Summoning the Storm: The Role of Power and Opportunity in *The Tempest*

The setup for *The Tempest* is to make the course of power run smooth(ly). Prospero is the rightful Duke of Milan and Shakespeare’s drama vigorously plots itself to restore the lord to his proper position. Except in order for Prospero’s schemes to work, he relies on an extraordinary amount of coincidence and luck from the other characters’ decisions, as well as the loyalty or servitude exhibited in Ariel and Caliban. Ignoring the other players in another person’s rise to power grossly inflates the vindication for that person’s authority. *The Tempest* subverts the notion that power is absolute, challenging the supremacy of those who claim power and suggests that power is rather granted to those who capitalize on an opportunity.

The purpose of *The Tempest* is to restore balance into the world, namely Prospero in his objective to return to his rightful Dukedom in Milan. The restoration reveals who wields the right to power and to whose authority the other characters submit. However, the absolute power that Prospero exhibits at the end of the play overshadows the fact that his foundations are built on decision he could not control. At first glance, it appears as though Prospero himself is solely responsible for his return to power, but upon deeper insight, Prospero did not directly force much of the events that led to his ascension. Starting from when he was first usurped, Prospero’s life has been a string of tremendous other peoples’ choices. Antonio chose to usurp his brother. Gonzalo chose to help him escape. Caliban chose to help Prospero and Miranda when they first arrived on the island. Ariel chose to obey Prospero’s wishes. Without all those decisions made
before him, it places Prospero in a position where he is able to generate a plan to return to his throne. Even as his plan is being executed, Prospero still has little influence on many of the outcomes. He sets up Miranda and Ferdinand to fall in love, but that does not mean that either actually will or will act upon their feelings. Even though Prospero commands Ariel to control the tempest or prevent Sebastian and Antonio from slaying Alonso or to distract Trinculo and Stephano, it does not mean that Ariel will necessarily obey.

All the grand events that occur in *The Tempest* is just a fancy way of showing that through extraordinary coincidence, divine intervention, and maybe a bit of both, Prospero is gifted with an opportunity for redemption. However, what he does with that opportunity is completely up to him, and the most important aspect of what he can control. He feels it was his own negligence that led to his brother’s betrayal, and the shipwreck allows him a chance to set things right. His political power mirrors a moralistic power as well. He does not desire his throne back out of greed or pride, but rather it is a journey out of justice and honor. By thinking of his daughter’s happiness and relinquishing his magical abilities, Prospero displays the compassion and humility needed in order to prove his rightful standing as a true ruler.

In contrast to Prospero stands Caliban, who also has a claim to a position in power. Being the son of Sycorax, who claimed the island as her own, Caliban is by birthright the inheritor of the island. Yet, just as Antonio usurped Prospero, Prospero in turn usurps Caliban. But in both cases, there is a justifiable explanation for their dethronement—Prospero had ignored the needs of his people and Caliban had attempted to rape Miranda. Before the summoning of the tempest, Caliban could have attempted to kill Prospero and claim the island for himself. He had twelve years to do so; yet he still held back. There are three possible reasons for his hesitation. One is that the risk of provoking such a dangerous enemy that would endanger own life far exceeds the
possible returns. He is too much afraid of Prospero’s sorcery to undertake such a bold move. The second reason is that he the only reason he is aware of his own identity within the context of empowered or subject or ruler is because his education had been through Prospero and Miranda. Thus, he feels a strange begrudging gratitude toward them. The last explanation might be that he is afraid of being alone again on the island. The arrival of Prospero and Miranda gave him human companionship for the first time, and even though he harbors resentment toward them, he still believes it better to be with them than alone without them. Whatever the case may be, the tempest provides Caliban with his own opportunity to gain power over the island. However, as soon as this opportunity presents itself, Caliban exchanges Prospero for Stephano in the hopes that this insurrection will advance his position. But all it does is make him into an even greater fool.

The key difference between Prospero and Caliban is that when the opportunity arises, Prospero rises while Caliban stumbles. Both are given respectively equal opportunity in terms of redemption—Prospero atoning for his sloth while he was the Duke of Milan and Caliban for lusting after Miranda. Prospero is able to display a change in virtue while Caliban is not. Caliban exchanges one master for another, is entrapped into gluttony through an excess of alcohol, and allows wrath to spur him to attempt a deadly revolution against Prospero. Working as a foil against Prospero, Caliban shows that even though power may be his by right, he has no claim to it on a moralistic level.

In a broader, more global sense, The Tempest suggests that true right to power should be granted not because of an inherent right but because of seizing opportunities to prove one’s integrity and compassion. To those in power, it forces the question of whether any leader, under
the same circumstances as Prospero, would act in the same manner. And if not, then they are more worthy to be led shamelessly led astray by a couple of drunken fools.