Tao Wu

Professor Paul Holchak

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Revenge, Reconciliation, and Restoration of Power in *The Tempest*

A controversy in literary criticism regarding Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, turns on the question of whether the actions of the central character, Prospero, represent the European colonization of the indigenous people in the New World. Literary critics of New Historicism argue that The Tempest should be seen in the historical context of the New World and, for a more accurate reading of its cultural significance, Prospero's treatments of Caliban and Ariel typify European colonial subjugation of the powerless natives. Other critics argue that the literary meaning of Shakespeare's playtext suggests a different reading, in which the chief contextual framework for understanding Prospero's actions is European power politics rather than new world colonialism. One of the latter view's main proponents, David Kastan writes that "the play is much more obviously a play about European dynastic concerns than European colonial activities" (Kastan 250). Judging from the story development, character transformation, and historical context, my own view is that the play is primarily concerned with the hierarchical conflicts of European powers. Through Prospero's orchestrated reconciliation with Italian aristocrats and successful restoration of dukeship, the ultimate significance of his actions lies not with the cultural performance of European colonialist practices but with the practical reflection of ruthless power plays in European dynastic politics in the Renaissance period.

In the play's prehistory, we learn that Prospero is the rightful Duke of Milan whose growing disengagement with his duties to rule breeds disastrous consequences that lead to his

banishment to an island far off from the dukedom. The bookish Prospero devotes himself to the pursuit of " bettering" his mind, which directly influences the public opinion and aristocratic confidence in his leadership for the worse (Shakespeare 1.2.90–92). Little does he know that Antonio, his brother and a trusted surrogate appointed to manage the state affairs in his stead, soon becomes maliciously ambitious. As a result, Prospero is forced into exile, along with his young daughter, Miranda, to a distant island when the usurper, Antonio, succeeds in staging a coup d'état with the help of Alonzo, the King of Naples (1.2.88–132). Prospero pays the ultimate price of his dukedom and nearly the lives of himself and Miranda and the price that he pays creates the circumstances and motivation for Prospero's decade-long ambition of a political comeback.

While Prospero, with a strong desire for vengeance, continues his study by honing his magic craft on the enchanted island, his strategic shrewdness to align his goal with the needs of the native creatures puts Miranda directly at risk. When Prospero and his daughter barely escaped death at sea and landed on this island, they met Caliban, a monster who claims to be the rightful inheritor of the island, with kindness and grace. His daughter even "took pain" to teach him a language, which requires effort, patience, and time, all for the betterment of Caliban (1.2.354–65). However, Caliban's failed sexual assault of Miranda dashes Prospero's hopes for coexistence in peace and threatens the centerpiece, Miranda's virginity, in his grand plan for the eventual return to power in Milan, which will be discussed in depth later in the essay.

However much one feels sympathetic towards the central figure due to the repeated betrayal by yet another trusted protégé, there is no denying the coercive power that Prospero displays in the control of Ariel, a magical spirit, and Caliban. Verbal threats and corporal punishments deployed to gain, through the labor of the enslaved Caliban, island resources that

Prospero and his daughter vitally rely on exemplify, according to the view of postcolonial and new historicist critics, European colonization of the indigenous people in the New World. As Tom Lindsay argues, “Caliban lived as an egalitarian and apolitical subject… Theirs is a world devoid of hierarchy and politics" (400-401). In other words, Prospero’s dealings with Caliban ideologically contaminate the otherwise innocent and apolitical island creature. Such contamination then is used to provide ground for absurd justification of his authority over “land to which they could have no conceivable legitimate claim,” as Barker and Hulme put it, and is characteristic of European colonialism that Prospero’s actions are claimed to represent (202).

Although the ostracized sorcerer’s island occupation is strongly reminiscent of his brother’s duchy usurpation and difficult to reconcile morally, further examination of the playtext reveals counter-evidence to the colonialism interpretation. “When thou cam’st first, Thou strok’st me…And then I loved thee” (1.2.335–45). The order in Caliban’s remarks is what is often glossed over by many new historicist critics. Humane care precedes communal generosity. Showing Prospero afterward all the hidden resources on the island in response to their goodwill is not a decision rooted in egalitarianism by Caliban. It is reciprocity rooted in mutual respect and affections. It is, above all, voluntary. After all, Caliban has to communicate the locations and resource types to Prospero in the language from which he learns and benefits.

Furthermore, Caliban's subservient and servile attitude toward Stephano in Act 2.2 goes against the interpretation that he is an apolitical subject whose generosity has been exploited. Caliban pleads with Stephano to take down Prospero and replace him as Caliban’s master in exchange for menial grunt work and valuable information about island resources (2.2.159–65). Caliban’s use of resource information as negotiating chips goes to show his political side. What is more, in Act 3.2, Caliban threatens to withhold information about where the fresh drinkable

water is in order to punish Trinculo for unfavorable comments (3.2.65-66). He is capable of asking whether a person is friendly or not, which in and of itself is a political question. At the very least, Caliban is neither egalitarian nor apolitical.

Rather than Prospero's colonial subjugation, ironically, it is Caliban's attempted sexual subjugation of Miranda that causes their relationship to go haywire in the first place. No reasonable person would expect authoritarian rulers to refrain from exercising authority over their subjects until a misdeed is committed, colonizers to share their living space together with their dearest loved ones and the colonized subjects from whom they intend to exploit and profit, or a father to sit idly by when his daughter is molested, let alone nearly raped by a monster. Enslaving Caliban is a decision of self-defense to prevent future occurrences without taking his life and a political calculation to preserve his daughter's virginity, an asset of absolute importance to Prospero's political interests. Though the decision seems conveniently utilitarian to benefit from Caliban's slavery status and perhaps to justify and legitimize their occupation of the island, plotting to take over the island like a colonizer is evidently not in Prospero's mind.

However, what is in Prospero's mind is his two-prong approach to implementing his plan: entrapping the Italian aristocrats on the enchanted island where his servant, Ariel, can help to further manipulate their psyche for eventual reunification with Prospero as well as clandestinely bringing about a potential romance between Miranda and Ferdinand, a prince of Naples directly in the line of succession. A royal marriage will undoubtedly solidify the two city-states' alliance and firmly place Prospero at the top of the power hierarchy. In the words of Ann Jennalie Cook "Nor did aristocrats enjoy much more freedom.…most children entered into alliances that furthered family interests" (Cook, 239). Falling in love with Ferdinand at first sight, Miranda falls for not just an equally infatuated prince but also a crafty arrangement that her father sets up

with the aim of his political advancement, by extension, the benefits of the family. But when it comes to concerns about hereditary power, the wronged Duke of Milan is hardly the only one that thinks that way.

The King of Naples who marries his daughter to the King of Tunis mourns over a power vacuum created by his son's supposed death that is risking the family's political grip on the kingdom. "O thou mine heir of Naples and of Milan," Alonzo woefully laments his drowned son, Ferdinand (2.1.113-14). Obviously, he has high hopes, or plans, for his son to rule both powerful city-states. Despite Alonzo's daughter, Claribel "is now Queen" and their family surely "prospers well" in return from this political transaction, the loss of Ferdinand, the rightful heir to the throne, is, for Alonzo alone, what is unbearable emotionally and consequentially (2.1.74-101). The sudden tragedy leaves Alonzo sorrowing inconsolably before he is cast asleep by Ariel, Meanwhile, the opportunity of the moment arouses demonic instincts for a naked power grab in his brother, Sebastian, and the fratricidal, current Duke of Milan, and brother to Prospero, Antonio.

Sixteenth-century Milan was a hotbed for political conflicts and military activities due to its strategic geography in Europe and industry buildup in the prior centuries, making itself the target for many authoritarian regimes of monarchs (Kirkpatrick, 161). The political milieu in Italy circa 1600 was frightful and treacherous at best, machiavellian—underhanded statecraft and cunning deception—at worst. Coup d'etat, an illegal seizure of power, at the time even had its unique function of not only overthrowing the incumbent ruler by force but also deliberately serving as a public exhibition of the political might of the ruling regime (Kirkpatrick, 162). Given such a ghastly state of politics, Antonio's murderous incitement to Sebastian, who seeks to

steal the crown in an attempt to assassinate his own brother and the counselor in their sleep, is befittingly an adaptive product of its environment during that time.

Owing to past experience and acute foresight, Prospero pre-instructs Ariel who succeeds in foiling their assassination attempt and in keeping Alonzo and Gonzalo alive. Although Alonzo assists Atonion's dukedom takeover in exchange for yearly tributes, Prospero needs the King's validation of the marriage between Miranda and Ferdinand as well as recognition of his reclaimed dukedom once his plan prevails. Equally significantly, Prospero is eager to repay Gonzolo who is solely responsible for the survival of Prospero and his daughter upon landing on the island (1.2.160-68). Without Gonzalo's political favor of stocking supplies on the ship, no amount of magical power Prospero could yield to escape starvation to death. It goes to show that getting politics right has life-saving effects that even an esteemed Duke with powerful sorcery cannot afford to forego. Immersing oneself in the sea of books has no intrinsic side effects aside from the loss of time. If, however, one is relied on to rule, the opportunity cost of neglecting political responsibilities proves to be catastrophic if not totally fatal. Thus, this near-fatal episode of banishment is in part what contributes to the formation of Propero's decision to relinquish his sorcery.

Another contributing factor to Prospero's relinquishment is the nature of magic power akin to a double-edged sword. Already filled with remorse for his early negligence of duty due to secluded studying of sorcery, Prospero is deeply saddened by the affliction, through the use of magic, he inadvertently inflicts on Gonzalo after Ariel describes the extent to which the extreme suffering bears down on the Italian aristocrats (5.1.11-30). Regret and guilt lead to Prospero's changed view of his magic power, once a source of pride and respect, as a source of trouble and violence now. Prospero declares, "this rough magic I here abjure," with a sense of relief

(5.1.50-51). As hard as it is to believe a willful gesture of self-sacrifice in the name of virtue, burying the circumstantial evidence that he is ousted for dereliction of duty might just be the last and decisive consideration behind the decision to let go.

Evading the narrative of negligence in state management and private obsession with secret studies is a political imperative Prospero must fulfill. Despite the worsening public opinion due to the prolonged absence of the former Duke, the governed who still love and admire Prospero prevent him and Mirada from being murdered on the night of usurpation, and evidently, "the dukedom yet unbowed" is forced to knuckle under Antonio's reign (1.2.90-150). In politics, what people believe counts rather than what the facts are. The basis for a consensual relationship between a monarch and the masses, apart from divine right, must be public belief in the leadership. Therefore, a return to power, in Prospero's case, does not simply require the recognition of the King of Naples but also calls for a self-serving counternarrative to rekindle the latent public trust. What it means for Prospero is no more books, no more magic cane, and no more private whispering of the word: Ariel. After all, since the airy spirit is not visually perceivable to others, Prospero's mental capacity to rule will surely be questioned if he is ever seen "talking to himself" all alone.

Without magic and without much suspense, Prospero, in the end, chooses a middle course of reconciliation over vicious revenge to secure the necessary recognition from the King of Naples. Prospero, himself, confesses: "They being penitent, the sole drift of my purpose doth extend not a frown further" (5.1.28-30). The goal all along has been to extract repentance under a magical illusion as opposed to a concession by force. Prospero's premeditated lies about the loss of his daughter coupled with slick stagecraft of the sudden appearance of Ferdinand are deployed to capitalize on Alonzo's vulnerability and to appeal to his emotions (5.1.153-82). From a

utilitarian perspective, the success of recovering his dukedom depends on the King's withdrawal of military support for Antonio. Moreover, the legitimacy of his daughter's royal marriage requires "the sovereign's permission" to avoid any "treason accusations" (Cook, 238). Or else with no political heavyweights around to recognize his reclaimed sovereignty over the city-state, if all his enemies' lives are taken, he is still nothing but a magic sorcerer and both Milan and Naples will be left in political turmoil.

From dominating Caliban and Ariel, arranging a potential royal marriage, letting go of his prized magic, to reconciling with Alonzo and even forgiving his usurping brother, Prospero's actions speak truth to his nature and self-identity as a political player. Prospero's unwavering desire to return to Milanese politics takes precedence over all aspects of the island life, especially the comfort of studying without repercussions. His heavy-handed domination over Caliban and repeatedly reneging on promises to set Ariel free are nothing more than relentless means to an end. While Antonio, who is a true machiavellian ruler at heart, answers the call of dynastic politics at the time and ruthlessly pursues power without regard for morality and his conscience, let us not forget the acknowledgment by Prospero: "myself, one of their kind" (Schlueter, par. 33; Shakespeare 5.1.22–23). The sorcerer closely identifies with the Italian aristocrats. His identity lies, not with the magic power, but with his political heritage and duty.

In *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare tells a tale of an exiled prince's personal and political redemption against the backdrop of the dynamics of European politics in the Renaissance time. Placed in the discursive context of the New World, Prospero's actions in the play might be easily seen as characteristic of European colonial activities. However, when texts are taken under literary scrutiny, should such efforts reveal a practical reflection of hierarchical conflicts of European powers. Politics is not a game for weaklings. To Prospero, what is moral is

to become an effective ruler who can competently manage the state's affairs and successfully resolve conflicts in politics. Facing power-hungry savage and destructive brutality, Prospero breaks the chain of hatred using reconciliation and forgiveness and stops a vicious circle of vengeance, not in the name of virtue, but for the objective of power restoration. That is, at its root, the ultimate significance of Prospero's actions.

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