

Science Fiction, Forbidden Planet, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Simone Caroti
University of Trieste

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Caroti, Simone. "Science Fiction, Forbidden Planet, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.1 (2004): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1214>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

CLCWeb Volume 6 Issue 1 (March 2004) Article 11

Simone Caroti,

"Science Fiction, *Forbidden Planet*, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/11>>

Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 6.1 (2004)

Thematic Issue *Shakespeare on Film in Asia and Hollywood*

Edited by Charles Ross

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss1/>>

Abstract: In his paper, "Science Fiction, *Forbidden Planet*, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," Simone Caroti illustrates the way in which Cyril Hume and Fred Wilcox's 1956 science fiction movie *Forbidden Planet* -- whose plot is inspired by Shakespeare's *Tempest* -- reconfigures in Shakespeare's play. Caroti begins by defining the genre of science fiction and explaining its attraction for modern audiences. Following Darko Suvin's notions of science fiction, Caroti highlights the theme of cognitive estrangement and shows how *Forbidden Planet* offers a cultural translation of this theme in *The Tempest*. The result of Caroti's analysis is to read Prospero and his magic in contemporary terms: the film translates Shakespeare's sense of wonder and the conflict between the rational interpretive self and the forces of the irrational into a search for truth and an understanding of the place of humanity in the universe.

Simone CAROTI

Science Fiction, *Forbidden Planet*, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

That the marriage between Shakespeare and Hollywood has produced some offbeat, fascinating, strange, and sometimes simply funny offspring is not a secret. From James Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965) and Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) to Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (1990), and Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You*, many films have tried -- with varying degrees of success -- to institute a dialogue with the bard's work that could go a little further than a simple cinematographic adaptation. One of the more improbable-looking members of this group is briefly discussed by Virginia Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan in their introduction to the latest Arden edition of *The Tempest*. While examining the Freudian interpretations of Caliban's character, they write: "Caliban as 'id' became a palpable thread in twentieth-century psychoanalytic interpretations of *The Tempest*, a notion more dramatically presented in the 1956 science-fiction film, *Forbidden Planet*. Now a cult classic, this postwar film transports its Prospero figure to Altair-IV, a distant planet, where Professor Morbius (Walter Pidgeon) continues his scientific investigations, builds robots (Robby, the film's Ariel) and raises his daughter Altaira (the Miranda figure played by Anne Francis). When a spaceship from earth invades the planet, Altaira falls in love with its handsome captain (Leslie Nielsen), but their romance is threatened by an invisible force that nearly destroys the spaceship and kills several of its crew. The dramatic finale reveals that the mayhem is caused by the Professor's own inner psyche, projected on to an electromagnetic force (Caliban), which implements Morbius's repressed anger at the man who would take away his daughter and jealousy at her love for another man. Only with the destruction of Professor Morbius can the calibanic force be quelled" (Vaughan and Vaughan in *Shakespeare* 111-12).

This, in a nutshell, is the plot of *Forbidden Planet*, together with a hint or two about some of its themes. When the film came out, reviewers were uncharacteristically enthusiastic about its strange blend of Shakespeare and 1950s science fiction. "Shakespeare takes a journey into space," the headline above Alan Brien's review for London's *Evening Standard* proclaimed, and Brien went on to argue that Cyril Hume, the film's scriptwriter, had "produced the most rumbustiously enjoyable of all Hollywood planetary melodramas, apparently by dressing *The Tempest* in space suits" (qtd. in Rosenthal 150). Today, after almost fifty years of continuous advances in special effects technology, it is easy to watch *Forbidden Planet* with a feeling of nostalgia. This, however, is misleading. If we look more carefully, and if the technological state of the art of 1950s science fiction cinema is factored in, not only will it become apparent that the film truly represents a special effects tour de force, but we will also discover that the sense of wonder which is the cornerstone of all good science fiction, greatly enriched in its scope and meaning by an intelligent use of several of *The Tempest*'s main themes, is still by and large intact. *Forbidden Planet* has stood the test of time much better than would appear at first sight, and in any case much better than the great majority of contemporary science fiction productions. In fact, it is now regarded as one of the most influential films in the history of sci-fi cinema, and not simply within the United States. The American 1950s, the decade of Doris Day, Sandra Dee, Elvis The Young and the USA as policeman of the world, where the sun of rationality and moral righteousness always shone, everybody was affluent and happy, and problems were something that lasted a couple of hours' viewing time and were never really serious to begin with.

In this paper, I present a brief analysis of the relationship between *Forbidden Planet* and *The Tempest* in order to illustrate not only the extent of the latter's influence on the former, but also the way in which the film's science-fictional setting significantly contributed to highlight some of the play's main themes. It is better to start with this last point, because it constitutes the background for our more specific discussion. In order to clarify how *Forbidden Planet*'s outer space setting is able to bring to the fore many of the central themes of *The Tempest*, one must ask a couple of basic -- and at first sight rather foolish -- questions: first of all, what does Shakespeare have to do with science fiction? And secondly, why *The Tempest* of all plays? In fact, both questions -- especially the first -- are by no means trivial. The Bard lived and wrote at a time during

which at least ninety-five percent of the world's population still believed that the sun traveled around the earth. The Elizabethan and Jacobean world picture provided people with a small, cozy and earth-centered cosmos, arranged around the opposition between Heaven -- a luminous, fluffy white sky realm way up above -- and Hell, a smoldering chasm of red flame situated in a fuzzily specified below. Each of the five planets we knew about corresponded to an invisible heavenly sphere that kept it aloft in a sky inhabited by angels, comets, stars, and other heavenly bodies, all moving around our earth in a graceful, complicated dance whose sole reason for being was to make us its center stage. Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy dictated how we were supposed to interpret the world around us. Science as we know it today did not exist, and its first great representatives were persecuted for trying to take away from us our earth-centered cosmos. When Nicolaus Copernicus discovered that it was the earth which moved around the sun and not the other way round, he was forced to flee to Holland in order to avoid the Inquisition, and thirty years or so later Galileo Galilei would not fare any better. All this is a far cry from the universe revealed by Newton and Einstein that today provides science fiction with most of its setting and subject matter. We exist within an expanding black void fifteen billion light-years wide, populated by at least a hundred billion different galaxies, each with a population of stars ranging from one hundred to four hundred billion. Our tiny sun and its complement of planets are situated in a peripheral arm of one of those galaxies, in no way special or different from all the others. Science has become our most powerful and trusted instrument for interpreting reality, while religious and mythological thinking are constantly being attacked by rationalists denying the very existence of God. How can we reconcile a form of fiction expressing the variables and problems of today's scientific and technological society with the works of a writer like Shakespeare? Moreover, was the choice of *The Tempest* as the basis of *Forbidden Planet* motivated by characteristics in the play itself that made it the perfect choice for the task at hand?

In his anthology *Age of Wonders*, science fiction editor David Hartwell provides us with an excellent expression of one of the genre's chief characteristics: "A sense of wonder, awe at the vastness of space and time, is at the root of the excitement of science fiction. Any child who has looked up at the stars at night and thought about how far away they are, how there is no end or outer edge to this place, this universe -- any child who has felt the thrill of fear and excitement at such thoughts stands a very good chance of becoming a science fiction reader. ... To say that science fiction is in essence a religious literature is an overstatement, but one that contains truth. Science fiction is a uniquely modern incarnation of an ancient tradition: the tale of wonder. Tales of miracles, tales of great powers and consequences beyond the experience of people in your neighborhood, tales of the gods who inhabit other worlds and sometimes descend to visit ours, tales of humans traveling to the abode of the gods, tales of the uncanny: all exist now as science fiction" (Hartwell 42). Of course, Hartwell is not saying that the mythological tale, the traveler's tale, medieval hagiography and other ancient forms of storytelling *are* science fiction. He is simply suggesting that in their time they satisfied the same aesthetic and emotional needs scifi satisfies today. The sense of wonder generated in the reader or viewer by the vicarious experience of extraordinary events, or by the perception of forces and time-scales far greater than those which can be commonly witnessed in the course of an individual's life, is the chief factor in science fiction's appeal, much in the same way it was for earlier literary forms. Perhaps the most interesting of those forms for our discussion is the traveler's tale, because with it we meet one of science fiction's most recurring features. It does not need to be overly emphasized that one of the best ways of generating the sense of wonder is to set a story in an exotic place, for the experiencing of unusual events will naturally stimulate this ability. Whether it is Ulysses walking in the garden of the Hesperides, Gulliver finding himself tied up in the country of the Lilliputians, David Bowman confronting the two-kilometer-long black monolith at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Stephano and Trinculo touring a strange island with Caliban, the sense of wonder is always there, ready to put us face to face with the marvels of the possible.

In a very material way, the trope of the fantastic voyage is one of the determining factors in the relationship between *The Tempest* and *Forbidden Planet*. Critics have argued for decades over whether Prospero's island, which the play locates somewhere in the Mediterranean between Tunis

and Naples, was originally intended by Shakespeare as a representation of the New World or as a fictional counterpart of the African continent. The supporters of each position are perfectly balanced with respect to each other, because while it is true that travel narratives to the Americas could be found by Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences in works like Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589, 1598-1600) and Samuel Purchas's *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1625), it is also true that those same publications contained several accounts of travels to Africa, like John Evesham's brief story of an English expedition to North Africa in 1586. Shakespeare was certainly familiar with these works but since he left us no specific clue regarding this aspect of the play, it is impossible to say with certainty who is right. All this critical back and forth, however, misses a more relevant point: "Caliban's/Prospero's island lies literally in the Mediterranean between Tunis and Naples, but its geographical location is less important than the fact that it is nameless, uncharted and largely unexplored. This enchanted island harbours two Milanese castaways (Prospero and Miranda), two remarkable natives (Caliban and Ariel) and assorted spirits unlike anything the Europeans (and we, the audience) have ever seen. Our sojourn on this enchanted island is akin to a trip to a distant planet, where we find a world dramatically unlike our own" (Vaughan and Vaughan in Shakespeare 4-5). In other words, the placing of Prospero's island in the Mediterranean works very well as a conceptual basis for justifying its array of marvels, for peopling this virgin territory of the imagination with all the strange things that would not have been plausible in Stratford or London. Between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, the New World and the African continent represented the site of England's sense of wonder. They were the frontier of civilization, peopled by *saluages* with strange, amazing, often horrifying customs, by impossible creatures made of materials other than flesh and blood, and by powers men could only guess at. Shakespeare left Prospero's island nameless precisely because this namelessness made it easier for the viewer or reader to superimpose on it any conceivable imaginative imprinting, depending on one's favorite dream landscape.

If Shakespeare found in Africa and the New World the perfect fantastic landscape, it was to seventeenth-century Italy that he turned to in order to give us the perfect fantastic and adventurous plot. Renaissance Italy was, for the average English citizen, a place of danger and secret, a sophisticated, violent geo-political scene of constantly shifting alliances and endlessly renewing intrigue. From the point of view of a country that was still enjoying one of the most stable periods in its history, Italy must have looked as much like a dream of exoticism, power, and culture as a nightmare of anarchy and instability. Informed as it was by medieval notions of order and structure in all things, and used to thinking of Rome as the seat of religious corruption, the Elizabethan mind looked at Italy with a mixture of fear and fascination; fear for the utterly chaotic and often brutal nature of its political life, fraught with wars small and large into which major European powers were always more than willing to step, and fascination for the sophistication and depth of its cultural intercourse, both within and without its borders (such as they were). Seen from afar, and modified by the fantastic treatment of the fictional materials, it is small wonder that the characters of the *Tempest* should be Italian. Prospero, with his abrupt, violent mood swings and his books of arcane arts, always teetering on the brink between white and black magic, whose throne was usurped by his brother; Alonso, a king who is more than willing to do a bad turn to someone he does not happen to like very much; Antonio and Sebastian, cunning, corrupt, utterly immoral and wholeheartedly devoted to the pursuit of power without consequences; these are only the most relevant examples, not of Renaissance Italy as it really was, but as it looked like from England at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is, in other words, the imaginative translation of a cultural makeup, and from this point of view it is wholly identical to the fictional synthesis of a geographic nexus like Africa or America. Both operate using the same principles, and both provide the English imagination with locales, situations and opportunities that would have been far more difficult to justify on one's own doorstep. It is, indeed, a very interesting group of people, full of as yet untold potential, who remain stranded on Shakespeare's unnamed island. The island is not simply unnamed, however. It is also unexplored, and this is where the experiences of Prospero's unwilling guests come in. As the storm that brought their ship to the island subsides, the Neapolitans find themselves split into three separate groups: Ferdinand, Alonso with the rest of the court

party, and Stephano with -later- Trinculo and Caliban. For most of the play's duration, they all tour the mysterious territory in an attempt to find any survivors other than themselves, and in the process they discover the marvels it has to offer. They all keep hearing strange sounds and unearthly music, coming from invisible sources up in the air. Ferdinand immediately meets Prospero and Miranda, falls in love with the latter, receives a taste of the former Duke's powers before being enslaved and freed again, finds a wife and sees a wondrous masque with Prospero's spirits as actors. Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio and Gonzalo are put to sleep by Ariel (to protect Alonso and Gonzalo from the others' murderous intentions); upon waking they are treated to a vanishing banquet, followed by a terrifying troupe of harpies who engender in them a state of guilty stupor from which only Prospero can free them. Stephano and Trinculo meet Caliban, who immediately proceeds to show the stupefied seamen the natural marvels surrounding them; they hatch with him a plot to kill Prospero and become lords of the island, are chased and stung by Ariel and the rest of the spirits, and are finally discovered by Prospero himself inside his house, wearing his robes. All this moving about and stumbling on incredible things institutes a twin process of exploration and discovery which, resulting as it does in a continuous stream of marvels parading in front of the characters' -and our- eyes, constitutes one of the chief attractions of Prospero's domain. The island is, in short, the perfect place to experience and exercise our sense of wonder, precisely because it has no name and has never really been explored. A hypothetical definitive answer to the America vs. Africa debate will therefore tell us nothing fundamental, for the same reasons that make it pointless to pinpoint the precise location of Trantor, the techno-gothic city-planet of Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy, or to find the exact inspiration for the sand-planet Arrakis in Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

The island is both Africa and America, at least as the Elizabethan and Jacobean imagination represented them. It is the territory of fantasy, and as such it is at the same time nowhere (except inside us) and everywhere (that is, anywhere our imagination sets up shop at any given time). It is Miranda and Gonzalo who, at the end of the play, put the sense of wonder generated by this process of exploration into words. At the end of act 5, soon after Prospero has drawn the curtains that had been hiding Miranda and Ferdinand from the Neapolitans' eyes (itself an effective symbol of the play's celebration of the joys of discovery, since Alonso had thus far thought his son dead), Miranda exclaims "O wonder! / How many goodly creatures are there here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world / That has such people in't" (5.1.181-84). An interesting aesthetic inversion is implied by what Miranda says, because her sense of the marvelous has been stimulated by the sight of Alonso, Sebastian, Gonzalo, Antonio and their retinue -- in other words, people that for us are absolutely normal. For her, it is Caliban, Ariel and Prospero's powers that are the norm, for the only place she really knows is the island. Her sense of what is strange and unknown represents the mirror opposite of everybody else's, and that includes the audience. *The Tempest* seems bent on providing *everyone* with a touch of the amazing. After a few lines, Miranda's words are echoed by a more experienced, conventional observer when Gonzalo attributes the happy ending of their tribulations to the gods "that have chalked forth the way/which brought us hither," and goes on to invite everyone to "rejoice / Beyond a common joy, and set it down / With gold on lasting pillars: in one voyage / Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis; / And Ferdinand, her brother, found a wife / Where he himself was lost; Prospero his dukedom / In a poor isle; and all of us ourselves, / When no man was his own" (5.1.203-04, 208-13).

A possible interpretation of Gonzalo's speech points to the fact that *The Tempest* seems to configure the act of discovery as a morally positive factor in the characters' lives. Everyone leaves the island in some way enriched by his/her experiences, or at least, in the case of Caliban, Antonio, and Sebastian, not harmed by the logical consequences of their actions. Even the storm that brings Alonso and the rest of his group to the island, the fearful spectacle of the harpies at 3.3, and the spirits that chase Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban at 4.1, are subsequently revealed to be illusions, scarecrow spectacles produced chiefly for didactic purposes rather than an honest-to-god attempt at harming anyone. In Shakespeare's play, and in a relevant cross-section of scifi texts as well, the contemplation of the wonderful and the miraculous seems to possess a special quality of kindness, of mercifulness towards our human failings. As with Prospero when Ariel convinces him

to be lenient towards Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio, it has the ability to bend our thoughts toward forgiveness rather than vengeance, and to make us willing to reexamine our personal convictions in the light of something greater than us.

A large-scale version of Prospero's island can be found in ancient maps of the known world, anytime from the first age of cartography to the beginning of the eighteenth century. As soon as mapmakers ventured beyond the boundaries of the known lands, they invariably put markers on their charts that signaled the beginning of the unknown. Anybody who has taken an even cursory glance at those charts will recognize them; the rough outlines of largely unmapped or newly discovered continents, so different from the painstakingly precise contours of today's maps, and inside them, or in the seas and oceans bounding them, all kinds of fantastic creatures: whales, sea-serpents, hydras, gryphons, giants, and on into the sunset. These images are something more than a simple embellishment of the words "sorry, we don't know what's there." They represent a powerful statement in favor of our need to replace the profoundly frightening emptiness of the unknown with an aesthetic construct representing our hopes, dreams, and nightmares. Representing, in short, a marvelous version of us, and the ancient cartographers knew that anybody who happened to look at their maps would have no trouble understanding the symbolic message lying underneath these images. We are all, in our hearts and minds if not in actuality, explorers, and we have constructed many of our strongest myths (the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey* spring to mind) to express our craving for the marvelous. We apparently need to project our imaginative faculties onto the unexplored, to make sense of it if nothing else, so it was only fitting for these mythological creatures to adorn ancient maps.

Fast-forward four hundred or so years from the writing of *The Tempest*, and the world is a very different place. We have mapped every inch of our planet, explored every nook and cranny with survey ships, photo reconnaissance aircraft, submarines, satellites, microscopes. We have landed on the moon and watched our earth rotate with stately calmness on its moderately inclined axis, continents, oceans and cloud formations coming into view as it turned. As the pace of human discovery kept reducing the frontier of the unexplored, we gradually started losing interest in our planet. We found no strange island in the Mediterranean, containing a cavern with "Caliban was here" carved on its walls and the desiccated remains of a fat, ugly old witch thrown into a corner. In much the same way, no fabulous sea-creatures could be found in the depths of the oceans, and the Americas, Australia and Africa yielded no monsters hiding inside forests, roosting on the tops of inaccessible mountains, or lurking under the muddy bed of dark, isolated lakes. Even Marco Polo's *Cathay* failed to deliver. When those of us who had gone westwards to explore realized that now they could materially shake hands with the fellows who had decided to go the other way, we knew the age of discovery was over and done with. So where is Prospero's island now? Enter outer space and faster-than-light travel. In the nineteenth century, Jules Verne decided it would be a nice idea to send men to the moon by having their spaceship shot from a really powerful cannon, and wrote a story about it. Forty years or so later, H.G. Wells did the same, this time using anti-gravity. Ever since then, science fiction writers have found several excuses to send their characters out there, but the most powerful boost for their imagination came in 1929, when the English astronomer Edwin Hubble looked at the sky with his telescope and discovered that Einstein's universe was not static, as Einstein himself had thought at the beginning, but was instead expanding at a speed that increased with distance. He also found out that it was much larger than had been assumed until then. When Hubble took a close look at the size of the universe as revealed by his calculations, he must have felt a little dizzy, for he had come up with a figure of about ten billion light-years. Later measurements would extend this figure to fifteen billion. After we had found the ideal playground for the sense of wonder (not only impossibly large, but expanding to boot), the only thing we needed was an imaginative expedient for getting there. There is thus little to be wondered at if it only took a small step for science fiction writers to imagine the construction of an engine that could kick the light-speed problem in the teeth. Whether one calls it warp engine, hyper-light thruster, dimensional jump capacitor, grid-deficient Heisenberg-Klapat thingamajig or Really Fast Way of Sauntering Along makes no difference. What the faster-than-light drive represents is the equivalent of Alice's rabbit hole and Dorothy's twister, or again of the storm that

brings Alonso's ship to Prospero's island: an effective way of taking people to otherworldly realms of the imagination.

During the seventy years that followed Hubble's discovery, we have seen the universe. The *Mariner*, *Voyager*, and *Galileo* missions have brought back incredible images of our solar system, while ground-based telescopes have watched as far as they could and discovered a majestic dance of stars, nebulas and galaxies involving time-scales and the production of energies that we simply cannot make sense of. The Hubble Space Telescope has peered even further, and for every light-year it covers there is something unprecedented and wonderful that reveals itself to us. The promises of 1929 turned out to be even greater than we imagined. So now it is 1956, and even before the space probes and HST everybody knows that the universe is, in that immortal champion of all understatements, a pretty big place. Scriptwriter Hume and director Fred McLeod Wilcox want to make a film based on *The Tempest* that can preserve the play's sense of wonder, together with a few other themes the two happen to be keen on. What better way of doing so than placing Prospero's island in outer space and enlarging it a little bit? Instead of a lonely patch of earth in the middle of the Mediterranean we now have Altair IV, so called because it is the fourth nearest planet to its parent star, Altair, and instead of a wooden brig being tossed by the elements we have a saucer-shaped starship calmly traveling toward the planet at an appreciable multiple of the speed of light. Prospero is now Doctor Morbius, a philologist stranded on Altair IV with his daughter Altaira when the survey ship of which he was a member, the *Bellerophon*, is destroyed with all its crew by an invisible force of unknown nature. The Ferdinand character is now Commander Adams, captain of the "United Planets cruiser C-57-D, now more than a year out from Earth base on a special mission to the planetary system of the great main sequence star, Altair." The mission is, of course, to rescue the crew of the *Bellerophon*, from whom Earth has not received a single transmission in nineteen years. We have the island and the characters. We have also retrieved our previously lost sense of wonder, and naturally there will be lots of incredible things happening on the planet.

Annoying as it certainly seems, the question of why Hume and Wilcox chose *The Tempest* and not, say, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, remains. After all, the night-time woods of the *Dream* harbor the same kind of wonders that people Prospero's island: elves and fairies, magical potion and strange transformations, Titania, Oberon, and Puck. The occurrences detailed in the play belong certainly to that category of larger-than-life events we have defined as the cornerstone of the sense of wonder, and thus of science fiction, and the act of stepping into the magical woods certainly feels like falling down the rabbit hole or being taken away by a twister. Why, then, did it have to be *The Tempest* and not the *Dream*? For that matter, why not *Macbeth* or even *Hamlet*? Let us assume that there really is a reason that explains the choice of this particular play for a science fiction film. If this is true, it must necessarily follow that the element of the sense of wonder is not enough to define the field of science fiction with sufficient accuracy. What else do we need? If we look at the kind of marvels featured in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we will discover that in their general outline they are almost identical to those portrayed in such modern-day works as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy, Terry Brooks's *Shannara* series and countless others. What all these works have in common, beyond obvious thematic similarities, is the umbrella label of the genre they belong to: fantasy. True, if we go to a bookstore and look for science fiction and fantasy, we will discover that these two categories are invariably put together on the shelves, since fans of the one have a passable chance of being interested in at least taking a look at the other. This, however, does not mean they are the same. What are the differences?

Possibly the most influential definition of science fiction of the last thirty years was given in 1979 by Darko Suvin (see also Wiemer). Mindful of the necessity of establishing once and for all a clearly defined critical identity for the genre, Suvin proceeded to the task of identifying a set of characteristics that would immediately include everything that was science fiction, while at the same time excluding anything that was not. The key factor in his separation of science fiction from other different but similar genres, like fantasy and horror, lies in his use of the twin elements of *estrangement* and *cognition*: "SF is a literary genre," Suvin writes, "whose necessary and sufficient

conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative alternative to the author's empirical experience" (7-8).

We have already encountered the first of the two terms. As defined by Suvin, estrangement is an imaginative agent that excites the reader's sense of wonder by presenting him with a reality set that is radically different from the one he or she is used to. Depending on the work of fiction one reads or sees, the level of estrangement of this alternative reality set varies, ranging between two extremes: a single new element in an otherwise normal setting on the one hand, and a thoroughly altered environment -- complete with a different timeline -- on the other. Estranging factors are an indispensable element in all aspects of fantastic fiction and can therefore be found everywhere, from the great mythological cycles and *The Lord of the Rings* to Greg Bear's *Eon* and Gregory Benford's *Timescape*. As we have seen, however, this element alone is not sufficient to fully distinguish SF from fantasy or the mythological tale, and it needs the second term of the pair, cognition. Quoting from Suvin's work, Edward James writes: "Estrangement is offered by the fairy tale and other literary genres as well, but sf is distinguished also by *cognition*, the process of acquiring knowledge and of reason. 'It sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to a cognitive view,' unlike, for instance, the myth or the fairy tale, which offer absolutes, not enquiry. 'Cognition' is, in fact, frequently the main subject of sf: the investigation, for instance, of possible social systems or new forms of science. A cognitive -- in most cases strictly scientific- element becomes a measure of aesthetic quality, of the specific pleasure to be sought in SF" (James 108).

The crucial difference between science fiction and fantasy lies here. The act of cognition, of rationally making sense of -and coming to terms with -- the estranging elements, increases the sense of wonder inherent in the former, whereas it destroys the pleasure of reading the latter. Magic as represented by writers like Tolkien is best left unexplained, because it belongs to the realm of the irrational. Like a fairy, it is a fragile thing, and trying to rationalize it or explain it away will kill it. On the other hand, a rationally constructed estranging element thrives on cognition, as will readily become apparent when a typical example of the genre is examined. Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1985) is set in our times, and at the beginning of the novel no difference from the world we know is offered. However, estrangement soon rears its head in the form of a biologist's development of a new strain of sentient bacteria. When the private lab he is working for cuts his funds and fires him, deeming his experiment illegal and dangerous, this modern-day Victor Frankenstein injects himself with the latest batch of his creations and goes away. In only a few days, these bacteria spread from their original host to contaminate half the population of the planet. As the novel nears its completion, the world has indeed become estranged from what the reader is used to, but this is nothing compared to the discovery lying in wait at the very end, when the true nature of this biological agent is revealed. Far from being just another outlandish example of malevolent disease (like the monstrous alien virus in John Carpenter's 1982 film *The Thing*), these bacteria have in fact evolved into a completely new life-form inhabiting an entirely different plane of existence, and have taken with them all the human beings who were thought dead. After finishing the last page, the sense of wonder is still with us, even stronger than before. The cognitive discovery of the new life-form's true nature implies a series of revelations regarding our understanding of reality and our place in the universe. Far from diminishing our sense of wonder, these revelations greatly increase it, first of all by grounding its presence within a plausible rational framework, and then by extending the implications of this framework far beyond what we had at first imagined.

In my opinion, the reason Wilcox and Hume chose *The Tempest* as the basis for their film is that the play is a very fertile ground for a science-fictional treatment of Shakespearean themes. To suggest that the play *is* science fiction would probably be a little too much, but I do not think that describing it as a form of proto-sci-fi would be too far-fetched. Consider the title, first of all: in Shakespeare's time, the term "tempest" represented "the alchemical term for the boiling of the alembic to remove impurities and transform the base metal into purest gold; if we see Prospero's goal as the transformation of fallen human nature -- Caliban, Antonio, Sebastian and Alonso- from a condition of sinfulness to a higher level of morality, the play's episodes mirror the alchemical

process" (Vaughan and Vaughan in Shakespeare 64-65). When Prospero comments that "My charms crack not" (5.1.2) and later invites Alonso to "cure thy brains/(now useless) boiled within thy skull" (5.1.59-60), he is referring to the refining of his project of psychological and moral engineering, for which he had been preparing himself ever since he and his infant daughter were stranded on the island, twelve years before the events narrated in the play. Like every self-respecting mad doc scientist, Prospero has studied, planned and waited, and has not acted until the times were ripe and his powers were at their peak. We could therefore see *The Tempest* as a prototypical representation of a pseudo-scientific experiment, a process of cognition employing estranging factors with rationally conceived means for rationally conceived ends.

If *The Tempest* represents a proto-experiment, it necessarily follows that Prospero is a proto-scientist. First of all, the Folio edition of the play capitalizes the term "Art" when it refers to Prospero's powers. "Art" implies study, intellectual labor and hours of practice, not the association one would have in mind when thinking of magic (which is usually something one has either been given or just *has*), and moreover, Prospero's powers also derive from his books and his staff, in other words from his tools. A further layer of believability is provided while the former duke is reminding Ariel of his suffering at Sycorax's hands: "It was a torment / To lay upon the damned, which Sycorax / Could not again undo. It was mine art, / When I arrived and heard thee, / That made gape the pine and let thee out" (1.2.289-93). Here Prospero is not simply saying that his powers are stronger than Sycorax's. He is also referring to a series of treatises written by such neo-Platonic scholars as Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus (translated by Marsilio Ficino) on the difference between the black arts and the white arts. Those works were certainly familiar to Shakespeare, who wove them into the texture of the play because he knew that his audience would have recognized them as well. The result is a clear definition of the abilities and limitations (admittedly very few) inherent in Prospero's powers, not so much to define them with respect to those of Sycorax (who after all has been dead for more than twelve years at the moment the play opens), but rather to clarify his abilities and moral stature *vis-à-vis* the situation that is about to develop with the arrival of the Neapolitans: "Prospero is often described as a theurgist, a practiser of 'white magic,' a rigorous system of philosophy that allows the magician 'to energize in the gods or control other beneficent spiritual intelligences in the working of miraculous effects.' The antithesis of theurgy is 'goety' or 'black magic:' its evil practitioner produces magic results by disordering the sympathetic relationships of nature or by employing to wicked ends the powers of irrational spirits" (Vaughan and Vaughan in Shakespeare 62).

While the evil magician uses the powers of the irrational, the good theurgist studies a rationally constructed "rigorous system of philosophy" that enables him to work with nature, not against it. In *The Tempest*, irrationality (epitomized by Caliban, Sebastian and Antonio) is evil, rationality (Prospero, Ariel, Gonzalo, Ferdinand) is good. The same kind of conflict between morally upright rational attitudes and the evils of an irrational behavior features prominently in *Forbidden Planet*, but as the Vaughans recognize in their introduction to *The Tempest*, Hume and Wilcox gave it a new twist. Linking the Suvinian twin elements of estrangement and cognition to Freud's theories, they used this strange hybrid as the carrier wave for a psychoanalytical treatment of the clash between the two conflicting sides in the Janus face of human nature: the Apollonian, rational worldview of the conscious mind and the Dionysian, rabidly-instinctual-and-proud-of-it irrationality of the unconscious. A brief look at the film's plot will quickly clarify the issue: *Forbidden Planet* is, for all intents and purposes, a multi-layered compendium of cognitively validated marvels. First of all, it is already set in the future, which of course is extraordinary for the audience but not for the characters. This situation, together with the matter-of-fact attitude the crew of the starship displays towards such exotic elements as faster-than-light drive, teleportation and beam weapons, further excites our sense of wonder. The perception of a plausible, rational environment is strengthened by the characters' use of well-structured 20th-century terminology to indicate hierarchies within the command structure of the ship, engineering problems, physical principles and biological factors. The behavior of the starship's crew is exactly what one would expect from the crew of a vessel on a rescue mission, and their reactions to what happens on Altair IV is a more than educated extrapolation of what a normal group of people would do in a similar situation.

When Commander Adams tells Morbius that the cruiser is there to rescue him, he is warned by the doctor to avoid landing on the planet. Morbius appreciates their concern for his safety but he is all right, thank you very much. This time, Prospero wants to remain in exile. Who will *not* be all right if they land on Altair IV, they are informed, are the Captain and his crew. As Adams and his two highest-ranking officers finally meet Morbius, they discover that the only living beings on the planet are himself and his daughter. Everybody else is dead. The force that destroyed them is -- in an interesting inversion of Ariel's power- invisible, incomprehensible, unstoppable, and soon begins to attack the starship, killing many of its crew. This force is something nobody is able to understand - not the audience, of course, but not the characters either.

The hunt for the truth is on then, and in the way Adams and his men set about finding it *Forbidden Planet* reveals its fundamental nature. Footprints and energy signatures are examined, even the readings of the instruments connected with the cruiser's protective energy barrier at the time of the creature's attacks, while Adams engages in some old-fashioned pumping of witnesses for information. In the process, he manages to fall in love with Altaira, who naturally reciprocates. It is Adams's tactics that yield the best results. When he and his officers enter Morbius's inner sanctum, the doctor is finally forced to show them his discovery: a great number of planet-sized generators built by an unimaginably evolved alien race, the Krell. After a million years of continuous evolution, the Krell were annihilated in one single night, just as they were on the verge of an evolutionary breakthrough that would have allowed them to leave their baser instincts and physical bodies behind. By connecting their minds to the generators and tapping the well-nigh infinite energies these machines were able to muster, they would have become pure psychic energy, sheer quanta of unadulterated rationality free of the physical constraints of a messy, inefficient body as well as of the irrationality of the unconscious, the ultimate rationalist's dream. Predictably enough, their murderer is the same force that destroyed the *Bellerophon* and is now busy trying to slaughter Adams's crew. The final revelation comes as a result of yet another act of cognition: the ship's medical officer and Adams pool their mental efforts and discover that the Krell were annihilated by their own subconscious. As the monstrous generators were connected to the minds of every Krell individual, their "id" recognized the threat of annihilation they posed and protected itself, using the unimaginable energies produced by the machines to destroy everyone on the planet. Of course, when all the Krell died their subconscious died with them, but now there is Morbius. During their first meeting, the doctor had told Adams that he was the only one of the *Bellerophon*'s crew who did not want to leave the planet, owing to his enthusiasm for the alien artifacts, an enthusiasm that the others did not share. The truth was a little different: the doctor had been the first to stumble on the discovery, and had been quick to connect his mind to the generators (which, of course, were still in perfect working order); what he had found was nothing less than the combined power of a dozen stars, all at his disposal. The Krell were an entire population, conceivably numbering several billions, and their minds, Adams and his men are told, were immeasurably more advanced and capable than ours. Yet they were destroyed in one single night. What would happen if one mere human being were to receive all that power in one single gulp, without intermediaries or sharers? As far as Morbius' conscious mind is concerned, nothing beyond a great enthusiasm for an unprecedented scientific discovery, and possibly a strong conviction of the need to advocate its careful study in the strongest possible terms. For the doctor's "id," however, it is a different story altogether. One does not share power, plain and simple. In the course of our all-too-often-barbaric history, we have come to learn this lesson quite well, almost always at a terrible price. Roman Emperors, Asian Khans, Medieval warlords, and twentieth-century dictators of all kinds and descriptions, have never failed to do the utmost to amass as great a quantity of personal power as possible, irrespective of whether a single human being could actually do something with this much at his disposal. This has nothing to do with rational considerations, of course, but it has everything to do with the Freudian irrational, the child-king that wants everything his way and is more than happy to annihilate any obstacle barring him from his goal. Fantasies of empowerment are extremely seductive, and once satisfied, practically impossible to let go of. Doctor Morbius faces this situation on Altair 4: when his companions decide to leave the planet to whatever fate awaits it, his subconscious is well aware that to agree to such a course of action would

mean severing its connection to the machines that make it near-omnipotent, and the incalculable de-powering that would result would equal death, or something even worse. It is simply unacceptable. Of course, Morbius constructs a series of rational arguments against leaving, but they are only a smoke-screen to cover the real reason: one does not share power, or let go of it. When the crew of the *Bellerophon* is ready to leave, safely tucked in their anti-g hammocks on board the ship, the doctor's "id" sucks power from the generators and defends itself, destroying everyone and everything.

It is nineteen years after the *Bellerophon's* destruction now, and Commander Adams and his men have come to Altair IV, charged with the mission of rescuing the doctor and his daughter and taking them back to earth. The forces of the irrational are threatened once again, and once again, they wake from dormancy. They want to survive, and like every threatened animal, they lash out. For all those readers of *The Tempest* who root for Caliban and wish he would not be so impotent in front of Prospero's arts, this is a dream scenario. Sycorax's deformed, helpless offspring is now connected to dozens of planet-sized generators. He is well-nigh omnipotent, and he is *not* happy. As soon as Morbius realizes what he has let himself do, he also knows how to stop himself: in an act of sacrifice that mirrors Prospero's giving up of his powers, the doctor steps directly in the path of the calibanic force he has unleashed. As his own unconscious kills him, he triumphs over it. Just before dying, he gives Adams the necessary instructions for the destruction of the generators. A force of this magnitude cannot be left in the hands of the unprepared, and mankind has a long way to go before it can hope to use it without the terrible consequences that sealed the fate of the Krell. As the United Planets starship heads back home, with Adams at the helm and Miranda at his side, everybody is treated to the final explosion that marks the end of Altair IV and their adventure. As the captain himself remarks, their encounter with the marvelous has given them a number of valuable lessons, and it is their responsibility to face the future with greater wisdom.

Both *Forbidden Planet* and *The Tempest* represent an intelligent reflection on the uses and misuses of power, and every character has a role to play in it, from minor figures like the ship's boatswain (rather amusingly mirrored by Earl Holliman's perennially thirsty cook) to major players like Alonso or Antonio (who are without direct counterparts in *Forbidden Planet*). However, its cornerstone is once again represented by the twin character of Prospero/Morbius. In the play, this theme is introduced right at the beginning. When Gonzalo approaches the ship's boatswain to give him advice, the man answers back: "You are / a councilor; if you can command these elements to / silence and work the peace of the present, we will not / hand a rope more. Use your authority! If you cannot, / give thanks you have lived so long and make yourself / ready in your cabin for the mischance of the hour, if it / so hap. -- Cheerly, good hearts -- Out of our way, I say!" (1.1.20-23). Evidently, not even the wise Gonzalo knows when it is time to let others do their job. The Neapolitans' arrogant assumption that they can give advice to experienced seamen during a storm is only the first in a long line of instances where the dangerous nature of power is examined. In fact, it is Prospero himself who recognizes that his exile on the island was caused by his excessive dedication to his arcane arts: "those being all my study, / The government I cast upon my brother / And to my state grew stranger, being transported / And rapt in secret studies" (1.2.74-77).

It is fundamental to understand that those same powers that make Prospero so terrible on his island cost him his dukedom in the first place. If he had not engaged himself in them, he would have remained powerful. As it is, the end of *The Tempest* merely reinstates him in his former condition without any increase in power, except perhaps greater wisdom. The dangerous nature of his studies is definitively asserted by his decision to get rid of them once his aims have been reached, as well as by his imploration of our forgiveness in his final speech. On the other hand, Doctor Morbius must sacrifice his own life to get rid of his powers, and from this point of view the Freudian elements of *The Tempest* become a useful critical tool. Prospero is able to willingly give up his Arts because he has never repressed them; alternately gentle and raging, optimistic and morose, he is well aware of what he has left happen to himself and Miranda, and knows that his powers represent a danger for both. Painful as it was for him, his decision to let them go represents a substantial growing up on his part. His two Freudian alter-egos, his superego and his "id," are both outside, represented by Ariel and Caliban respectively, and his fondness for the former as well as

his hostility towards the latter allow him to maintain a sane relationship with himself. When Prospero lets Ariel convince him that forgiveness is better than vengeance, he is listening to the better part of his nature, and he can do that because he can also see very well what his worst part looks like. Morbius, on the contrary, has been granted no such luxury. For someone who is supposed to be the very embodiment of rational enlightenment, he goes by a rather unsettling name: "Morbius" is a slight reconfiguration of the Latin *morbus* and the Italian *morbo*, both names meaning "disease," both of the body and of the mind, and the dangerous duality such a name implies is mirrored in the doctor's relationship towards the two aspects of his nature. Morbius has kept his Caliban inside, repressed and unrecognized for more than nineteen years. His apparently rational discourse conceals a seething, raging psyche over which he has no control. To further compound the problem, his Ariel is a robot, not a human being. It cannot help him. When he finds his life on Altair IV (his *powerful* life, with the energy output of a dozen suns at his command) threatened, and when he finds that his daughter has found another man, he unleashes a force which he, lacking as he does Prospero's greater psychological awareness, will only be able to stop by killing himself. That Morbius does so, that he is finally able to make the ultimate unselfish decision and destroy himself in order to let others live, testifies to the basically good nature of the character.

Works Cited

- Hartwell, David G., ed. *Age of Wonders: Exploring the Worlds of Science Fiction*. New York: Walker, 1984.
James, Edward. *Science Fiction in the 20th Century*. London: Oxford UP, 1994.
Rosenthal, Daniel. *Shakespeare on Screen*. London: Hamlyn, 2000.
Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 2000.
Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.
Wiemer, Annegret. "Utopia and Science Fiction: A Contribution to Their Generic Description." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 19.1-2 (1992): 171-200.

Author's profile: Simone Caroti graduated in Anglo-American Literature at the University of Trieste, Italy, in 2002 with a thesis on H.P. Lovecraft's geography of the fantastic. He is currently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in comparative literature and science fiction at Purdue University and plans on following his studies with a PhD. E-mail: <scaroti@purdue.edu>.