

THE MYTHIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SHAKESPEARE'S THE TEMPEST  
AS EVIDENCED BY ITS MYTHIC QUALITY AND ITS  
ADHERENCE TO MODELS OF ESTABLISHED MYTHS

2148-5608A

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Speech

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1974

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LD  
2668  
R4  
1974  
C67  
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Document

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## INTRODUCTION

"One of the most distinctive trends in contemporary literary study is that of myth criticism."<sup>1</sup> So states John B. Vickery, editor of Myth and Literature. He states further that myth "provides concepts and patterns which the critic may use to interpret specific works of literature."<sup>2</sup> Francis Fergusson contends that myth criticism addresses itself to these concepts and patterns of a poetic work on two levels: those modelled upon established myths, and those which contain a "mythic quality."<sup>3</sup>

This paper will attempt to demonstrate that The Tempest functions effectively on both levels. That the play is a work containing a mythic quality is evidenced by the operation of three archetypes within the play: the archetype of royalty, the archetype of the poet, and the New World archetype.

That The Tempest can be approached as a work modelled upon established myth is supported by K. M. Abenheimer's psychoanalytic study in which the play's action functions to break down Prospero's psychological isolation.<sup>4</sup> It is supported also by Colin Still's theory that the play re-enacts ancient initiation rites, the upward study in Virgil's Aeneid, and the theme of Dante's Divinia Commedia.

## A DISSENTING VIEW

Before considering the main points of this paper, one dissenting opinion should be noted. Harry Slochower, a critic zealously supporting myth criticism, asserts that The Tempest is merely a "magic fairy tale."<sup>5</sup>

If the play is merely a fairy tale, it would only function, as Susanne Langer has observed, "to supply vicarious experience" rather than "to understand actual experience."<sup>6</sup> However, by following the myth patterns of ancient initiation rites, or the pattern of psychological isolation; or by providing insights into archetypal truths, The Tempest would seem to be more than just "an escape from actual frustration and conflict,"<sup>7</sup> to quote Langer again.

Why, then, does Dr. Slochower discount the mythic significance of The Tempest? Speaking boldly in the journal which Dr. Slochower himself edits, John E. Gedo contends that "there may be more things in mythopoesis than are dreamt of in this philosophy. The functional unity that Dr. Slochower has forged seems to me to be an artificial one."<sup>8</sup>

This artificiality arises from the preconceptions which Dr. Slochower imposes upon his study of myth in classic works. He cannot recognize any mythical significance in The Tempest because it is Hamlet which best personifies his "idealization of opposition to authority, and his emphasis on issues of

social class, all typical of progressive-democratic circles of the entre-deux guerres."<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Slochower's primary concern in his book, Mythopoesis: Mythic Patterns in the Literary Classics, is heroic revolt against authority. This fact is particularly well illustrated by his opposition to religious interpretations of the "Book of Job" because "it ignores Job's revolutionary indictment."<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that Dr. Slochower chooses to revere Shakespeare's Hamlet. This play provides, he states, "the first hero which stands alone," whereas previously, "the revolt of the heroic character takes place within (emphasis Slochower's) the framework of tradition."<sup>11</sup> In addition, Dr. Slochower determines that: "Hamlet's difficulty consists in his inability to be a specialist (emphasis Slochower's) in an age of developing specialization."<sup>12</sup>

In view of this orientation, it is not difficult to understand why The Tempest is discarded as a mere fairy tale. The Tempest does not provide an historical environment into which Dr. Slochower can project his theory of the revolutionary hero. "The happy ending," he contends, "becomes possible only by being set in a fairy world in which life is 'such stuff as dreams are made on.'"<sup>13</sup>

It has been necessary to consider Dr. Slochower's book for two reasons. First, its topic is "mythopoesis," which he defines as those myths which have "seized the imagination of our classical writers who then transformed the various mythological accounts into a single, unified work of art."