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, 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 work 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” cannot be simplified, all three referencing the play’s ambiguous depiction of the “other”. However, the dynamics between Prospero and Caliban offers a different understanding to a unified text. Prospero’s parent-child relationship with Caliban reflects a double-edged desire to treat the Old World under similar parenthood principles while battling against fears of failing in that role.

Paul Brown and Deborah Willis both discuss the creation of Prospero’s “other” through Caliban and Antonio, respectively. Brown highlights a colonial discourse between Prospero and Caliban, who subverts European supremacy over the New World. 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). Because Prospero ultimately fails in subduing the “other”, a socio-politic tension is formed and colonial power is undermined. In direct response to Brown, Willis rejects the idea of Caliban as the true “other”: “Caliban is by turns sympathetic and ridiculous” (Willis 332). She instead proposes that Prospero’s brother is
the most conniving and unrepentant character. Furthermore, Prospero likens his trust in Antonio to a “good parent” who errs in ignoring a child’s “evil nature” (Willis 327). Essentially, Prospero’s inability to contain Antonio’s political ambition creates a political discourse, wherein friction within the family produces unstable political security. The ambiguity that Brown and Willis explore suggests that *The Tempest* is a play riddled with inconclusive meaning.

Contrary to Brown and Willis’ paradoxical conclusive incongruity, Meredith Anne Skura looks at not the fact that interpretation can be incomprehensible but at the reason for such ambiguity. She approaches *The Tempest* as a psychoanalytical discourse pitting Prospero against the “other”, Caliban:

> 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).

Skura suggests that the “childish presence” creates a frustrating struggle within and between Prospero and Caliban, as each holds onto fragile idyllic expectations. The tenuous creation results in a psychologically battle for supremacy, which is unable to separate a clear victor.

The “melody” of *The Tempest*, though unclear initially, is unified through Prospero and Caliban as an underlying parent-child relationship. In Caliban’s first scene, the dynamic is immediately introduced, although it is a strained relationship at best. Prospero calls Caliban a “poisonous slave”, “Filth”, and “Hagseed” (1.2.322, 349, 368), and Caliban cries: “[Miranda] taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you [Propsero] / For learning me your language!” (1.2.366-368). Prospero, the New World power,
holds a constant stream of rebuke while Caliban, the Old World subordinate, fosters rebellious thoughts that undermine Prospero’s parental control. Even though Prospero and Miranda may have taught Caliban their language, there is a complete and utter failure to communicate mutual understanding. Prospero’s failure is physically exhibited in Caliban’s attempted rape of Miranda. The implicit incestuous act between foster brother and biological daughter is especially horrifying to Prospero. Even worse, Caliban shows no indication of remorse: “O ho! O ho! Would’t had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had people else / This isle with Calibans” (1.2.352-354). The inability to instill into Caliban the virtues Prospero believes are right—regardless if they do, in fact, adhere to a universal righteousness—betray Prospero’s incompetence as a moral instructor. The problem would later increase when Caliban falls into service under Stephano and stages a coup against his father figure. The repeated rebellion exposes the stark tension between success and failure as a parent.

Despite the tension, Prospero still accepts Caliban as his own parental responsibility:

…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.

The parent-child discourse between Prospero and Caliban is transposed as figures for the Old World’s dominance over the New World. Wherein, the Old World assumes responsibility for the care and growth of the New 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 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 New World undermines the power of the individual Old World nation. If a 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 parenthood “melody” between Prospero and Caliban is manifested as a struggle between the Old World and the New World, the symbol of the parent demonstrating a push-and-pull motivation of fear and nurture. Prospero attempts to embody the colonial mindset, but in accepting parental responsibility and his inability to control Caliban’s rebellion against both father and master, his political power is substantially weakened.
WORKS CITED


