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 ultimate 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. Although 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 claims the colonial and political discourse hide a larger psychological conflict of the parent-child relationship between Prospero and Caliban. However, drawing upon all three critics—in particular Skura—*The Tempest* appears to have unifying theme. Prospero’s parent-child relationship with Caliban reflects a double-sided desire to treat the New and the Old World under similar parenthood principles while battling against fears of failing in that role.

Both Paul Brown and Deborah Willis discuss the formation of Prospero’s “other” in *The Tempest*, with the former arguing for Caliban and the latter staking a claim for Antonio. Brown focuses on a colonial discourse that arises from Prospero’s relationship with Caliban, which
primarily subverts European supremacy over the New World. In general, power necessitates a proposition of a worst alternative in human or ideological form, which Caliban seems to represent. However, Brown argues that Caliban’s rebellious nature: “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”.

In direct response to Brown, Willis rejects the idea of Caliban as the true “other”: “Caliban is by turns sympathetic and ridiculous” (Willis 332). Willis draws similar comparisons to Antonio. She comments that Prospero’s brother is the most conniving character and shows no repentance by play’s end. Plus, 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. Prospero’s inability to properly contain Antonio’s rebellion and political ambitions creates an ambiguity in political security.

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:

The New World is an appropriate stage on which to enact this last resurgence of the infantile self…What the example of Caliban’s childish presence in the play suggests is that for Shakespeare the desire for such utopias—the golden worlds and fountains of youth—has roots in personal history as well as in “history”…And, like every child’s utopia, each is a fragile creation, easily destroyed by the rage and violence that constitute its defining alternative (Skura 385)
To Skura, Caliban embodies a child caught in the middle of circumstances beyond his control. Specifically, the intrusion of Prospero reflects a broader image from Shakespeare’s time in regards to the struggles between the New World and the Old World. Prospero, then, being the parental figure has conflicting interests, at once both caring for Caliban and controlling him.

Building upon Skura’s views on parenthood in *The Tempest*, Prospero’s role as the father figure to both Caliban and Miranda reflect its unifying theme. The parenthood “melody” is transparent and manifested into the New World and the Old World, and the symbol of the parent demonstrates a push-and-pull motivation of fear and nurture.

For Prospero and Caliban, the parent-child dynamic is quite strained. In the first scene introducing Caliban, the audience is presented with a relationship dynamic in which the more powerful holds a constant stream of rebuke and the subordinate fosters thoughts of rebellion. Prospero directly calls Caliban a “poisonous slave”, “Filth”, and “Hagseed” (1.2.322, 349, 368), while Caliban states: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning my your language!” (1.2.366-368). The rebellious nature within Caliban undermines Prospero’s parental control. As the parental figure to Caliban, Prospero assumes responsibility for the island native’s maturation. However, even though Prospero and Miranda may have taught Caliban their language, there is a complete and utter failure to communicate understanding between the pseudo father-and-son, leading to a friction causing contempt and rebellion.

Furthering the parental discourse is Caliban’s attempted rape on Miranda. As the parental figure for both the youth on the island, the implicit incestuous act is horrifying to Prospero. Even worse, Caliban shows no indication of remorse: “O ho! O ho! Would’t had been done!” (1.2.352). Considering the backdrop behind Caliban’s rebellious nature and unremorseful
feelings, it is easy to see how he is so quick to fall into service for Stephano. But the repeated failings on Caliban’s part to demonstrate any volition to amend his errors is also a direct reflection on Prospero’s failings as a parent. Since Prospero is unable to instill into Caliban the virtues Prospero believes are right—regardless if they do, in fact, adhere to a universal righteousness—betray Prospero’s shortcomings as a moral instructor.

Yet, despite the stark tension, Prospero still accepts Caliban as a being of his own parental creation:

…this demidevil—
For [Caliban’s] a bastard one—had plotted with them
To take my life. Two of these fellows you
Must know and own. This thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine (5.1.272-276).

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. Either way, Prospero is fully accepting the responsibility for Caliban. He does not have to do this—nobody would dispute Prospero if he chose to disregard any connection with the “demidevil”. But in calling Caliban “mine”, Prospero is assuming any failings of Caliban as his own, as a parent with a child.

Combining Brown and Willis’ assertions on the colonial and political discourse along with Skura’s understanding of the parent-child psychology, Prospero and Caliban become figures for the Old World’s dominance over the New World. Wherein, the Old World assumes
responsibility for the care and growth of the Old World inhabitants, as a parent raising a young child. However, as Prospero shows, this responsibility leads to a certain degree of worry that the “parenting” will incite hostile feelings and ultimately fail in its endeavors: “[Caliban is] A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains, / Humanly taken, all, all lost, quite lost!” (4.1.188-190). The failings to properly instruct Caliban reflects poorly on Prospero as a parent, and in a broader sense, his colonial expectations. As a child is the result of a parent’s rearing, a colony is supposed to have a productive yield for the mother country. Caliban’s uncontrolled rebellious nature is the embodiment of the colonial discourse, where the Old World fears the hopelessness in their designs for the New World.

On a political level, the inability to corral the Old World undermines the power of the individual Old World nation. If ruler fails to control even a “demidevil” and a “bastard”, then it suggests that the power one holds in the Old World is susceptible as well. Indeed, the other lords of the island, upon seeing Caliban, make disparaging commentary: “[Caliban] / Is a plain fish, and no doubt marketable” and “[Caliban] is a strange thing as e’er I looked on” (5.1.265-266, 289). Prospero, in claiming Caliban as his, is also admitting that his political influence has been weakened through association. The parent-child dynamic has sparked a political discourse where the “father” appears weaker through his “son’s” failings.

*The Tempest* is a complex play whose “melody” is hard to pinpoint. However, drawing from critics such as Brown, Willis, and Skura, Shakespeare’s play is seen as a parenthood discourse between Prospero and Caliban that reflects upon larger issues of colonialism and political influence.
WORKS CITED


