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A Hypocritical Treatment of Hierarchy in *The Tempest*

Hierarchy is prominently displayed throughout *The Tempest* starting with high-class groups of characters like Alonso and his royal party, and trickling all the way down to commoners such as Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban. However, hierarchy is not treated singularly nor simply throughout the course of the play, and is in fact recognized in three different forms that are not treated equally. *The Tempest* factions hierarchy into political hierarchy, social hierarchy, and paternal hierarchy, the latter being a familial hierarchy between a father and his child. For the purposes of this argument, paternal hierarchy will be narrowed down even further to directly refer to the relationship between a father and his daughter. Both political and social hierarchies are denounced as valuable by being displayed as arbitrary constructs, but paternal hierarchy actually advocated for by constantly being treated as reliable and a profit to those who enforce it. The inconsistent treatment of hierarchy in *The Tempest*, which singles out paternal hierarchy as the only hierarchy of merit, displays a gendered bias against women that makes it not only acceptable, but profitable to strip women of their freedoms in favor of hierarchy and profit.

Throughout the course of *The Tempest*, political hierarchy is displayed as arbitrary. Political and social hierarchies are extremely interconnected, but within this discourse political hierarchy refers to the men who hold offices of government. In *The Tempest*, this includes main players such as Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian. If their offices were to change hands through a

transition of power, it would have a lawful consequence outside of the island in their home country of Italy. The assumption of political hierarchy is that offices of higher power control offices of lower power, and that this system is respected and stable. In the assumed system, Antonio, Duke of Milan, and Sebastian, the king's brother, would be loyally sworn to Alonso, King of Naples, and never question his authority through terms of treason and mutiny. This, however, is not demonstrated within the confines of *The Tempest*. Antonio, a political lesser to the king, speaks freely of deposing Alonso and persuades Sebastian to execute his scheme:

... Say this were death
 That now hath seized them, why, there were no worse
 Than now they are. There be that can rule Naples
 As well as he that sleeps, lords that can prate
 As amply and unnecessarily
 As this Gonzalo. I myself could make
 A chough of as deep chat. O, that you bore
 The mind that I do! What a sleep were this
 For your advancement! (2.1 255-63)

Here Antonio breaks the assumption of hierarchy and questions the authority of Alonso and his advisor, Gonzalo. Antonio shows no loyalty to Alonso, and instead proclaims that “there be that can rule Naples as well as he that sleeps...” and the same goes for Gonzalo's position. Antonio's goal is, of course, to persuade Sebastian to kill his brother in his sleep and treasonably proclaims to Sebastian “What a sleep were this for your advancement!” since Sebastian stands to become King of Naples with Alonso dead and his children presumed dead or incapable of rule. By saying that another could easily replace Alonso, Antonio moves political hierarchy from a system that is

orderly and stable, to an idea that is fluid and arbitrary. Sebastian further legitimizes this by agreeing with Antonio's logic. In the fluid landscape they have created, political titles and power transform from inheritable birthrights into opportunities to be grabbed by any individual at the first chance.

Much like political hierarchy, social hierarchy is too revealed to be an arbitrary schema rather than a solid foundation. It is important to differentiate between political and social hierarchy, because while political hierarchy refers to a specific group of governing offices, social hierarchy refers to anyone within a certain society and broadens the play's comments on hierarchy from a special interest into a universal matter. Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban participate in social hierarchy and through their interactions offer a parallel to the political hierarchy dealings of the characters mentioned in the paragraph above. Stephano serves a similar role to Antonio by way of his ease in abandoning the assumed stability of hierarchy: "...Trinculo, the King and all our comapny else / Being drowned, we will inherit here" (3.1 167-8). Much like Antonio and Sebastian are ready to seize the opportunity to further their political power by disposing of the king, Stephano and Trinculo readily adopt lordship over the island because they assume that their hierarchal betters are dead and thus cannot stop them. With one proclamation, Stephano asserts himself and Trinculo as social equals to Alonso and they even gain a lesser to them in the form of Caliban. This change in status comes at no struggle or bloody power change. The authority that Stephano uses isn't a potent external force, but rather just the internal fancy that he wanted to rule over the island. Stephano and Trinculo create this hierarchy on a whim and with no true claim to power and thus social hierarchy is displayed as another arbitrary hierarchal system.

By displaying both political and social hierarchy as arbitrary, *The Tempest* devalues these forms of hierarchy and criticizes their legitimacy. Because political office and social status are shown to be challengeable by anyone in the hierarchy and transformed on a whim, these two forms of hierarchy are devalued because the legitimacy of the power imbued in individuals by this hierarchy is nonexistent. Furthermore, because the political and social hierarchal landscapes are so fluid, there are no sure outcomes for those who decide to challenge it. In the course of the play we learn that Antonio had previously gained the title of Duke of Milan, only to lose it to his brother Prospero, whom he had taken it from in the first place. Sebastian surely could have advanced his political office and become King of Naples by killing Alonso in his sleep if only Ariel hadn't interfered. Stephano and Trinculo, to the best of their knowledge, spend time as lords over the island, only to be demoted when their plan to murder Prospero was foiled. Because there is no stable cause and effect shown within *The Tempest* when it comes to challenging hierarchy, and no character has a sure reward, *The Tempest* actually advocates against these forms of hierarchy. Social and political hierarchies are made into a farce, rather than a viable schema. Each of these situations shows a crack in the construct of hierarchy and can be easily made into fuel for the argument that *The Tempest* criticizes and displays distrust in all forms of hierarchy. *The Tempest*, however, does not truly treat hierarchy so simply, and its comments on the matter grow complicated when the female characters become involved.

While political and social hierarchy are shown to be fluid and arbitrary, paternal hierarchy between fathers and daughters is shown to be defined and stable. There are two representations of father-daughter relationships in *The Tempest*: Miranda and Prospero, and on a smaller level, Alonso and his daughter Claribel, who is the reason Alonso's ship sailed so close to the island. It is true that there is another father-child relationship in the play between Alonso

and Ferdinand, but this relationship lacks the complexity of the father-daughter ones and will not be examined at length. In the case of Alonso and Claribel, and Miranda and Prospero, the father figure is shown to wholly preside over the daughter in a commandeering, one-way relationship that is never broken.

Although Claribel is not an active character in the play and is only mentioned in one scene, there are several remarks made by Alonso and Sebastian that clearly show Alonso ruling over his daughter. It is first mentioned by Gonzalo that the reason the royal party passed so near the island was because they had just attended the wedding of Claribel to the King of Tunis. At first it is unclear if this wedding was Claribel's idea borne out of love, or if it was orchestrated by another to gain political power. The answer comes from Alonso, who in a bout of despair over the supposed death of Ferdinand wails, "Would I had never / Married my daughter there!" (2.1 104-5). It is the use of the word "I" that is telling in this sentence because it indicates that it was Alonso's idea to marry Claribel to the King of Tunis. Alonso imposed his will on Claribel to marry a man of his choosing, and if the evidence of paternal hierarchy in play at this moment is insufficient, Sebastian incriminates him further:

You were kneeled to and importuned otherwise
 By all of us, and the fair soul herself
 Weighed between loathness and obedience at
 Which end o' the beam should bow. (2.1 125-8)

Claribel, "the fair soul herself," was not inclined to marry the King of Tunis and actually despaired at the thought. Sebastian describes her as caught between "loathness and obedience," but in the end she succumbed to her father's will and went through with the marriage. Because Claribel acquiesced to the marriage, it makes the statement that her father's will is above her

own, and shows the paternal hierarchy of fathers and daughters to be stable in *The Tempest*, even between two characters who do not even interact throughout the course of the play.

Paternal hierarchy is not only defined and enforced in Alonso and Claribel's relationship, but also in Prospero's and Miranda's, and even more manipulatively. Prospero's scheme to regain his dukedom hinges entirely on Miranda falling in love with Ferdinand so that when Alonso finds Ferdinand alive and happily in love with Miranda, he will trip over himself in gratitude to Prospero and give him his dukedom back. Every move Miranda and Ferdinand make together Prospero plans and accounts for, anticipating and using Miranda's actions to fuel his scheme. When Ferdinand and Miranda decide to marry one another, Prospero secretly revels, "So glad of this as they I cannot be / Who are surprised with all; but my rejoicing / At nothing can be more." (3.1 92-94). Prospero proclaims that he can't be as happy as Prospero and Miranda "who are surprised with all" because he knew that this would be coming the whole time, so it holds no real joy for him. It is a means to an end. He used his daughter—a lesser to him—as a chess piece in a game. Prospero knew that Miranda would fall in love with Ferdinand on sight because her experience with men was only interactions with her own father and their slave, Caliban. To Miranda, Ferdinand is "a thing divine" and Prospero knows it (1.2 422). Prospero uses his paternal authority over Miranda to get her to accomplish his agenda, displaying a traditional model of hierarchy.

Some may argue that Miranda does in fact disobey her father's will, which, if true, would break the system of stability in paternal hierarchy set forth in *The Tempest*, but her rebellion is actually purposefully willed into being by Prospero. Soon after Miranda and Ferdinand meet for the first time, Prospero sentences Ferdinand to be his slave on the pretense that he is lying about being the next King of Naples, and forbids Miranda from speaking with him. Miranda later

seemingly disobeys her father's command and does end up speaking to Ferdinand, which could be seen as a breaking of the hierarchy between Prospero and Miranda, but it Prospero actually wanted this small rebellion to happen. Right before forbidding Miranda from speaking to Ferdinand, Prospero proclaims in an aside, "They are both in either's powers; but this swift business / I must uneasy make, lest too light winning / make the prize light," (1.2 454-56). Prospero's command to Miranda was made to be broken. Prospero wants them to fall in love, but issued the command so that they wouldn't fall in love too fast lest it "make the prize light." Prospero fully intended for Miranda to break the rule and fall in love with Ferdinand, he just wanted it to happen at the right time. So instead of Miranda rebelling against the paternal hierarchy, she again succumbs to her father's will, making her situation a near parallel to Claribel's. In both instances of paternal hierarchy in *The Tempest*, both daughters always submit to their fathers' will, creating a reliable, one-way relationship that doesn't exist in the other forms of hierarchy in this play.

Whereas political and social hierarchy are criticized and devalued in *The Tempest* by being shown as unstable in nature and outcome, paternal hierarchy is advocated for in exactly the opposite way. The characters that challenge and participate in social and political hierarchy can never be sure in the nature of their outcome, but in all instances of paternal hierarchy in the play, those who enforce it—Alonso and Prospero—are rewarded. It may seem like Alonso was being punished for marrying his daughter off in Tunis because he was plagued by shipwreck and a period of time when he thought his son was dead and his legacy ended, but in the end just the opposite was true. Alonso not only discovers that Ferdinand is alive, but he gains a daughter in Miranda, thus securing his monarchy for the future. None of that would have happened if Alonso hadn't ordered Claribel to marry the King of Tunis, sending the message that his authority over

Claribel and her life led to a prosperous future. The same can be said for Miranda and Prospero. Prospero time and time again uses Miranda in his scheme to get his dukedom and their livelihood back, and it pays off nicely in the end. By orchestrating the meeting between Ferdinand and Miranda knowing that she would fall in love with him, he guaranteed that he would be putting the king in his debt and that way Miranda would become a princess of Naples, and he would regain his former title. This prosperous ending wouldn't have happened if Prospero didn't force his will and authority onto Miranda. By showing that paternal hierarchy in father-daughter relationships yields prosperous rewards *The Tempest* puts value on this form of hierarchy and advocates it against all others, sending the message that not only can it be trusted, but that it's good and acceptable, which ultimately singles out women as lesser to men.

The rewards that Alonso and Prospero receive by enforcing paternal hierarchy justify the degradation of women and the stripping away of their freedoms. It is crucial to note that it is only paternal hierarchy that is treated differently throughout the play, because while some characters engaged in other types of hierarchy still suffer, it is only Claribel and Miranda that are singled out as being tickets to a prosperous future, if only they are oppressed. Both Claribel and Miranda have their sexuality controlled by their fathers by having their spouses chosen for them, and Prospero even takes advantage of Miranda's lack of education and interaction with her own species in order to commandeer her sexuality further. It's further important to note that the enforcement of paternal hierarchy is only specific to women in *The Tempest*. Alonso and Ferdinand also make up a father-child relationship, but Alonso's will is never forced upon Ferdinand. Rather, Alonso is immediately accepting of Ferdinand's decision to marry Miranda, thus Ferdinand experiences a freedom in choosing his own spouse, which the paternal hierarchy that applies to Miranda and Claribel does not allow for. By not treating hierarchy consistently

and singling out paternal hierarchy between fathers and daughters as the only hierarchy of merit, *The Tempest* displays a gendered bias against women that makes it not only acceptable, but also profitable to strip women of their freedoms in favor of hierarchy and profit.

This particular treatment of hierarchy is hypocritical and damaging to the view of women as equals to men. When reading *The Tempest* today, it's important to be vigilant and fully comprehend the statements that the play is making on hierarchy. If these antiquated hypocrisies are not recognized for what they are, it runs the risk of impeding the progress which western society has made for the advancement of women. It's important to study these statements on hierarchy not only to celebrate how far society has come, but to also realize all of the gender bias that still exists in society today. Understanding the treatment of women in *The Tempest* helps us evaluate our own treatment of women, and serves as a reminder of how far women have to go until they can be rightfully awarded the same freedoms, opportunities and privileges that men have, free of impediment, to treat hierarchy fluidly and to their own advantage.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. Ed. Gerald Graff and James Phelan. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. Print.