Origin Point: The Role of Parenthood in *The Tempest*

One music composition theory states that any song should be able to be reduced to its fundamental melody, meaning a musician performs the entire piece with only a single note played at a time and still retain the theme. Similarly, some literary critics attempt to strip away the excess body and pare a work down to the skeletal question: what is this actually about? One of the most challenging literary pieces to disassemble is Shakespeare’s penultimate play, *The Tempest*. In fact, the complexity of such works is why critics like Paul Brown, Deborah Willis, and Meredith Anne Skura believe the “melody” of literature is impossible to strip down. Brown argues that Shakespeare tries creating a unified art to highlight the awareness of colonial concerns, but the representation of Caliban as Prospero’s “other” breaks the thread. While agreeing with Brown about Prospero’s competitive “other” upsetting *The Tempest*’s coherent core, Willis aggressively differs, claiming that it is Antonio who is Prospero’s foil and gives the play a politically charged context. Skura advances Brown and Willis’ ideas more abstractly, but instead identifies the “other” as Prospero himself, analyzing the play from a psychological perspective. However, the problem behind Brown, Willis, and Skura’s critiques is that they all make assumptions about the scale at which Shakespeare without demonstrated the progression from where these ideas originate. In doing so, they ignore the personal level from which the play originates. *The Tempest* has a centered unified text portrayed in the all-inclusive human condition of love, primarily in the parent relationship between Prospero and his children.
PAUL BROWN

Paul Brown’s argument focuses on the relationship Prospero has with Caliban to show how there is a colonial discourse subverting the European supremacy over the New World. For Brown, power and colonialism are interconnected, where colonial philosophy is wielding power and power is proof of the “other”. In order to keep or seize power, one must first prove that there is a worst alternative, be it in a human or ideological form. *The Tempest*, then, is seen as a game of power struggle with Prospero at the heart representing the colonialist mindset and Caliban his opponent. To Prospero, Caliban represents every kind of threat to colonial power: displacement of the upper class, patriarchal and masculine condensation, and revisionist understanding in regards to the relationship between the ruler and the subject. However, Brown argues that Caliban at the ending makes commentary that is rebellious in nature against Prospero, which is never resolved. This creates a social unease wherein colonial assuredness is displaced and undermines the efforts Prospero has made in subduing the “other”. Brown draws the conclusion that there is no definitive conclusion, as the parallels are clearly drawn to colonialism, but are too incohesive to have any merit.

DEBORAH WILLIS

In contrast to Brown, Deborah Willis presents Antonio as the true “other” to Prospero’s ruling claim. Antonio usurps Prospero. Antonio schemes with Sebastian to murder Alonso and Gonzalo. Antonio shows no repentance at the play’s finish. Again and again, Antonio proves himself to be a legitimate threat to Prospero, and if not for his and Ariel’s magical abilities, nobody except Antonio could have left the island alive. When referring to Antonio, Prospero even uses descriptive language like “Awak’d an evil nature” and “falsehood”. Because of this,
Antonio has a larger claim to be the true “other” of the play, creating a political discourse where two noble classmen vie for the same title. In direct comparison to Brown, Willis also discusses the role of Caliban. While she agrees that Caliban is a figure of colonial analysis, Willis believes Brown places too much emphasis on Caliban’s importance in influencing the events of the play. To her, Caliban is seen as a comical character with no true threat to Prospero. As such, all of Prospero’s fears seem unjustified and the paranoid delusions of a feeble ruler. Everything Caliban does is taken as a sarcastic or ironic tone, and his threat to Prospero’s rule is no legitimate threat at all. Therefore, it is impossible for Caliban to serve as Prospero’s other; it can only be Antonio.

MEREDITH ANNE SKURA

The previous two critics Brown and Willis try to pinpoint *The Tempest* as a colonial or political discourse work. Meredith Anne Skura instead argues that there are stronger ties to approach the play from a psychoanalytical standpoint. One cannot simply call it a colonial work. There are far too many differences between the Old World depiction of indigenous tribes to Caliban that make it undeniably clear that Caliban is *not* literally representative of these New World inhabitants. Rather, look at Caliban as a psychological reaction and representation of contemporary *opinion* on the New World. Colonialist interpretation merely serves as a context for which to understand Prospero’s mindset and reaction to the “others” of the island. Prospero’s strange relationship with the “childish” Caliban is there to better understand the ousted Duke’s own background and rationale behind his actions.
THE HUMAN CONDITION

For all three critics, their concern is to demonstrate how *The Tempest* is impossible to clearly define as a simple construction or statement about the world in general. But the claims they make—colonial, political, and psychological—are abstract notions referring to isolated philosophies or applications to life of a small percentage of peoples, namely the noble class. Brown, Willis, and Skura all partake in the assumption that Shakespeare is writing from a global perspective. And while this is not to discredit or refute any or all these critiques, it is important to note that the lofty, allegorical nature that they are presuming cannot be substantiated without having a foundational core from which to build. The three critics’ claims broken down read something like:

Brown: Prospero’s “other” is physically represented in Caliban revealing a colonial discourse.

Willis: Prospero’s “other” is physically represented in Antonio, revealing a political discourse.

Skura: Prospero’s “other” is metaphysically represented in Propsero, revealing a psychological discourse.

The problem with depicting global concerns is that the world is a big place. Though something might have tremendous influence on how governments and academics interact in an international setting both politically and socially, these concerns are not the same concerns everybody has. Where Brown, Willis, and Skura err is that their attention on colonialism or politics or psychology is a social construction; they are not the essence of human survival or nature. In any creative art—poetry, drama, music, painting, sculpture, dance, etc.—the reoccurring motifs of suffering or love or death are reoccurring because they reflect the origins of the human
condition. What critics like Brown, Willis, and Skura fail to do is dissect further how colonialism or politics or psychology relates to a basic human condition. Stripping away all global notions of political or colonial discourse, *The Tempest* reads as a story about a father and his children. Notice: *children*. In *The Tempest*, prevalent at its heart is the nature of love. In particular: love manifested as parenthood in regards to Prospero.

**CALIBAN**

It is impossible to know whether Shakespeare scripted the dynamic intentionally, but it is interesting to note that Caliban is a man who knows who his mother is but not his father and Miranda is a woman who knows who her father is but not her mother. The three other royal father figures in the play—Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian—all allude to (and in Alonso’s case, are physically onstage) having sons but do not mention wives. In the masque that is performed for Ferdinand and Miranda feature the three goddesses Juno, Ceres, and Iris, who function as the only visible maternal figures in the play. While these facts do nothing to support any substantial claim about *The Tempest*, they do establish that Shakespeare is definitely experimenting with the idea of parenthood and what it actually constitutes.

For Caliban, Prospero represents the only father figure he has in his life. As many critics point out, there are distinctive parallels between Sycorax and Prospero. Both are European sorcerers who were exiled to the same island, and once there, proceed to inflict their dominance over the inhabitants. Prospero even states about Caliban that: “For he’s a bastard one—had plotted with them / To take my life… / This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (5.1.273-276). What is striking here is the use of the word “bastard”, which bears a double meaning. One: it is in reference to the fact that Caliban’s father is unknown, meaning that Sycorax bore an
illegitimate child. Because the father is a mystery, Prospero is able to assume that role having no other challenger with which to compete. Two: the belief in Shakespeare's time about bastard children is that they will inevitably turn against their parents. An earlier play of Shakespeare explores such beliefs in *King Lear* through Edmund's betrayal of his father, the Earl of Gloucester. The exact same scenario is played out in *The Tempest*, with Caliban rebelling against the only possible parent he has.

Further evidence of the adopted father-son relationship is in the push-and-pull exchange in which Prospero and Caliban cycle. Prospero is primarily responsible for Caliban's education and familiarity with the English language. In exchange, Caliban repays him by cursing Prospero’s name. Prospero gives Caliban companionship. Caliban in turn, attempts to rape Miranda. Prospero places restrictions and confines Caliban in to adhere to the isolated social climate Prospero has created on the island. Caliban responds with threats of rebellion. In all these situations, there is a childish manner in Caliban’s reactions. He does not understand the criteria by which Prospero teaches. Like an actual parent, Prospero is assuming responsibility for the moral growth of Caliban, but the task is impossible. They are not a community; they are a small family, and as such, cannot provide Caliban with any real context or explanation for moral values rooted within foreign concepts of “Christianity” or “Society”.

The rape of Miranda is at the forefront of the moral discourse between father and son. From a naturalism stance, sex is about the reproduction of species and disregards the emotional and society aspect. Caliban, being unfamiliar with either, is unable to even understand what mutual consent would entail. Indeed, when Prospero angrily rebukes him on the matter, Caliban ignorantly treats it as a joke, crying out, “O ho! O ho! Would’t had been done!” (1.2.352). There is a bitter dynamic between Prospero and Caliban, where the former is constantly attempting to
instill understanding between right and wrong and the latter does not grasp the concepts. It is frustrating for Prospero, to say the least, but the Duke errs in borrowing his parenting technique from principles based on social constructs. In the end, though, Prospero forgives Caliban for his miserably bumbled insurrection. There are strong allusions to the Prodigal Son parable. Like the younger son, Caliban returns to Prospero in a meek state afraid of being severely punished, but instead finds himself forgiven.

**MIRANDA**

Understanding Caliban as Prospero’s child helps provide explanation for the Duke’s actions toward Caliban as well as Miranda. He overreacts, rebukes, and punishes Caliban, but still yet claims Caliban as his own. Caliban is called “bastard”, the literal definition acting on two levels: The first being that he is the bastard son of Sycorax and the second commenting on the adoption and natural rebellion against Prospero. Miranda, on the other hand is Prospero’s biological child. She, unlike her surrogate brother, is the purer child. Whereas Caliban questions everything that Prospero tries to control, Miranda is more willing to be obedient. This is due mostly because of the issue on identity. Miranda, being of Prospero’s flesh and blood, does not necessarily need to openly rebel against her father to determine what she means to him. She knows he has her father’s love. With Caliban, because he is the “outsider” of the family, he does not have the blood connection to understand on what level Prospero and he have a parent-child relationship. However, an interesting difference between Caliban and Miranda’s maturation process is that the daughter experiences a gentle rebellion whereas the son has a violent rebellion. Caliban plots to murder Prospero. Miranda goes against her father’s actions first when
she pleads with him to appease the tempest, and again, when she disobeys his orders not to fraternize with Ferdinand.

The two biggest moments in Miranda’s life are the betrayal of Caliban and the first encounter with Ferdinand. With the attempted assault in regard to the relationship between Miranda and Caliban, there are two connotations: one is that the incident was an incestuous act and the other is it was a breech of premarital contract. Being the pseudo-child of Prospero means that he is the surrogate brother to Miranda. However, as mentioned previously, there is a strange identity struggle happening among the three. While Prospero stands in as Caliban’s father figure, it is not necessarily certain that Caliban considers Miranda as a sister, or even understands the social or moral laws in regards to that. In a complex paradox, Prospero’s two children are in fact not siblings. In parallel to the situation is the masque with Juno, who in Classic mythology is the sister and wife of Jupiter. All of these circumstances call into question Prospero’s feelings toward Caliban. If he does truly consider him an adopted son, then the relationship between Caliban and Miranda is horrifying because of the incestuous implication.

Another perspective that Prospero might have for Caliban is that he is a prospective son-in-law. One of the duties of fathers in Shakespeare’s age was the role of matchmaker. For his daughter’s prospective security, Caliban may be well below Miranda in social hierarchy due to his exile and illegitimacy, but he is literally the only option for her—until Ferdinand, that is. Caliban’s betrayal is then seen as the breech of the sanctity of marriage. To consummate their relationship before the proper time is a corruption of Miranda’s innocence and also would reflect poorly on Prospero as a parent for allowing such an act to occur. This is why Prospero is so adamant toward Ferdinand and Miranda being chaste, even commissioning a moralistic play on such matters.
POWER

Caliban and Miranda’s relationship with Prospero represent a different type of power than that referred to in Brown, Willis, and Skura’s conversation. The three critics respectively center on power as a colonial, political, and psychological function. The fourth type depicted in *The Tempest*, and the most relevant to the human condition, is parental power. Prospero, during those twelve years on the island, had unlimited reign to exercise his progenitor influence, as Caliban and Miranda had nobody else to consider. The introduction of Alonso and the other shipwrecked survivors signal the end of Prospero’s control over his children. For Caliban, he finds new companionship—albeit drunken and disorderly—in Stephano and Trinculo. Although, Caliban grudgingly admits his error to Prospero, the very fact that he can acknowledge his fault is a sign of maturity not seen before in his character. Miranda openly disobeys Prospero to be with Ferdinand and her marriage engagement is the conclusion to Prospero’s unbridled parental power. His superfluous parental guidance is symbolically displayed in Prospero renouncing his magical powers, leaving them behind on the island as an acceptance that his time is waning.

This paper does not disagree or refute the ideas presented by Paul Brown, Deborah Willis, and Meredith Anne Skura; rather, it argues that Shakespeare did not provide parallels to colonies and monarchies as the explicit interpretation. If one strips away the contexts of historical and postcolonial criticism, the play is the story of a father who strives to secure prosperity for his children. Parenthood is a universal experience, which Prospero’s account reflects through the transference of power from parent to child and the surrender of parental control over Caliban and Miranda.
WORKS CITED


