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

In *The Tempest*, Prospero’s power completes a full circle, starting at the apex as the Duke of Milan, spiraling downward into exile, and eventually rising to reclaim his title. Prospero’s ultimate achievement seems to advocate the legitimacy of a ruler’s genetically inherited absolute authority. Except Prospero undergoes a moralistic transformation between the time he was last Duke and at the denouement when power is restored. His power is not merely gifted to him; he earns it through his learned virtue. Ignoring the transformation principle and necessary maturation for any person in power inhibits understanding for why a person does or does not deserve power. *The Tempest* subverts the notion that power is an assumed right, suggesting that power is granted to only those who capitalize on an opportunity to prove their moral worth.

The purpose of the tempest is to restore balance, namely placing Prospero back as the rightful Duke of Milan. However, the restoration can only be fulfilled if Prospero is first given an opportunity, and not only an opportunity but he must embody *carpe diem*, seize the day. Recognizing this, Prospero tells Miranda that “A most auspicious star, whose influence / If now I court not, but omit, my fortunes / Will ever after droop” (1.2.182-184). Although Prospero is playing with a stacked deck, he still does not hold all the cards in this island adventure. He exhibits tremendous magical power and foresight, but those factors overshadow the underlining reality that his plans are built upon exterior forces he does not control. The auspicious “star” of
which he refers has gathered every person he could possibly need to regain both his dukedom and prove his moral worth.

His moral stumbling had been in neglecting his duties as a Duke to pursue his own interests, as he explains: “The government I cast upon my brother / And to my state grew stranger, being transported / And rapt in secret studies” (1.2.75-77). However, Prospero is not resentful or bitter about the experience; instead, he blames his own sloth and pride for believing his own needs to be above the needs of his people. His self-introspection allows him to recognize that the tempest is the opportunity for his redemption, and as long as he remains diligent and humble he will prove himself worthy of the power he had lost. His diligence is proved through his meticulous plotting and manipulating the shipwrecked to achieve the best possible outcomes. Ferdinand, for instance, is separated to best give him and Miranda the opportunity to fall in love. Alonso is joined with Antonio and Sebastian to examine the King’s compassion and mercy one those that had done him wrong. Prospero’s ultimate demonstration of his moralistic change is in relinquishing his magical powers: “…this rough magic / I here abjure… / I’ll break my staff” (5.1.50-51, 54). Prospero’s aforementioned “secret studies” included those of magical origins. While sorcery certainly makes him more powerful, it is also the emblem that had caused his downfall in the first place. By renouncing those supernatural powers, Prospero is symbolically separating himself from the moral corruption he had once endured, proving that he has learned from is mistakes and desire no more power than he is allotted.

Under monarchical law, if Prospero has a just claim to be the Duke of Milan, then Caliban has just as much claim to be the island’s ruler as Sycorax’s inheritor. But just as Prospero fell from grace through his prideful negligence, Caliban’s disgrace manifests as prideful lust. When referring to his attempted rape of Miranda years prior, Caliban exclaims: “O
ho! O ho! Would’t had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had people else / This isle with Calibans” (1.2.52-54). There is an immediate unrepentant temperament in Caliban that foreshadows his inability for moral transformation. Prospero is given the opportunity to be merciful and humble, and consequently, Prospero displays mercy and humility. Time and time again, Caliban is presented opportunities to prove his moral character but fails to do so.

When Caliban first meets Stephano and Trinculo, he tells the former: “I’ll show thee every fertile inch o’ th’ island, / And I will kiss thy foot. I prithee, be my god” (2.2.141-142). His words are almost an exact replica of how Caliban describes how he treated Prospero when he first arrived on the island: “…And showed thee all the qualities o’ the’ isle, / The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile” (1.2.340-341). While choosing a person to whom loyalty is given is not precisely morally egregious, it is representative of the large issue that Caliban does not learn from his past mistakes. Before that moment, Stephano entered in a drunken stupor singing a bawdy song. To the audience, it is clear that the inebriated butler is incapable to be a leader of men; yet, Caliban once again proves to be unwise in his trust. Later, Caliban encourages a mutiny against Prospero, begging Stephano’s aid in murdering Prospero and abducting Miranda. He tells Stephano: “…I’ll yield [Prospero] thee asleep, / Where thou mayst knock a nail into his head” and that Miranda will “become [Stephano’s] bed, I warrant, / And bring thee forth brave brood” (3.2.58-59, 99-100). Even though on numerous occasions Caliban refers to Prospero as a “tyrant”, the fact remains that Prospero is Caliban’s master. Disregarding the debate whether Prospero’s rule is justified or not, Caliban is still acting out of disloyalty. On top of that, he is displaying an uncompassionate nature. Whereas Prospero forgave and was merciful to Antonio, Caliban is not proffering the same treatment to Prospero. As for Miranda, Caliban is once again succumbing to lustful feelings. He is selling Miranda’s virginity to a
complete stranger for the price of vengeance. Though Caliban my have an inherent right to be master of the island, he has no moral right. He is unable to trust sagely or be trusted himself, and repeats the same faults without ever transforming his character because of them. Though he has the opportunities to speak or act in a manner that shows a penchant for moral maturity, he instead displays qualities that constitute a weak ruler and prove Caliban undeserving to any position of power.

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 someone seizes opportunities to prove one’s integrity and compassion. Prospero and Caliban serve as opposite approaches to the issue on opportunity, Prospero displaying capability in merciful action while Caliban falters toward repeated error. To those in power, it forces the question of whether any leader, under the same circumstances as Prospero, would act in the same manner. If not, then they are more worthy to be led shamelessly led astray by a couple of drunken fools.
Works Cited