Origin Point: The Role of Parenthood in The Tempest

One music composition theory states that a song should be able to be reduced to its fundamental melody, where only a single note is played at a time and still retain its theme. Similarly, some literary critics attempt to strip away the excess body to the skeletal question: what is this about? One of the most challenging literary pieces to disassemble is Shakespeare’s penultimate play, The Tempest. In fact, the play’s complexity is why critics like Paul Brown, Deborah Willis, and Meredith Anne Skura believe its “melody” is impossible to pare 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 core, Willis claims the “other” is Antonio and gives the play a political context. In contrast to Brown and Willis, Skura believes the previous two only look at The Tempest superficially, claiming the colonial and political discourse only hide a larger psychological issue. However, the problem behind Brown, Willis, and Skura’s critiques is that they make assumptions about Shakespeare’s aspirations without demonstrating the progression from where those ideas originate. In doing so, they ignore the universal element that Shakespeare portrays. The Tempest has a unified text portrayed in the all-inclusive human condition of love, primarily in the parent relationship between Prospero and his children.
Paul Brown’s argument focuses on the relationship Prospero has with Caliban to show 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, either in human or ideological form. *The Tempest*, therefore, is seen as a power struggle with Prospero representing the colonialist mindset and Caliban as 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 between the ruler and the subject. However, Brown argues that Caliban makes commentary rebellious in nature against Prospero that is never resolved. As a result, the play “declares no all-embracing triumph for colonialism…The play’s ‘ending’ in renunciation and restoration is only the final ambivalence” (Brown 291). A social unease is created, wherein colonial assuredness displaces and undermines the efforts Prospero makes 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.

In contrast to Brown, Deborah Willis presents Antonio as the true “other”. For starters, Antonio usurps Prospero, schemes with Sebastian to murder Alonso and Gonzalo, and shows no repentance at the play’s finish. When referring to Antonio, Prospero likens his trust in his brother to a “good parent” who errs in ignoring a child’s “evil nature” (Willis 327). The family bonds correlate with a political discourse where two noble classmen vie for the same title. And while she agrees that Caliban is a figure of colonial analysis, Willis believes Brown places undue emphasis on Caliban’s importance. To her, Caliban “is not…an embodiment of threat. Indeed, Caliban is by turns sympathetic and ridiculous” (Willis 332). As such, Prospero’s fears in regards
to Caliban seem unjustified and the paranoid delusions of a feeble ruler. Furthermore, Prospero’s inability to properly contain Antonio’s rebellion and political ambitions by play’s end creates an ambiguity in political security. Such as Brown concluded that Caliban’s uncertain final state produces colonial discourse, Antonio’s unremorseful character leads to an unsatisfactory denouement to Prospero and Antonio’s relationship.

Meredith Anne Skura does not disagree with Brown or Willis’ about The Tempest being viewed as a colonial or political work, but she does believe there are stronger ties to approach the play from a psychoanalytical perspective. She argues that:

The “colonialism” in his play is linked not only Shakespeare’s indirect participation in an ideology of political exploitation and erasure but also to his direct participation in the psychological aftereffects of having experienced the exploitation and erasure inevitable in being a child in an adult’s world. Here was not merely reproducing a preexistent discourse; he was also crossing it with other discourses, changing, enlarging, skewing, and questioning it. (Skura 387)

When it comes to colonialism, there are too many differences between the Old World depiction of indigenous tribes and Caliban that make it undeniably clear that Caliban is not literally representative of these New World inhabitants. Politically, there is too strong historical irrelevance in relation to England and the New World when Shakespeare would have written The Tempest, which suggests it is inaccurate to study the play as a political work. But in analyzing the play as a psychological discourse, Skura believes Shakespeare is experimenting with relationships, specifically through Prospero and the “childish” Caliban to depict the innocence and discovery the world inhabited around the turn of the century.
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’ interests, namely the noble class. The three critics’ claims broken down read:

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 Prospero, revealing a psychological discourse.

Though something might have tremendous influence in an international setting both politically and socially, these concerns are not universal concerns. 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 fundamental “melody” of the human condition, an element disseminated among all people. Stripping away all global notions of political or colonial discourse, *The Tempest* is a story about a father and his children. In *The Tempest*, prevalent at its heart is the nature of love; in particular, love manifested in parenthood.

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. The masque 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 Caliban’s mother, 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: “For [Caliban’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. 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 parent he has left.

Further evidence of the adopted father-son relationship is in the push-and-pull exchange that Prospero and Caliban recycle. 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. As Skura points out, “this is the rebuke made by every child…tended by his mother, and who is then subjected to the demands of the community, represented by the father” (381). Caliban, however, 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 “otherness” of which Brown and Willis refer to does appear within Caliban, but under the context as any parent struggles in the uncontrollable nature of a child.

The highest point of moral discourse in Prospero’s lack of parental control is the attempted rape of Miranda. 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.

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. 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.

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.

Though the ideas presented by Brown, Willis, and Skura are not inaccurate, it is a misstatement to say Shakespeare provided 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


