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Shakespeare's Colonial Tempest

England's colonialist drive in the 17th century inspired numerous literary works that either criticized or supported colonial actions. *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare, is an excellent example of one of these works, and a reader might easily conclude that the play is critical of colonialism in nature. This is supported by Prospero's continual mistreatment of Caliban throughout the play and his manipulation of the other natives, which might lead readers to believe that he is a villainous character. Despite Prospero's violent and manipulative tendencies, the play ultimately invites readers to feel positively towards colonialism and encourages the submission of subordinates through sympathy garnered through Prospero's actions, coupled with the success and failure of Ariel and Caliban's views on enslavement, respectively.

Prospero is very clearly the main colonial force in the play, and support for him correlates very heavily to the support of colonialism itself. His colonialist ideals, including superiority, dominance, and exploitation, are supported by the sympathy that he garners from both readers and characters alike. This can be seen through his telling of his backstory to Miranda, where he explains how he was wronged by his brother and lost his position as the Duke (1.2.88-106). It is only natural for someone to want to get back at the person who stole something as big as dukedom from them. Although Prospero first uses this reasoning to justify his treatment of his brother's crashed ship, it can be extended to the rest of the island as well. His yearning for the

power and control that were ripped away from him serves as his true motivation for taking over the island and causes readers to sympathize with him, as we would never want something like that to happen as a result of a family member's wrongdoings. Prospero's feelings towards Antonio and the other nobles shift towards the end of the play, where he forgives them with Ariel's guidance (5.1.25-28). Seeing how such a vengeful man was able to forgive the people he had been seeking revenge against for the entire play shows Prospero is not as evil as one might originally believe. Forgiveness, as understood by readers, is sometimes impossible to offer, so Prospero's actions here support his character and what he stands for even further.

Sympathy and empathy can go hand in hand if done right, and Prospero excellently garners both of these emotions from readers, specifically during the wedding celebration scene, where we almost start to put ourselves in his shoes as a father. After a discussion with Ferdinand, he requests that Ariel summon spirits to put on an elaborate play, saying, "Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple / Some vanity of mine art. It is my promise, / And they expect it from me (4.1.39-42). In this scene, Prospero is clearly supporting his daughter and her engagement, and it is hard for us, as readers, to not feel inclined to identify with Prospero here. His actions incite empathy from readers, as we can see ourselves attempting to impress our child's spouse in hopes of better welcoming them into the family. Some readers may cite the fact that this marriage was politically doctored by Prospero, but in reality, this does not discount the love between Miranda and Ferdinand. Also, if Prospero's motivations were purely political, he would not have set up such an elaborate wedding celebration for the two of them. A reader's identification with Prospero extends even further into the epilogue, where Prospero directly addresses the audience, asking for applause from their "good hands" (Epilogue 10). The play is very literally asking for the audience to support Prospero and let him be free. This act, as previously mentioned, directly

correlates to the audience cheering for colonialism. All of his actions throughout the play lead up to a request for applause, which suggests that all of the colonialist thoughts and behaviors Prospero exhibited should be praised.

Prospero exercises his control over the island consistently throughout the play, which leads to us as readers being drawn to him and ultimately respecting him. From the summoning of a destructive storm (1.2.29-34) to summoning spirits for a wedding celebration, Prospero clearly has full control over his own magic and the island's natives as a whole. While readers today may feel that this dominance over a foreign land is evil and should be faced with rebellion, the opposite belief is presented by the play. Prospero's actions are typical of 17th-century England, as many viewed the colonization and 'civilization' of foreign lands as morally righteous. It should also be noted that the majority of the spirits, or natives, never explicitly comment on Prospero's behavior, so Ariel and Caliban serve as the means of discerning how Prospero's actions are truly received. On one hand, Caliban despises his master, going as far as attempting to dishonor his daughter (1.2.347-349). Caliban was once well-loved by Prospero until he attempted to rape Miranda, which is when things started to go downhill. Caliban's mistake here ultimately led to both the island's and his misfortune, suggesting that the obedience of servants leads to a perfect world where everyone can coexist and live contently. Ariel and Prospero's relationship backs this up, as Ariel is nothing but obedient to Prospero, leading to his eventual freedom. He still questions his master (5.1.20), which leads to Prospero's eventual forgiveness of the other nobles. This presents Ariel as more of a friend to Prospero, who looks out for himself, Prospero, and their relationship constantly. Although he is threatened if he tries to gain his freedom without Prospero's permission (1.2.246), Prospero still keeps his promise, releasing Ariel after being a good and obedient slave for so long (5.1.317). Caliban and Ariel correspond

to two sides of the same coin, and their actions correspond to the different beliefs held by slaves throughout the world. Ariel's eventual freedom as a result of his submission to Prospero suggests that the play believes that a ruler's subordinates should be loyal above all else, as that leads to a favorable outcome for both parties.

The success found by nearly all of the characters in the play further emphasizes pro-colonialist views while also reinforcing the notion that slaves should be loyal to their masters. Caliban, being the target of Prospero's aggression, finally decides that he will try to be a more loyal and wise servant to Prospero in Naples (5.1.295-298). Being the only true anti-colonial force in the play, his supposed submission to Prospero can be connected to his submission to colonialism itself. Ariel's aforementioned freedom also supports colonialism, as it was a result of him obeying his master and accepting the way Prospero colonized the island. Prospero's success in gaining his dukedom back also supports the play's pro-colonialist narrative (5.1.168). It has been made more than clear that Prospero is the embodiment of colonialism, so his success at the end of the play clearly correlates to the success of colonialism in the past. While some readers may point out how frowned upon slavery and colonialism as a whole are today, it is important to remember that Shakespeare's audience was not readers today but instead those in 17th-century colonial England. Shakespeare clearly commented on the behavior and attitude of slaves towards their masters, and setting the obedient slave free while keeping the disobedient one a servant accurately describes old views on slavery.

Some readers may feel that the play is anti-colonialist because of its display of Prospero's evil and oppressive tendencies. Prospero is clearly aggressive towards Caliban and Ferdinand, as seen through Caliban's view of his torture and the incitement of fear he used on Ferdinand. Caliban explains that "For every trifle are they set upon me: / Sometime like apes that mow and

chatter at me... / Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount / Their pricks at my footfall”

(2.2.8-12). This depiction is truly grotesque and presents Prospero as an unforgiving villain.

Although this type of torture is not put on Ferdinand, he is threatened with an unhappy life if he chooses to “break her virgin knot” before the ceremony (4.1.15). This can be said to be a form of torture itself, and some readers may cite these characters interactions with Prospero to suggest that the play is not in favor of colonialism and submission. While Prospero’s actions towards Caliban suggest unnecessary violence, his interactions with Ferdinand regarding Miranda actually serve to justify them. Prospero clearly treats marriage and copulation very seriously, and it is made more than clear to Ferdinand that he will be miserable if he does not respect Prospero’s wishes. It is known that Caliban attempted to dishonor Miranda at some point, and that is what led to his torture. Knowing how seriously Prospero takes this topic, it can be assumed that Caliban was well aware of Prospero’s beliefs about it. Caliban purposefully goes against Prospero’s wishes and suggests that he would’ve done it again to Miranda if given the chance, saying, “Would’t had been done; / Thou didst prevent me, I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans” (1.2.350-352). Caliban’s mistreatment of Miranda and lack of remorse towards the situation are good enough reasons for Prospero to punish Caliban. While it is true that this punishment is overly cruel, the play does not condemn Prospero for his actions, as Caliban is the only person to receive such treatment. Prospero even goes so far as to celebrate Miranda and Ferdinand’s marriage, suggesting that all Caliban had to do was respect Prospero’s wishes to gain respect for himself.

Throughout the play, *The Tempest* leads the reader down a pro-colonial path by encouraging careful examination of Ariel, Caliban, and Prospero’s actions. The slaves’ behaviors towards Prospero and subsequent consequences related to them, whether positive or negative,

comment on how the play believes slaves should act towards their usurpers. This analysis begs the question, 'Assuming you live in 17th-century England, how might you feel towards British Colonialism after watching this play'? It is clear that the play believes submission to be the only road to happiness when it comes to servitude, extending into support of colonialism as a whole, but a more critical look into how you might feel towards a work of this nature is an important part of dissecting divisive literature.