



*Keywords:* natural philosophy, visual arts, sovereignty, illusionism, media

### Prospero's Art: Nature, Politics, Visuality in *The Tempest*

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In his last play, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare spectacularly explores the physics and metaphysics of nature in a distant and exotic environment, that is an 'un-inhabited island' somewhere out of the beaten maritime routes, probably located either in a remote corner of Southern Mediterranean or in the faraway Caribbean sea. The plants, animals and stones of the island, as well as the human beings who happen to be washed on its shores, seem all to be linked by mysterious, invisible threads that can be seen and pulled through "magic" understanding. This is precisely the "Art" of Prospero, one of the most controversial characters that Shakespeare created: a former ruler (Duke of Milan) so deeply "enraptured" (and distracted) by "secret studies" to consent his brother Antonio to usurp him. After living twelve years in exile on the island with his now 15-years old daughter experimenting and refining his studies, he wants to restore her legitimate position in the world (she must be princely married) and uses his "so potent Art" (V.1.50) to accomplish his project. Many historical figures have been credited to be the model of Prospero, starting from Marsilio Ficino, who first introduced Hermes Trismegistus to the European humanist culture, but also Paracelsus, Leonardo da Vinci and, of course, John Dee. Above and beyond them, Prospero stands out as an everlasting *exemplum* of the Renaissance man, with his weaknesses and strengths.

The island, therefore, is not only a laboratory for the natural philosopher who is investigating "the secret book of nature", but is an experimental ground for the ruler who is conversant in the new art of government (from Machiavelli on) – in fact, the whole first scene of the first act is but an allegory of the State - it is also, and literally, a stage, since "the play is the thing" (*Hamlet*), through which human beings can not only be observed and scrutinized but also deeply transformed (and purged by their most pernicious emotions and desires) by the illusionistic and yet all too real Art of the theatre.

The panel will offer to discussion a few of the above mentioned aspects of the play: Prospero as a scientific investigator of both nature and art, *à la* Leonardo (Pennacchia), the transformative component of his "rough magic" as reinterpreted by new visual media like cinema (Bladen); the legitimation of the art of ruling in connection to visuality and illusionism in outdoor and indoor playhouses (Elam); the enchantment of the Restoration *Tempest* on whose island all elements, nature included, are the product of an overtly spectacular construct (Calvi).