Positioning Mankind: Prospero and the Great Chain of Being

Time is fleeting. Death is certain. For man, that is—nature plays by its own rules. Perhaps it is raw jealousy that causes man to be forever at odds with nature. Regardless, popular depiction suggests that man must either overcome the natural orders or succumb to them. During the Elizabethan age, the world order was at the heart of common understanding of mankind’s placement in the universe. Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* utilizes the eternal struggle between man and nature through Prospero’s desire for an immortal legacy, demonstrating that people can only discover their universal placement if they accept the uncertainty of time and morality.

It is not enough that the mere passing of time can hurry people along to an ultimate unconsciousness, but nature itself contains numerous dangers to shorten the lifespan. One perilous example occurred in 1609 when the English ship *Sea Venture* was shipwrecked off the Bermuda islands. Two survivors, William Strachey and Slyvester Jourdain, each wrote in contrasting perspectives about the adventure. Strachey’s account depicts the event on Homeric proportions, stating that the storm was “like an hell of darkness turned black upon us, so much the more fuller of horror…troubled and overmastered senses of all” (122). He refers to the islands they landed upon as “Devil’s Islands” and being as horrifying as the storm itself (123). Jourdain, on the other hand, describes the event more generously. He says, “it pleased God to work so strongly as the water was stayed for that little time…and the ship kept from present sinking” (125). As for the islands, he mentions “the country [is] so abundantly fruitful of all fit
necessaries for the sustentation and preservation of man’s life” (125). Both accounts call into question the struggle between man and nature. According to Strachey, humankind trembles before nature and survives out of divine intervention. Jourdain, while he definitely alludes to the presence of a higher being, depicts mankind as being a bit more resourceful and unyielding to nature’s chaotic whims. For Strachey, time and the fear of death play an important role in his perception, while Jourdain acknowledges the fleetingness life offers.

Like Strachey and Jourdain, Prospero is also forced to confront that as much power as he wields, he is still no match for time. When he was the Duke of Milan twelve years prior, he had squandered his moment as ruler. Not only that, he had left for himself a legacy of negligence and cowardice for abandoning his duties and allowing himself to be usurped. However, Prospero experiences the true nature of felix culpa; his dethronement makes him reevaluate his position in the world. He explains to Ferdinand and Miranda that “…We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” (4.1.156-158). Prospero acknowledges the transience of nature. Being deposed and exiled to the island has forced him to confront the fact that any power he wields—political, magical, or social—is but for a brief time. The struggle he contends with is how to conquer time in the same manner as he is able to control the tempest, and in doing so leaving a lasting impact on the world. His daughter’s prospective marriage to Ferdinand seals this destiny, even receiving a blessing from Ceres laden with double entendres for offspring: “Spring come to you at the farthest / In the very end of harvest! / Scarcity and want shall shun you” (4.1.114-116). Another of Prospero’s intentions is to return to his seat of power as the Duke of Milan. He requests Alonso to “…retire me to my Milan, where / Every third thought shall be my grave” (5.1.310-311). When it comes to natural laws, death is the one certainty. Prospero understands this principle, and the next logical step is how he can make his
presence felt after he is gone. Miranda’s marriage assures his line shall survive another
generation, while his return to his Dukedom allows him to redeem his past faults and prevent
peoples’ memories of him being highly negative.

A popular idiom today that mothers, wedding planners, and filing enthusiasts use is “a
place for everything and everything in its place”. Back during the Renaissance, they would just
call that the Great Chain of Being, which attempted to rationalize an irrational universe. Thomas
Elyot in his 1531 treatise, *The Book of the Governor*, wrote “Every kind of trees, herbs, birds,
beasts, and fishes have a peculiar disposition appoerpered unto them by God their creator; so that
in everything is order, and without order may be nothing stable or permanent” (Tillyard 172).
Everything was given a position; God was naturally the highest Platonic form in Christianized
Europe, but that left mankind in a state of flux: where do human fall in this natural order?
Somewhere above paramecium and below angels is not specific enough to inquiring minds, and
so philosophers and scientists for centuries have sought to discover the answer. The Renaissance
academic Copernicus (1473-1543) created the heliocentric model, theorizing Earth to revolve
around the sun and not the other way around. Copernicus sought “the reverse…to the new
astronomy; to remove man from the centre of things was to raise him from his low estate”
(Lovejoy 104). Copernicus’ theory challenged theological argumentation based on literal
interpretations of the Bible and upset human impression on the natural balance. People realized
that their beliefs on where humanity stood on this Great Chain were not merely mistaken but
unfounded. Copernicus’ theories raised moral dilemmas, as Thomas Paine wrote, “Had the
Second Person of the Trinity been incarnate on innumerable planets in turn, or was ours the only
portion of the universe in which oral agents had any need of redemption?” (Lovejoy 109).
Prospero represents the disjointed morality that stems from the Great Chain of Being. His actions in *The Tempest* serve a dual purpose, one to legitimize his standing in the physical world and the other to secure a position in the spiritual world. In other words, immortality is treated in two different aspects. For the latter part, in the spiritual world order there are only two options: the redeemed and the damned. Prospero battles over his own position in this divine order, struggling to improve his moral worth to ascend from the depths of hell. He tells Ariel that “Though with their high wrongs I am struck to the quick, / Yet with my nobler reason ’gainst my fury / Do I take part” (5.1.25-27). Part of the greater struggles for humanity is the blurred lines between rationality and animal instinct, the id and the ego, the heart and the brain. Like any person, Prospero contends with his natural impulses and the logical reasoning in his head, and sorting out when one is crossing over to the other. According to the animalistic laws of survival—eat or be eaten, kill or be killed—Prospero has every right to kill the shipwrecked members of the island. The power-conscientious and impulsive choice would be easy; anybody back home in the Italian city-states would believe them to have drowned during the tempest, and his legitimate claim to rule bears him great favor too. But Prospero overcomes the temptation, and follows instead a stronger conviction of mercy, an ability lost in the animal kingdom.

The Great Chain of Being depicts a rigid order to the universe, but that strictness means that it is difficult for people to know where they stand in the world. In *The Tempest*, Prospero indicates the only way to prove human superiority against the universe is to acknowledge time’s power in the physical world as an intermediary to secure position in a spiritual world.
Works Cited


