

Katie Hopkins

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Dr. Scheler

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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. While political hierarchy is clearly revealed to be arbitrary and is treated as a valueless construct, paternal hierarchy, between a fathers and daughters, is actually advocated for as a reliable system that brings profit to those who enforce it, suggesting that *The Tempest* may not be as progressive as it first appears. 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 also profitable to strip women of their freedoms in favor of hierarchy and gain.

Throughout the course of *The Tempest*, political hierarchy is displayed as arbitrary. Political hierarchy applies to the men in *The Tempest* who hold offices of government including 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.

The debunking of political hierarchy is widespread throughout *The Tempest* and is present in the interactions of Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban who offer a comedic 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. The authority that Stephano uses to assert his dominance 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.

While political hierarchy is strongly evidenced to be fluid and arbitrary, paternal hierarchy 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. In both relationships, 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 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.

Claribel’s rocky relationship with Alonso points to Miranda’s own relationship with Prospero, one that is shown to be even more manipulative. 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 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 her father, she again succumbs to her his 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 the characters that challenge and participate in political hierarchy can never be sure in the nature of their outcome, the enforcers of paternal hierarchy—Prospero and Alonso—are consistently rewarded. In one proclamation, Gonzalo reveals the rewards:

Was Milan thrust from Milan, that his issue
 Should become kings of Naples? O, rejoice
 Beyond a common joy, and set it down
 With gold on lasting pillars: In one voyage
 Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis,
 And Ferdinand, her brother, found a wife
 Where he himself was lost; Prospero his dukedom
 In a poor isle; and all of us ourselves
 When no man was his own. (5.1 205-13)

The fortunes that Gonzalo paints to be happy coincidences are actually all indebted to the enforcement of paternal hierarchy. Claribel did not just “her husband find at Tunis,” but was forced to marry a stranger by her Alonso. Ferdinand “found a wife” in Miranda because of Prospero’s schemes and ability to orchestrate love between the two by using his daughter to his advantage. Through the orchestrated union of Ferdinand and Miranda, Prospero seemingly found “his dukedom / In a poor isle” and “his issue [became] kings of Naples.” The fortunes that Alonso and Prospero gained in seeing their children married, and thus their family lines secured for the future, were not happenstance, but were the result of using Miranda and Claribel to their advantage. This sends the message that the fathers’ authority over their daughters can lead to

prosperous outcomes and a secure future. 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.