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Religion, Art, and Sexuality: W.H. Auden's Revision of Shakespeare

Alexandra Golz

In his article "Revision and Power: The Example of W.H. Auden," Edward Mendelson writes, "Revision, for Auden, was the means by which that first step is followed, voluntarily, by a very different one" (Mendelson 112). True to this philosophy, Auden took William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* and revised it completely in his long poem "The Sea and the Mirror." The question is: why did Auden choose to take a play by the greatest writer in the English language and turn it into a reinterpreted poem? On the surface it seems as though Auden has chosen to flaunt his mastery of poetry by showing Shakespeare's characters in a way the playwright never could. First, he starts with a moving speech given by Prospero to Ariel; he follows this with an assortment of speeches given by various characters about their experiences on the island, and ends with a section in which the uncivilized Caliban informs the audience about the meaning of art. However, the real answer to this question lies in thinking first of Auden's poem without Shakespeare's play. At its heart, "The Sea and the Mirror" really shows a poet trying to grapple with the ideas of religion, art, and sexuality as they relate to his personal life in 1940s America. His understanding of these three deeply personal themes informs the way in which he rewrites Shakespeare's characters, principally Prospero, Antonio, and Sebastian. This essay will analyze why Auden chose to reimagine Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the ways in which his personal life influenced the creation of his reimagined characters.

In an article he wrote for the Roman Catholic Journal *Commonweal* in 1942, Auden stated that, "As a writer, who is also a would-be Christian, I cannot help feeling that a satisfactory theory of Art from the standpoint of the Christian faith has yet to be worked out"

(Kirsch xii). Auden was also frequently cited as having told his close friends that his poem, in its base form, is “about the Christian conception of art” (Turner 95). Thus, Auden’s revision of Shakespeare constitutes his attempt at working out the intersectionality between the artistic and religious spheres (while also trying to work through his feelings stemming from his sexuality, but more on that later). So, how does Auden’s understanding of art and religion really influence the way in which he wrote his poem?

Looking at this poem from a religious standpoint is not difficult given Auden’s overtly Christian stance. Auden first returned to the Anglican Church in 1940, which was followed by an intense spiritual renewal just a short year later after the death of his mother (Kirsch xii). He then became fascinated by the writings of Soren Kierkegaard and other religious philosophers, soon becoming very preoccupied by theological issues (Kirsch xii). Given that Auden wrote his poem in 1944, it is clear that these religious ideas would have been at the forefront of his mind. Before moving into the influence art had on the formation of Auden’s poem, I would like to discuss two principal ways in which Auden’s religious musings come forth in his Shakespearean rewrite. First and foremost, he uses *The Tempest* as a vehicle for exploring the Christian teaching of forgiveness. Auden explores this idea where Shakespeare had previously left it untouched, as the play ends without the characters being able to voice their thoughts on either Prospero’s or their own actions. In addition to that, Auden uses his poem to show the process of a spiritual journey, much like the one he went on in his reconversion to Christianity. This process is one of self-awareness and acceptance that comes to serve a moral function as the characters realize their wrongdoings and attempt to right them.

As previously stated, forgiveness plays a much bigger part in Auden’s rewriting than it had in Shakespeare’s play, and this stems from Auden’s religious background. In her article “In

Solitude for Company’: Forgiveness, Memory, and Depth in W.H. Auden’s ‘The Sea and the Mirror,’” Hester Jones says that, “Auden also published several essays that discuss Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*, and express in a similar way a puzzled dissatisfaction with the play and with the image of forgiveness projected in it” (Jones 418). By the end of Shakespeare’s play, the only person who really asks for forgiveness and truly receives it is Alonso, although he had the least to be guilty for. For the rest, Prospero simply says, “Let us not burden our remembrances with / A heaviness that’s gone” (Shakespeare V. 1. 198-199). The two most in need of reconciliation are Antonio and Sebastian, but after they realize that they cannot win against Prospero, they go silent. Prospero doesn’t punish them, but it cannot be said that Prospero forgives them either because they have not asked to be pardoned. In fact, Auden even had trouble with the word pardoned – the word that Shakespeare used in his play – because of the formality rather than the genuineness that it implies (Jones 419). Because of his disappointment in the way that *The Tempest* handled forgiveness, Auden decided to make it one of his main focuses throughout his poem.

Although Auden’s Prospero speaks only briefly about the need for forgiveness, it can be argued that this idea is the primary focus of Sebastian’s response in part II of the poem. During his speech, Sebastian says, “I am Sebastian, wicked still, my proof / Of mercy that I wake without a crown...Right Here is absolute and needs no crown” (Auden 145-146). To Jones, Sebastian’s poem is about “awakening amidst and into a sense of failure, a poem of disintegration and of living again” (Jones 422). Sebastian so badly desired to take the crown from his brother, Alonso, that he was willing to commit fratricide. However, in Auden’s rewriting, Sebastian’s forgiveness comes in the form of his not only accepting, but being grateful for his failure to execute his plan. He “[wakes] without a crown” but he takes his lack of power

as a blessing rather than a curse. Kirsch says that, “Auden wrote in his draft as well as in a letter to Isherwood, [Sebastian] is ‘redeemed by failure,’” (Kirsch xxvii). So, where Sebastian previously showed no desire for forgiveness, Auden rewrites his character in order to be redeemed and saved through his inability to carry out his murderous plan.

Auden also used “The Sea in the Mirror” to show the personal process of a spiritual journey, having just undergone one himself. In her article, “Delight and Truth: Auden’s ‘The Sea and the Mirror,’” Daphne Turner states that, “In this poem, for which Auden claims the moral function of allowing ‘all things’ to ‘be themselves,’ he writes of experiencing the reality of one’s own shortcomings and using them positively” (Turner 98). In order to force his characters to experience the reality of their shortcomings, Auden opens the characters’ eyes to their disillusionment. For example, he highlights Sebastian’s childish fantasy of stealing his brother’s crown by referring, “...to our children’s day / Where each believed all wishes wear a crown” (Auden 145); similarly, Stephano’s need for escape in alcohol: “Exchanging craving we pursue / Alternately a single aim: / Between the bottle and the ‘loo’ / A lost thing that looks for a lost name” (Auden 138). These characters recognize their wrongdoings and doing so is the first step towards a spiritual awakening. One cannot come to a higher understanding without first having unburdened oneself from the shadow that fantasy, namely the one that Prospero creates over the course of the play, casts over reality.

Now having gone through Auden’s religious reasons for rewriting Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, let’s move on to consider how Auden’s view of art influenced how he wrote his poem, especially how it influenced his depiction of brothers Prospero and Antonio. First, it can be argued that Auden wrote his poem to demonstrate the power, but mainly the limitations, of art, a point he illustrates in his depiction of Prospero as an artist, with magic being his mode of

creation. Auden sees Prospero as a sort of artist, showing the great power art can have over those close to it. Throughout the play, Prospero uses his art (magic) to control everyone around him until they are all subservient to his will and forever changed by what he has done to them. However, through his poem, Auden strives to show Prospero's fallibility as an artist, which reflects Auden's belief that artists can never take themselves too seriously. The main way Auden achieves this is by putting Antonio in opposition to Prospero throughout the entire poem, and by having the other characters speak for themselves in order to disprove Prospero's preconceived notions about them. The other way Auden plays with the concept of art is through viewing it as a sort of mirror, reflecting the difference between our fantasies and reality.

As previously stated, let's begin with the power behind Prospero's art before moving on to the limitations that that power has. Daphne Turner states: "The main figure speaks for Auden, for the representative artist, for Shakespeare, for Prospero as a character like the others and for Prospero as a writer of the other characters...One question is what part Prospero's art has had in changing them" (Turner 97). Prospero uses his art to turn himself into a poet, the creator of the other characters. His magic dictates their actions, an idea shown numerous times in Shakespeare's play as he manipulates the characters into doing whatever will further his own vengeful agenda. Mendelson also makes an interesting comment on the power behind Prospero's art: "Prospero is an artist who makes his art by manipulating his perceptions into a work of art, while ignoring the real suffering of those he perceives" (Mendelson 107). This idea is shown many times as Prospero sits back and watches the suffering his magic causes. For example, when Alonso thinks his son Ferdinand is dead, Prospero keeps it to himself that he is actually alive and well just to make the old man suffer, "You cram these words into mine ears, against / The stomach of my sense. Would I have never / Married my daughter there, for coming thence / My

son is lost and (in my rate) she too” (Shakespeare II. 1. 107-110). Prospero also ignores the true feelings of the other characters, only seeing them as they are useful to him. As readers see in Prospero’s speech to Ariel in Auden’s poem, Prospero assumes he knows everything about everyone, only to be contradicted multiple times when the others are given a chance to speak -- an idea that will be discussed more in depth shortly. So, readers must first see the power that Prospero’s art has, before understanding why such power needs to be shown that it has limits.

Auden was a firm believer in the idea that artists must never take themselves too seriously, even becoming irritated with writers like James Joyce and John Milton because of their constant determination to only produce great masterpieces and their tendency to think of themselves as important. In talking about “The Sea and the Mirror,” Auden once said that he is “attempting something absurd, to show in a work of art, the limitations of art” (Kirsch xi). He also praised Shakespeare for his “consciousness of these limitations” (Kirsch xi). Because of his firm belief in the frivolity of art and the irritation he felt at artists’ belief in a higher self-importance, Auden used his poem in order to show Prospero’s fallibility as an artist. In *The Tempest*, readers are expected to take Prospero’s word as truth, never questioning his confidence in the morality of his actions. However, Auden reverses almost everything readers are taught to believe about Prospero and his influence over the other characters.

Auden accomplishes his goal of diminishing Prospero’s power as an artist by putting Antonio in constant opposition with his brother, having the other characters disprove everything Prospero believes about them, and by the way in which the characters speak. In Shakespeare’s play, after realizing that he will not beat Prospero, Antonio goes silent. However, Auden gives him a chance at retaliation in his poem. In their article “Artifice and Self-Consciousness in Auden’s ‘The Sea and the Mirror,’” Lucy and John McDiarmid state, “The shadowy presence of

Prospero's choreography is obscured by Antonio's stanzas" (McDiarmid 364). In addition to his own speech, after each of the other characters speaks, Antonio follows with a stanza aimed towards diminishing Prospero while also asserting his own independence. For example, after his own speech, he says, "Your all is partial, Prospero; / My will is my own: / Your need to love shall never know / Me: I am I, Antonio, / By choice myself alone" (Auden 137). Antonio's retorts against Prospero dominate the second section of the poem, making it so that he is the one in control, rather than his brother. Auden also uses the speeches of the other characters to show the limits of Prospero's power over them. In his speech to Ariel he says, "Alonso's heaviness / Is lost" (Auden 132). However, in Alonso's own speech, he says, "But should you fail to keep your own kingdom / And like your father before you, come / where thought accuses and feeling mocks, / believe your pain..." (Auden 143); in short, the heaviness in Alonso's words completely contradicts what Prospero thought he knew about him. Lastly, it is interesting to note the way in which Auden structures the characters' diction. Kirsch points out that, "In the poem, Auden portrays Prospero as... self-absorbed; he also diminishes him by making the natural Caliban rather than the spiritual Ariel the spokesman for art and gracing Caliban with the sophisticated prose style of the later works of Henry James" (Kirsch xxi). Even the way in which Auden has the characters speak shows the limitations of Prospero's art. He cannot control everything, no matter how hard he tries.

Another point that Auden makes is that art can act as a sort of mirror, reflecting the true nature of reality. Turner observes: "So [art] reflects to us the difference between our fantasies and the real, between moral demand and our reality. It holds out possibilities. It is healing because it acknowledges the real without shame or judgement" (Turner 100). With this idea, we are dealing with Auden's decision to even begin his rewriting as opposed to the content of the

poem specifically. Auden's poem is a piece of art, reflecting the difference between the fantasy of Shakespeare's play and the true reality of the events that just took place. This is also where the poem gets its name – the sea (which some would say reflects life itself) and the mirror (art).

Auden's art reflects to audiences the reality we could not see within *The Tempest*.

Lastly, a very close reading of Auden's poem suggests that he wrote "The Sea and the Mirror" in order to grapple with feelings relating to his love life. In 1939, soon after his emigration to the United States, Auden met Chester Kallman, an American who was fourteen years his junior (Kirsch xv). The two fell in love and entered into a relationship that Auden saw as the "moral equivalent of a marriage" (Kirsch xv). However, in July of 1941, Kallman revealed to Auden that he had betrayed him and taken another lover, something that took a big toll on Auden (Kirsch xv). The two did remain close friends but were never again intimate, their relationship turning more to one of a parent and child as opposed to lovers (Kirsch xviii). If one looks close enough in the text, especially to a few key lines delivered by Prospero, readers can hear Auden voicing his thoughts on the end of his former relationship.

Auden was cited as calling Kallman's affair "The Crisis" (Kirsch xviii), and this idea directly corresponds to lines delivered by Prospero in his speech to Ariel. Prospero says, "Inform my hot heart straight away / It's treasure loves another" (Auden 131). When Prospero says this, he is referring to Miranda, regretting the way that he is no longer the sole object of her affections. However, to any reader who knows the sad ending to Auden's relationship with Kallman, it becomes clear that Auden is speaking through his character. Auden uses a rewriting of *The Tempest* in order to talk through his characters, exploring personal beliefs and giving voice to private musings. So, it wouldn't be strange for Auden to continue this by speaking through

Prospero, giving himself an outlet through which he can express the betrayal he felt at the hands of Kallman.

Thus, W.H. Auden uses his poem “The Sea and the Mirror,” a rewriting of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in order to explore the ideas of religion, art, and love as they related to his personal life in 1940s America. From a religious standpoint, this poem explores the Christian ideal of forgiveness and sees the characters going on a sort of spiritual journey, admitting their shortcomings and desiring to do better. From an artistic view, Auden uses Prospero to show the power, but also the limitations of art, and he also examines the idea that art can be used as a sort of mirror to reflect reality as opposed to the fantasy world that the characters have lived in. Lastly, looking at this poem with the knowledge of Auden’s sexuality, it can be determined that Auden used his poem to voice his feelings on the depressing end of a very important relationship. In the end, Auden didn’t really need Shakespeare specifically. All he needed was a way to disguise his voice coming through to talk about his personal beliefs and private events from his life, and a rewriting of *The Tempest* provided that cover for him.

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