

Anger and Forgiveness in *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline*

Introduction

Anger, and its place in human relationships, has recently become a bit of a hot topic. With the rise of the alt-right on the right, the rise of neoliberalism on the left, and the increasing antagonism between those of differing political inclinations, the contemporary concern with anger, in both the public and academic domain, is entirely apt. Although this inquiry is particularly appropriate for contemporary times, questions surrounding anger and its place in human affairs are not new. *The Iliad*, for example, notably opens with the line, “Sing, O muse, of the rage of Achilles,” immediately establishing a general concern with Achilles with a particular focus on his rage. Seneca, the Roman philosopher, likewise takes up the topic in his philosophical work *De Ira*, where he discusses anger in relation to ethics. Contemporary concerns with anger and human relationships have predominately followed Seneca’s steps in relegating anger to the ethical realm. Some, as in the case of Rebecca Traister, have championed anger as a potential driving source for justice.¹ While others, as in the case of Susanna Schrobsdorff, have denounced anger as a kind of illness to be addressed.² The contemporary conversation surrounding anger and human relationships, then, has been mainly focused on the status of anger; very little attention has been given to the reparation of the human relationships that have, ostensibly, been damaged in such a way that would warrant anger.

As has been previously noted, the concern with anger in relation to human affairs is not new. Writers like Homer and Virgil have taken up the topic of anger and its place in human relationships in their respective works, *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*. Shakespeare has likewise taken

¹ See Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger*

² See Schrobsdorff, *The Rage Flu: Why All This Anger Is Contagious and Making us Sick*

up the conversation in his works. In particular, Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* address the reactive nature of anger and then presents forgiveness as a means by which the reactive nature of anger may be overcome in order to restore human relationships.

On the Language of Forgiveness

Before addressing *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*, however, it would be worthwhile to explore the language of forgiveness. In *On Forgiveness*, Jacques Derrida notes that “the concept of forgiveness... belongs to a religious heritage” which he names “Abrahamic, in order to bring together Judaism, the Christianities, and the Islams”.³ He goes on further, stating that “only [the] sacredness of the human” can justify the notion of “repenting and asking forgiveness”.⁴ The issue with forgiveness, for Derrida, is then rooted in what he perceives to be the necessarily religious aspect of forgiveness, and the necessarily religious aspect of the language used when speaking about forgiveness; “atonement, redemption, reconciliation, salvation,” for example.⁵ For Derrida, the inherently religious language becomes of greater concern when globalization is taken into consideration. As Derrida explains, the problem with the “‘globalization’ of forgiveness” is that it “resembles an immense scene of confession” which he says is an “impos[ition of Abrahamic culture] on cultures which do not have European or ‘biblical’ origins”.⁶

Like Derrida, Hannah Arendt, in a section concerning forgiveness in *The Human Condition*, notes that “the discoverer of forgiveness in human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth”.⁷ Unlike Derrida, however, she goes on to say that “certain aspects of the teachings of Jesus of

³ Derrida, *On Forgiveness*, 27-28

⁴ Ibid., 30

⁵ Ibid., 31-32

⁶ Ibid., 31

⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Nazareth... have been neglected because of their allegedly exclusively religious nature” even though they “are not primarily related to the Christian religious message”.⁸ Arendt aptly notes that while certain terms and concepts have been seen as inherently religious and, as such, largely neglected in secular society, the concepts and terms are not necessarily religious in nature. She goes on, stating: “the fact that he [Jesus of Nazareth] made this discovery in a religious context... is no reason to take [the concept of forgiveness] any less seriously in a strictly secular sense”.⁹ Ultimately, Arendt argues that forgiveness, and language of forgiveness, “sprang from experiences in the small and closely knit community of [Jesus of Nazareth’s] followers, bent on challenging the public authorities in Israel” and not from religion itself.¹⁰

With that said, the perspective that forgiveness, and the language associated with forgiveness, is inherently religious and, as such, should not be given a place in secular society, may still seem appealing for some readers. While it may be true that the terms used in the language of forgiveness are popularly associated with religious dialogue, they are not exclusive to religious dialogue. As it happens, seemingly religious terms are already being used in secular contexts. Of particular note are the terms, bad faith and good faith, which developed from existentialist philosophy; a philosophy that was born out of the rejection, of what Derrida calls ‘Abrahamic’ values.¹¹ With that in mind, we may now explore forgiveness and reconciliation as it relates to human affairs in *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*. In order to forgive, however, there must first be something to forgive, since one may not “give up resentment” where there is no

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

resentment.¹² And so let us first address anger and its reactive nature as demonstrated in *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*.

Anger in Cymbeline

Posthumus' enraged monologue in act II, scene v, is arguably *Cymbeline*'s most obvious instances of anger. Posthumus' rage induced monologue comes after Giacomo convinces him that he, Giacomo, has slept with his, Posthumus', wife. What Posthumus perceives to be a trespass on the part of his wife, perceives because his wife is never unfaithful, fuels re-active monologue against all women. The reactive nature of anger is first seen earlier, in act II, scene iv, however. When Posthumus is finally convinced of his wife's trespass, he expresses that he wishes "he had her [there], to tear her limb-meal",¹³ in effect expressing his desire to re-act the perceived trespass of his wife by causing her harm. His desire to mirror, to re-act, the trespass of his wife is further developed in his rage filled monologue leading him to call out for "vengeance, vengeance".¹⁴ Vengeance is after all, as Hannah Arendt argues, a "re-acting against an original trespassing".¹⁵ A statement supported by Posthumus' letter to Pisanio wherein Posthumus states that he "expects his revenge" and that Pisanio "must act for [him]" and kill Imogen, in his absence.¹⁶ Anger then, is in part reactive because it is a re-acting, or once again performing of a trespass.

¹² See Oxford English Dictionary, *Forgiveness*

¹³ Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, II.iv.147

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II.v.8

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*

¹⁶ Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, III.iv.24; III.iv.25

Anger can also be understood as reactive, in the sense of self-perpetuating, where anger creates a “chain reaction,” a process that “everybody remains bound to”.¹⁷ This “chain reaction” can be observed when Imogen becomes aware of her husband’s trespass against her: his plot to murder her.¹⁸

After Imogen discovers her husband’s plot, she seems to be consumed with grief and self-pitying, relating that her heart “is empty of all things but grief” and referring to herself as “a garment out of fashion”.¹⁹ Nevertheless, words like “traitor”, “revolt”, “villainy”,²⁰ and in particular, her reference to Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which opens with images of war and “Juno’s unforgetting rage”²¹ reveal her anger. And so, when Imogen tells Pisanio that she “desire[s her death] too” the desire is a re-acting of her husband’s trespass. As Imogen states, she desires to be killed so that when Posthumus is made aware of “[her] obedience” he will see that her “act [is not] of common passage, but / a strain of rareness” and he “will then be hanged by” thoughts of her.²² Imogen, in her anger, desires her death as a means of re-acting her husband’s trespass. Of course her husband’s trespass is a re-acting of what he perceives to be Imogen’s trespass against him. The reactive nature of anger as self-perpetuating lies ultimately in the fact that vengeance “which acts in the form of re-acting against an original trespassing [wherein] everybody remains bound to the process”.²³

¹⁷ Ibid., 2

¹⁸ Ibid., 2

¹⁹ Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, III.iv.68; III.iv.50

²⁰ Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, III.iv.53; III.iv.54; III.iv.55

²¹ Ruden and Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.1

²² Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, III.iv.91-92; III.iv.95

²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Anger in The Tempest

The Tempest, like *Cymbeline*, is filled with instances of anger. The title itself references the sea storm that opens the play and which Prospero, “by [his] art”,²⁴ caused in order to bring those who planned to “expatriate [him] and [his] / out of the dukedom” to the island he commands.²⁵ Much like *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest* presents anger as reactive, in the sense that it re-acts trespasses as well as in the self-perpetuating sense.

Prospero and Caliban’s relationship presents both senses of anger’s reactionary nature. The first sense, where reactionary is understood as the re-acting of a trespass, can be seen in the first interaction between Prospero and Caliban. Prospero first mentions Caliban in the second scene of the first act by calling for “slave! Caliban!” and then commanding him to “speak!”²⁶ Caliban merely responds by stating that “there’s wood enough within”.²⁷ However, Prospero perceives Caliban as disobedient prompting him to command him twice to “come forth!”²⁸ Prospero seems to view Caliban’s disobedience as a trespass against him because of the master and slave relationship between them. Prospero becomes incensed in response to this perceived trespass and then re-acts the trespass committed against him by calling Caliban a “poisonous slave, [who was] got by the devil himself / upon [Caliban’s] wicked dam”.²⁹ Interestingly, while the pattern of perceived trespass, anger, re-acting of trespass follows the one observed in *Cymbeline*, the trespasses and the re-acting of the trespass are re-acted in speech, not bodily

²⁴ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.ii.1

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I.ii.125-126

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I.ii.313; I.ii.314

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I.ii.407

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I.ii.315; I.ii.320

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I.ii.319; I.ii.320

harm. This difference can be better noted if the rest of the exchange between Prospero and Caliban is analyzed.

In response to the trespass Prospero commits against him by offending his mother, Caliban, re-acts the trespass against Prospero by mirroring the language Prospero uses in order to re-act the trespass. Prospero calls his mother a “wicked dam”,³⁰ Caliban’s response includes both “wicked” and “mother” as well as a curse on both Prospero and his daughter.³¹ Prospero then responds to Caliban’s curse by cursing him, informing him that “urchins / shall forth at vast of night” to punish him.³² The exchange continues until Prospero threatens Caliban who acknowledges that Prospero’s “art is of such power” it would “make a vassal” out of his mother’s god and who then, out of fear, obeys Prospero.³³

Although the conclusion to the angry dialogue between Prospero and Caliban seems to offer some release from the reactionary, and cyclical nature of anger, it is important to recall that Caliban does, later in the text, recruit Trinculo and Stefano in a murder plot against Prospero. It appears, then, that fear may momentarily hinder the cycle of trespass, anger, and re-acting of the trespass, but not impede it.

On Forgiveness

The question of how to transition from a relationship of trespass, anger, and re-acting of the trespass to one of reconciliation is still then left unanswered. While Hannah Arendt’s argument against the notion that forgiveness is an inherently religious value has already been presented. As previously stated, Arendt noted that the concept of forgiveness originates in the

³⁰ Ibid., I.ii.320

³¹ Ibid., I.ii.321

³² Ibid., I.ii.327

³³ Ibid., I.ii.371; I.ii.373

“teachings of Jesus of Nazareth,” it has also been related that the ideas of Jesus of Nazareth “have been neglected because of their allegedly exclusively religious nature”.³⁴ Her perspective on the “teachings of Jesus of Nazareth” as they relate to forgiveness, however, have yet to be presented.

According to Arendt, Jesus of Nazareth “first maintains against the ‘scribes and Pharisees’ that it is not true that only God has the power to forgive, and second that this power does not derive from God”,³⁵ according to Arendt, he instead argues to the contrary, stating that men “must be mobilized by men toward each other”.³⁶ In regards to her interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth’s concept of forgiveness and trespassing she says “trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action’s constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly”.³⁷ Furthermore she says, that forgiveness is a “constant mutual release” that can “begin something new” unlike vengeance which is “the re-acting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take it unhindered course”.³⁸

In Arendt’s interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth, forgiveness “is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is

³⁴Arendt, *The Human Condition*

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

forgiven”.³⁹ Forgiveness is then freeing precisely because it frees “both doer and sufferer” from a the cycle of vengeance “which by itself need never come to an end” and in doing so can “begin something new”.⁴⁰ With an understanding of Arendt’s interpretation on the philosophy of forgiveness, the matter of how in *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* address the topic of forgiveness may be approached.

Forgiveness in Cymbeline

Cymbeline ends, memorably, with a series of revelations and the king’s proclamation: “pardon’s the word to all”.⁴¹ While this ending appears to be the shift from anger and vengeance to forgiveness and reconciliation that Arendt claims is necessary for the release of the cycle of vengeance for “both doer and sufferer”, further analysis reveals that the ending is more ambiguous.⁴²

Earlier in the scene, Giacomo confesses that he lied to Posthumus about seducing his wife, upon hearing this Posthumus too ‘confesses’ to murdering his wife, at which point his wife Imogen attempts to embrace her husband. However, Posthumus does not recognize her, and instead berates her as a “scornful page” before striking her.⁴³ The pattern of trespass, anger, and re-acting of the trespass is readily apparent between Posthumus’ and Imogen’s exchange. And the chain reaction associated with anger and vengeance is likewise seen when Imogen, who is on the floor, reprimands Pisanio who attempts to, once again, help her. Although Posthumus later

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, V.v.421

⁴² Arendt, *The Human Condition*

⁴³ Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, V.v.228

recognizes his wife and in the midst of their embrace tells her to “hang there like fruit”, Posthumus never asks for forgiveness from her.⁴⁴

Perhaps surprisingly, the only character who does ask forgiveness, is Giacomo. After, what appears to be the reconciliation of Posthumus and Imogen, Giacomo approaches Posthumus, on his knees, and “beseeches” Posthumus to “take that life... which [he, Giacomo,] owe[s]”.⁴⁵ To which Posthumus responds that the “malice [he has] toward [Giacomo] is to forgive” him and then commands him to “deal with others better”.⁴⁶ No other instance of forgiveness and presented by Arendt’s account of forgiveness is present in the end of *Cymbeline*.

The ambiguous status of the reconciliation between certain people in *Cymbeline* is likewise found in Cymbeline’s description of his daughter, Imogen, whom he says “throws her eye on [posthumus], her brothers, [himself]” Cymbeline “like harmless lightning”.⁴⁷ As has been previously stated, the god Juno who makes a physical appearance in the text, who is alluded to throughout the play, and who is know for his rage, is also associated with lighting. At the end of the play then, the question of whether or not Imogen is angry, wrathful, vengeful is not known. This uncertainly is largely connected with the phrase “harmless lightning”⁴⁸ that presents the glance as somehow non-threatening and threatening simultaneously.

Forgiveness in The Tempest

The Tempest, like *Cymbeline*, ends with the status of the relationships between people not entirely sorted. Antonio does “entreat / [Prospero to] pardon [him his] wrongs” and in doing so

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V.v.268

⁴⁵ Ibid., V.v.413; V.v.413-414

⁴⁶ Ibid., V.v.418-419

⁴⁷ Ibid., V.v.394; V.v.393

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.5.394; 5.5.393

opens the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.⁴⁹ And Prospero states that he “do[es] forgive / [Antonio’s] rankest faults”.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Prospero’s tone indicates some harbored anger or resentment; words like “wicked”, “infect”, and “rankest” suggest that he has only forgiven in word, not in action.⁵¹ According to Arendt, the power of forgiveness rests in the release it gives to “both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven”.⁵² If forgiveness is not given then, there is no other means to achieve freedom, and establish something new, a reconciliation. Moreover, Prospero’s ‘forgiveness’ of Antonio’s faults is not rooted in *who* Antonio is, since “to call [him] brother / would even infect [Prospero’s] mouth”, but in *what* Antonio can give: the dukedom.⁵³ This too is contrary to the argument that Arendt has concerning forgiveness, where she states that “*what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it”, which is not the situation for Prospero.⁵⁴

By the epilogue the audience has observed that Prospero has not forgiven Antonio and that he has also kept Caliban as a slave; the audience knows Prospero’s relationships has not been rectified. With this context, Prospero preforms the epilogue, and asks the audience to “release [him] from his bands” pleading to the audience “as you from crimes would pardoned be, / let your indulgence set me free”.⁵⁵ Prospero seems to be asking for the audience’s applause in order to be set free from the stage and the play. However, the epilogue is not only asking the

⁴⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V.i.119

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, V.i.131; V.i.132

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, V.i.130; V.i.131; V.i.132

⁵² Arendt, *The Human Condition*

⁵³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V.i.130-132

⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*

⁵⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, V.i.20

audience to applaud but is asking for the audience's forgiveness. If Arendt's description of forgiveness as a "mutual release"⁵⁶ is read in relation with the line "but release me from my bands",⁵⁷ Prospero seems to be asking for the audience's forgiveness. This view is furthered by the second to last line where Prospero seems to imply that he has committed some "crime"⁵⁸, some trespass, and is asking the audience to forgive him "as [they] from crimes would pardoned be",⁵⁹ as they would like to be forgiven themselves. The epilogue places Prospero in the role of Antonio and the audience in the role of Prospero, inviting the audience to meditate on their desire to forgive or not forgive Prospero. For audience members inclined to not forgive Prospero for the "crimes" they just saw him commit against Antonio and Caliban, they must confront that they have reinforced Prospero's decision to not forgive Antonio and to not release Caliban and have transitioned from playing the role of Prospero to being Prospero. Audience members inclined to forgive, however, in effect re-write Prospero's decisions and release at once Antonio, Caliban, Prospero himself, since he has been forgiven, and released even themselves from the paradox that arises from refusing to forgive.

Conclusion

In the era of the 'politics of anger,' questions surrounding the value of anger in human relationships have taken center stage. Although the interest in what place anger has in human relationships is of great value and fascinating in its own right, the matter of how anger in human relationships can move from anger towards reconciliation is, surely, of immeasurable worth. Its true neither *Cymbeline* nor *The Tempest* offer a world where, in the end, reconciliation has been

⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2

⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Epilogue.19

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 19

achieved in the way that Hannah Arendt describes in *The Human Condition*. It is also true, however, that both plays attempt to end on some kind of reconciliation. In the case of *Cymbeline* the king pardons everyone, in *The Tempest* Prospero frees Ariel and asks the audience for their forgiveness for his shortcomings. Perhaps, even the fact that both plays end with relationships in states that most people would consider wanting, speaks for the desire for a reconciliation better than those which were presented; the desire for more than the impersonal blanket pardon of an authority figure and for more than a forgiveness that is said but not felt.

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