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ENGL 2270

The Tempest: Mastery and the Arts

Mastery of one's environment and skills is a critical source of confidence and power in overturning one's circumstances. Often, expertise and careful maneuvering is the only means by which justice can be restored and long-standing power dynamics can be upset. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* commences with a tumultuous storm and a shipwreck, immediately setting the tone for a play that unfolds against this backdrop of mastery and recovery. Throughout the play, the characters grapple with various forms of authority, leading to a profound exploration of power dynamics, forgiveness, and justice. In many ways, *The Tempest* can be framed as a contest of mastery and how mastery can amend unfair judgments. Immediately, the storm that opens the play serves as a symbolic representation of Prospero's mastery and powers of transformation. Its tempestuous nature mirrors the internal and external conflicts that the characters must confront upon their arrival to the island. The wreck itself becomes a metaphor of their shattered lives and disrupted destinies, launching the characters on paths of recovery and self-discovery.

Immediately, the essence of the play reveals itself, contextualizing the subsequent events within a narrative as a quest for recovery, restitution, and salvation. Betrayed and usurped by his brother Antonio to be exiled on an island, the exiled Duke of Milan, Prospero, wields mastery over diplomacy and magic to wrest control of his future and find redemption in spite of wrongs committed against him. Ultimately, he is able to find revenge and forgiveness for the past

transgressions against him. Through characters like Prospero, *The Tempest* demonstrates how mastery and its various manifestations can lead to recovery and contemplates the overarching theme of mastery as a source of power and a pathway to redemption.

In the opening act, the audience first witnesses Prospero's first manifestation of mastery. Prospero's magical prowess, acquired during his years of isolation on the island, quickly becomes a central and primary driver of the play. Through his command over the supernatural, Prospero summons the storm that initiates the events of the play; the audience immediately sees how his mastery over magic serves as both a tool for recovery and a means of asserting control over the fates of those marooned on the island. Broadly, we see this sense of mastery as both a positive and negative actor of development. It can be regarded as neither wholly good nor wholly bad. As a catalyst for the play, it can be argued that its use precipitated the entire recovery and reconciliation sequence that ultimately amended the characters' relationships for the better. However, its use nevertheless raises ethical concerns. In Act 5, Scene 1, Prospero reflects on the consequences of his actions, acknowledging the moral ambiguity of his use of magic. Though effective in achieving his ends as evidenced by his reflections, he has qualms and misgivings about its power and how unnatural and unfair it is in its own right. Having finally fulfilled all of his goals, he subsequently declares:

graves at my command \ Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth \ By my so
potent art. But this rough magic \ I here abjure, and when I have required \ Some
heavenly music, which even now I do, \ To work mine end upon their senses that \ This
airy charm is for, I'll break my staff, \ Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, \ And deeper
than did ever plummet sound \ I'll drown my book. (Act 5, Scene 1)

Here, Prospero grapples with the implications of his magical prowess. While it was successful in achieving his end goals, it raises questions about the ethical boundaries of his magical mastery. While it has achieved a physical good in his eyes, it is a wild form of magic and ungodly. Such work, in his eyes, is shameful and to repent, he promises to destroy his staff and bury his book once his plan has been enacted and his sought after goals achieved. The interplay between magical mastery and moral responsibility underscores the consequences of unrestrained authority and emphasizes the role of mastery as a means to both amend wrongdoings of the past and create new injustices. Clearly, this form of mastery can be seen both as a good insofar as it precipitated in the characters' recoveries, and as a bad in its moral murkiness. Concisely, Prospero rationalizes his use and recognizes his use of his magical mastery as an unjust means to a positive end.

The pursuit of diplomatic and political mastery also emerges prominently in "The Tempest," inherently intertwined with Prospero's overarching quest for recovery. Driven by a desire to reclaim his position as the Duke of Milan and bind Naples and Milan politically through Ferdinand and Miranda's marriage, Prospero engages in cunning political maneuvers. More specifically, his machinations involve manipulating the relationships between characters and tricking them into his bidding using Ariel and Caliban as pawns to project his power. As before, Shakespeare's portrayal of Prospero's political mastery and authority is a mix of both good and bad. While he ultimately achieves recovery of what he has unjustly lost, he also does so by questionable means and significantly exploits Ariel's and Caliban's fealty to him. It invokes a sense of Machiavellianism reminiscent of colonialism that, while clearly effective in achieving results, has a malignant potential for abuse that cannot be ignored. The negative effects of

Prospero's political mastery and authority most strongly asserts itself in scenes with Caliban and Ariel. In one of the first scenes with Caliban, this power dynamic negatively highlights Prospero in Act 1 Scene 2, when Prospero and Caliban insult each other:

PROSPERO: Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil \ Himself. Upon thy wicked dam,
come forth!

CALIBAN: As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed \ With raven's feather from
unwholesome fen \ Drop on you both! A southwest blow on ye \ And blister you all o'er!
... This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou takest from me.

(Act 1 Scene 2)

Clearly, through Caliban's defiance, Prospero's political mastery is highly negative insofar as how it affects those under his influence. Caliban desperately struggles for freedom throughout the play. Prospero abuses Caliban and Ariel to a significant degree, and while his diplomatic scheming and powers of persuasion work to facilitate his road to recovery and redemption, they come at the cost of those he tramples. Prospero benefits greatly from his diplomatic mastery and ability to coordinate grand plans, but at the same time, it causes Caliban and Ariel to suffer and continue to suffer immensely under his political authority. Nevertheless, throughout the play, mastery of diplomacy reveals itself as another way that Prospero wrests control of his destiny; political cunning enables Prospero to reclaim his position as Duke of Milan but also sustain its lasting security and power by inducing a marriage between his daughter and the son of Naples. As with his mastery of sorcery, it works as a force for good but has negative moral implications that cannot be ignored.

Finally, the dynamics of parental mastery feature prominently in Prospero's relationship with his daughter, Miranda. Prospero's protective instincts drive him to control Miranda's knowledge of their history and manipulate her interactions with other characters. While Prospero is ultimately motivated by paternal concern and fatherly love, his actions raise fundamental questions about the balance between safeguarding a child and allowing them autonomy and free will. Prospero's authoritative mastery as a father becomes a critical aspect of the play's exploration of mastery and power and how this power can be used as a force for recovery and reconciliation. This parental mastery, authority, and resulting sense of recovery feature most prominently in Act 1, Scene 2, where Miranda questions her father about the storm, "If by your art, my dearest father, you have / Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them. (Act 1, Scene 2)" Prospero's response reveals both his paternal authority and how he wields it to allay fear: "Be collected. / No more amazement. Tell your piteous heart / There's no harm done." The exchange is a microcosm for the delicate balance between parental guidance and acknowledgement of the child that Prospero straddles throughout the play. While he recognizes and loves Miranda as his child, as a parent, he manipulates her to a significant extent to achieve his end goals. By the end of the play, his mastery as a parent—in addition to some magic—enables him to secure Miranda's love for Ferdinand, ultimately coalescing into a marriage. Again, this result is ultimately mixed, as the play holistically explores the contrasting themes of authority and free will in evaluating the effects of Prospero's mastery. As usual, Prospero leverages this paternal power and mastery as a parent to expedite his recovery into power as Duke of Milan and to secure his throne by marrying Miranda to Ferdinand. There is no clear cut good or bad judgment to this action; the play more generally offers no definitive critique on Prospero's actions. He achieves positive results for everyone but does so by leveraging morally ambiguous means. Miranda should have a

right to self-determination, but her knowledge of the world and decisions in the play are ultimately heavily influenced by Prospero and what he allows her to see and know. This paternal power interleaves greatly with the magical and political components of Prospero's plan and ultimately leaves the audience unsure as to whether to regard Prospero's use of his paternal power as good or bad. Miranda's free will is suppressed, but Prospero ultimately achieves his sought after redemption and recovery through parental mastery.

In conclusion, throughout this journey, driven by a mix of revenge, political ambition, and paternal concern, Prospero projects his magical, diplomatic, and parental masteries to achieve this end. The play again offers no simplistic judgment for this behavior. It facilitates Prospero's recovery and redemption, but as usual, authority clashes heavily with ideas of freedom and independence. Prospero, in effect, plays the role of puppetmaster in order to manipulate the stranded islanders, unfairly reducing their autonomy yet ultimately achieving a favorable end for everyone. He leverages his various forms of mastery to ultimately achieve recovery, redemption, and reconciliation with those who have wronged him in the past. By the end, he is able to forgive them and restore his place as Duke of Milan with strong political ties to Naples through Ferdinand and Miranda. The play invites the audience to explore the ethical dimensions of power as characters navigate Prospero's storm of influences. The suppression of free will is overall negative, but the end result arguably favors everyone involved. Alonso and the rest of the co-conspirators are forgiven of their guilt, Miranda finds love under questionable circumstances, and Prospero returns to power. Overall, *The Tempest* is a rich tapestry that revolves around the central problem of redemption and recovery and the nuanced question of mastery.