

Charles W. Johnson

ENGL 0220 (Great Books I), Pruett

Short Essay

2 June 1999

Rewriting Prospero

*Forbidden Planet as a Tragic Revision of *The Tempest**

Many critics have noticed that the film *Forbidden Planet* is, in many ways, a modernization of *The Tempest*. Although the film never mentions Shakespeare's play in the narrative or in the credits, it was known at the time that it drew heavily from the text and any reader familiar with *The Tempest* could identify parallels without much difficulty. Despite the parallels, however, there are also radical differences between film and play, revolving around the parallel characters of Prospero and Doctor Morbius. Where Prospero overcomes his anger and regains his rightful duchy, Morbius is eventually consumed by the forces that he sought to control and dies. In the final analysis, *Forbidden Planet* is best seen not as an adaptation of *The Tempest*, but as a radical departure from it, a different narrative unfolding with the same characters. In *Forbidden Planet*, the comic drama of *The Tempest* is hijacked and rewritten as tragedy.

The similarities between play and film also revolve around Prospero characters, and the relationships of other characters and plot elements to them. Prospero is a sorcerer and uses his art to control fairy creatures; Morbius controls powerful alien technology and has mechanical servants to do his bidding. The source of Prospero's power is the witch Sycorax, who inhabited

the island before his arrival; Morbius inherits his power from the Krell, an alien race who inhabited Altair before his arrival. Altaira and Miranda are the beautiful daughters of the recluse, who fall in love with Commander Adams and Fernando, the handsome male protagonists. Prospero's two servants are the cheerful, faithful Ariel, and the menacing, dangerous Caliban; Dr. Morbius is served by the stalwart Robby and the terrifying Id monster.

The crux of the differences between Prospero and Morbius, which in the end determines their divergent fates, lies in their attitudes towards life and towards humanity. Prospero is open to life and to man, while Morbius is closed. Prospero was exiled to the island by a plot beyond his control, and wishes to return; Morbius exiled himself to Altair and only wants to be left alone, to live in peace¹. Morbius is dour in his appearance and manner, always dressed in black and speaking in grave tones; Prospero is often light-hearted, conspiring to arrange romantic matches and putting on masque dances with his magic. Even their names suggest the differences in their demeanors, and their ultimate fates: *Prospero* evokes the word *prosper*, and images of happiness and success; *Morbius*, the word *morbid*, or the French *mort*, both signifying death. It is this openness which allows Prospero to give up his quest for power over others, to forgive his enemies, and to humbly beseech the audience to help him home at the end. Morbius, on the other hand, is destroyed by his own power-lust in the form of the Id monster ... although in the end he frantically cries out that he disavows, releases the Id monster, he is too far gone for a comic resolution, and he must die as he is purged of his "fatal flaw."

The identity of the Id monster, in fact, is representative of this crucial difference. In *The*

¹ He also wishes to live on his planet because he is so disgusted with the outside world; indeed, he later rants about how he does not consider mankind good enough to receive the Krell technology.

Tempest, the monster is Caliban, a native of the island before Prospero's arrival. Although, like the Id monster, Caliban to a certain extent represents Prospero's rage and need to control others (mostly by receiving commands and threats), he is also constructed as Other, a dehumanized and rapacious monster. Thus Caliban serves as a dark mirror to Prospero's basic goodness; the abuse which Caliban represents is in some ways legitimized and externalized from Prospero. Morbius's dark servant, on the other hand, at first seems to be a terrifying native, but in fact is found to be a "monster from the id:" that is, from *Morbius's own subconscious*. While Caliban *externalizes* Prospero's flaws, the Id monster is an integral part of who Morbius is, and the megalomania and killing rage that it represents cannot be separated from the master and disavowed. Morbius must face the evil within himself, not the evil of others. It is this catastrophic conflict which ultimately destroys Doctor Morbius himself, bringing the drama to a tragic close.²

² It has often been pointed out that tragic endings usually have some ambiguity; by being purged through their deaths, the tragic hero can be seen to regain some small moral victory. This is true here too: although Morbius must die to achieve it, he does in the end disavow the megalomania and inner anger that create the Id monster's murderous rampages.