizing Ariel as a creature of fluid potential shackled to hierarchy. Bloom (1998, 663; 667) extends the critique into the occult, casting Prospero as "Shakespeare's anti-Faust" and Ariel as his hermetic familiar. Here, Ariel's role as a metaphysical enabler – whether of salvation or domination – renders its compliance inseparable from the moral ambiguities of power itself.

23   Brown (1985, 60) underlines the paradox of Ariel's seething subjection to Prospero. Hulme (1986, 144, 202) questions Ariel's reliability as an "impartial witness" in the matter of Sycorax and underlines his reluctance and volatility. While Marjorie Garber (2008, 862) cautiously upholds Ariel's traditional benevolence, she concedes the spirit's latent capacity for rebellion from bondage. Charry (Shakespeare 2022, 17; 29) traces this shift in South American criticism: Rodó's

"nimble" obedience as a troubling light-heartedness. Textually, Ariel's ambiguity crystallizes in Prospero's offhand branding of the spirit as "malignant" (I.ii.257), a term that invites subversive re-readings. Far from a "graceful" force, Ariel orchestrates Prospero's illusions with clinical detachment, whether conjuring "flaming amazement" or adopting the harpy's vengeful guise. While Ariel is hardly a pantomime villain, I think that there is sufficient textual evidence – and scholarly precedent – to support a less benevolent reading of this "brave spirit". Ariel's scopophilic gaze in the song to Ferdinand mentioned above – marked by detachment, amorality, and an almost clinical objectivity – renders death a neutral spectacle of decomposition – a material metamorphosis stripped of moral or metaphysical weight. Such moments recast Ariel not as a "purely light-hearted" spirit, but as an ethically ambiguous enforcer. To interpret Ariel as benign requires ignoring the chilling precision of its collaboration: power, even cloaked as "white magic", thrives on the silent compliance of those who refuse to interrogate its designs.

If Ariel's characterization captures one layer of this mischievous evil – the transformation of human life into a neutral object of scrutiny – *The Tempest* does not confine strangeness to that single register. As the play unfolds, it cultivates a more pervasive sense of disorientation, moving us beyond the malignant spirit's detached gaze. Strangeness becomes cumulative, shifting from a suggestive undercurrent to a force that openly challenges natural order and moral certainty. By the time we reach Alonso's admission that events "strengthen / From strange to stranger" (V.i.227-28), the play signals a broader anxiety: that the curious mind, driven by thirst for knowledge, might slide imperceptibly from lawful inquiry toward perilous obsession. At this juncture, Shakespeare's portrayal aligns with the warnings of King James I's *Daemonologie*, where the quest for understanding can, step by step, dissolve into the black art of magic[24]. Prospero's

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1922 essay, which celebrates Ariel as the emblem of self-scrutiny and enlightened freedom, gives way to Retamar's 1971 anti-colonial recalibration, where Caliban supplants Ariel as an icon of resistance.

24   James I warned that unchecked curiosity could lead to forbidden knowledge, suggesting that escalating inquiry might ultimately turn to the "black and unlawful science of Magic" (2016, 10). Vaughan and Vaughan (Shakespeare 2011, 64–66) connect this warning to Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and the broader intellectual climate of the Jacobean court.

own "secret studies" and his "transported" state (I.ii.74-77) reflect the very transformation James feared – a legitimate intellectual pursuit yielding to something darker and less easily contained[25].Yet it is not only others – Ariel, Sebastian, Antonio, or even Sycorax – who exemplify this precarious slide into moral indifference. Prospero himself must eventually confront the "thing of darkness" he has helped to shape, a recognition that comes late (V.i.275-76). The line "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine" has often been read as Prospero's admission that Caliban, whatever else he may be, cannot be fully disentangled from Prospero's own culpability.

In a play where "brave", "nimble", and "strange" ominously flag the subtle shapes evil can take – moments when curiosity turns callous, ingenuity warps into cunning, and the pursuit of knowledge slips toward ruthlessness – Prospero's words signal a reckoning. He is forced to see how his "secret studies" and manipulations have not been morally neutral but part of a pattern that reduces others to instruments or curiosities, leaving him stained by the very darkness he sought to master. Critical readings of *The Tempest* have long singled out Caliban as a perplexing embodiment of evil – whether as the "natural man" corrupted by colonial oppression, or as a symbol of untamed, "uncivilized" nature that threatens civilized order[26]. Thus, whether seen as the malignant face of raw nature or the outcome of colonial evil, Caliban remains an ambivalent figure: monstrous, yet capable of poignant speech; cunning, yet often childlike in his resentments and dreams of freedom. This ambivalence aligns with *The Tem-*

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25   For a discussion of Faustian features in *The Tempest* see Traister (1984), Mebane (1989), and Logan (2007).

26   Early Restoration commentators, such as John Dryden and William Davenant in their adaptation *The Enchanted Island* (1667), heightened Caliban's monstrosity (Vaughan and Vaughan 1996, 38–43). Later eighteenth-century critics continued to see in Caliban a "born devil" whose attempted assault on Miranda confirmed an innate bestiality. However, postcolonial interpretations complicated this view by suggesting that Caliban's violent outbursts might be products of Prospero's own colonizing regime – an argument made influentially by Mannoni (1956) and subsequently developed in Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969). Here, Caliban's bitterness and rebellious impulses emerge as responses to oppressive treatment, rendering him less a savage monster than a victim of cultural and psychological domination (the object of a "ponerological" approach to the study of evil (Brown 1985, 59-60; Greenblatt 1990, 27-32).

pest's wider thematic concerns: the question of responsibility for evil – be it native or imposed – cannot be reduced to a simple binary. Caliban's conspiracy with Stephano and Trinculo mirrors the high-born conspiracy of Antonio and Sebastian: in both, Shakespeare underscores how greed, resentment, and personal grievance distort moral judgment. At the same time, Prospero's role in Caliban's "education" – teaching him language while treating him as a lesser being – complicates the notion that Caliban's capacity for malice arises purely from innate savagery (Hulme 1986, 94-99). As with Prospero's admission "This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (V.i.275-76), the play suggests that Caliban's darkness is partly Prospero's as well: a convergence of nature and nurture, unbridled impulse and overbearing authority (Brown 1985, 67-69; Vaughan and Vaughan 1996, 152-56). In this sense, Caliban stands at the intersection of multiple interpretive frames – colonial oppression, primal instinct, and moral complicity – deepening *The Tempest*'s broader interrogation of how evil emerges wherever empathy fails and dominion supersedes dialogue.

This acknowledgment does more than merely highlight Prospero's complicity; it reverberates through the complex moral geography of the late plays. Here, Shakespeare suggests that evil need not appear in its most flamboyant forms – through overt acts of savagery or unbridled malice – but thrives in subtler guises, emerging where moral imagination fails and a skewed sense of "bravery" or "nimbleness" justifies treating others as means rather than ends. By calling the "thing of darkness" his own, Prospero confronts the entanglement of personal responsibility and intellectual ambition, laying bare the thin line between wonder and exploitation, between knowledge and hubris. This moment invites us to see that the capacity for evil may surface most perilously where it is least expected: not in chaos and cruelty alone, but in the quiet calculations that erode empathy.

This preoccupation with the moral implications of empirical knowledge finds its most vivid metaphor in the play's interplay of darkness and illumination. When Prospero speaks of "melting the darkness" (V.i.66), the phrase resonates well beyond the physical dawn. It points to a dissolution of the "ignorant fumes that mantle / Their clearer reason" (V.i.67-68), a cleansing of the fog that obscures moral judgment. Yet the agency behind this enlightenment is itself ambiguous. Prospero's magic may disperse ignorance as the

morning sun scatters night, but it does so from a position of power that remains ethically fraught. If darkness symbolizes not only literal obscurity but also the moral blindness that allows evil's subtle encroachments, then Prospero's power to "melt" touches on the very heart of the play's dilemma: the tension between knowledge as illumination and knowledge as domination, between a benevolent guiding hand and the subtle force that compels compliance.

Shakespeare's late plays offer a distinctive perspective on the quality of evil – one that anticipates yet complicates modern theoretical frameworks. While these plays acknowledge the insubstantiality of evil in ways that echo Arendt's insights into its banality, Shakespeare also suggests that even the clearest rational understanding cannot fully account for evil's relentless return. This tension between intellectual demystification and evil's persistent presence points toward a more nuanced approach, one that values critical exposure while recognizing its limits. Drawing on the medieval concept of *mysterium iniquitatis*, evoked in *Pericles* by Gower's archaic voice, Shakespeare explores a view of evil that neither surrenders to opaque mystery nor aspires to total explanation. Instead, he treats evil as an unavoidable part of mortal existence whose ultimate resolution lies beyond human reason. Yet he does not simply endorse this inherited view; rather, his late plays cultivate a subtle synthesis. They uphold the importance of rational scrutiny while acknowledging that purely secular responses remain incomplete. This synthesis takes shape through the role of providence, not as a veil obscuring evil, but as a force revealing an essential emptiness. In *Pericles*, the guidance of Diana and, in *The Tempest*, Prospero's eventual renunciation of magic both serve to disclose rather than conceal, to illuminate rather than mystify.

Yet the plays also show that rational discernment, though powerful, cannot stand alone. It can strip evil of its grand illusions, but it cannot, by itself, provide the broader spiritual awareness needed to face evil's recurring forms without slipping into either despair or naive faith. In this way Shakespeare offers a theoretical framework that resists a simple choice between Arendt's emphasis on critical thinking and the theological insistence on transcendence. Instead, his late plays suggest how these perspectives might work together. They present evil as susceptible to rational analysis yet, at the same time, demand a broader spiritual horizon. In doing so, Shakespeare

points to contemporary discussions toward a vision of evil that acknowledges both the potency of reason and the necessity of what lies beyond it.

Across these late plays, Shakespeare turns from the grand pageantry of evil in his tragedies to its stealthier, more insidious seepage into human affairs. Here, iniquity emerges not as a towering demon but as a subtle presence, thriving in the cracks of thoughtlessness and habit, feeding on shallow illusions rather than dwelling in any genuine depth. By uncovering evil's banality, Shakespeare strips it of its metaphysical aura and shows it to be hollow at its core. Yet he does not rest on exposure alone. Mere rational demystification, however essential, cannot fully contain what so stubbornly resists our efforts to control. The romances acknowledge that reasoned critique, though powerful, must be joined by something more – by grace, forgiveness, and a measured openness to mystery.

This outlook, an "Arendt" vision of sorts, frames evil as both fully knowable yet forever elusive: it can be unmasked, but not wholly disarmed by intellect alone. To reckon with it, Shakespeare's final plays suggest, we must look beyond the neat boundaries of argument into realms where the spirit finds its bearings – not by rejecting reason or slipping into hazy mysticism, but by acknowledging a dimension of experience that reason alone cannot treat thoroughly. Shakespeare's romances compel us to stare at evil's banality without flinching – yet dare us to hope beyond it.

Far from mere abstraction, the numinous here stands as a palpable, if elusive, moral ground urging toward a fuller engagement with the drives that shape human frailty and resilience. Confrontation with evil must thus draw on more than intellectual exposure. In these culminating gestures, Shakespeare summons his audience to let knowledge and wonder, demystification and mystification, clash and kindle. It is in this tension – neither complacent nor despairing – that one may grapple with evil, armed not only with clarity of mind but with a finer, ethically attuned perception – a mode of understanding that glimpses the entanglements of human conscience and dares to find worth in less tangible registers of insight, meaning, and desire; to apprehend, as the oracle decrees in *The Winter's Tale* "that which is lost" (III.ii.133) – not as void, but as a crucible for grace.

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