Positioning Mankind: Prospero and the Great Chain of Being

In William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Prospero reclaims his Dukedom because he *is* the Duke. It seems straightforward; yet, it does not tell the whole story. According to the Renaissance philosophy of the Great Chain of Being, everything has a proper placement under God’s laws. However, that placement does not have a definitive “why?”, which drives Prospero to question his own position in the world. His doubt, though, allows him to uncover an explanation for his monarchal legitimacy. In his search to understand why he deserves to be the Duke, Prospero realizes that the Great Chain of Being justifies his rule if he is able to couple repentance with forgiveness.

The Great Chain of Being attempts to rationalize an irrational universe. As Thomas Elyot wrote in his 1531 treatise, *The Book of the Governor*: “Every kind of trees, herbs, birds, beasts, and fishes have a peculiar disposition appropered unto them by God…and without order may be nothing stable or permanent” (Tillyard 172). Without order, the belief was the world would descend into chaos, and thus, God is the stabilizer that allots each being to prevent such calamity. One such order was Divine Right, which is the idea that a monarch holds power because God has sanctioned it. But events in the sixteenth century raised critical theological incongruities that forced people to reconsider how they viewed the Great Chain. Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* and Copernicus’ Heliocentric Theory challenged theological argumentation based on literal interpretations of the Bible and upset people’s impressions on the natural balance. Eighteenth-
century American Revolutionary Thomas Paine later commented on the Renaissance upheaval:

“Had [Jesus] 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). The main issue of debate was the uniqueness of humanity, and on a personal level, how the individual has proven the right to be in the position one inhabits.

For Prospero, he seeks to justify his claim to the Dukedom of Milan. According to the Divine Right principle, the reason he lost his power was that God had deemed him unworthy of such a position. Prospero’s actions on the island, then, are an attempt to demonstrate his worth once more. Through his dethronement, Prospero experiences the true nature of felix culpa and it makes him reevaluate his position in the world. He explains 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 for but a brief time. And time is the element, under the Christian ideology, which belongs to God in his eternity. In accepting time’s supremacy over his own life, Prospero is demonstrating a humble repentance and understanding that his placement in the Great Chain of Being is transitory as well.

As further proof of his repentance and appreciation for his position, Prospero also takes into consideration the needs of his Dukedom’s people. In his first stint as ruler, he had instead neglected his duties and focused instead sorely on his own pursuits. However, in correlation with time, death is the one certainty. He admits that as soon as Alonso will: “retire me to my Milan, where / Every third thought shall be my grave” (5.1. 310-311). Prospero fears that once he is buried, other people like his brother Antonio may encroach upon his position of power again, which would upset the natural order of the world. To ensure that chaos does not prevail, he
arranges a marriage for his daughter Miranda and Alonso’s son, Ferdinand. The hope being, of course, that they have children to further Prospero’s line, which Ceres openly blesses in the fairies’ festival: “Spring come to you at the farthest / In the very end of harvest! / Scarcity and want shall shun you” (4.1.114-116). With his daughter’s future in place, Prospero is allowing the Great Chain to thrive. If his rule is Divinely sanctioned, then his children will be as well.

Although Prospero may show signs of his repentance, he must also prove that he is able to change from his experiences. His actions in *The Tempest* serve a dual purpose: one to legitimate his standing in the physical world and the second 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 and justify his position in the Great Chain. 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). 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 natural laws—eat or be eaten, kill or be killed—Prospero has every right to kill the shipwrecked members of the island. But Prospero overcomes the temptation, and follows instead a stronger conviction of mercy, an ability lost in the animal kingdom. He tells his brother, the most erroneous of the shipwrecked survivors: “For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive / Thy rankest fault” (5.1.130-132). In forgiving Antonio, Prospero proves that he is again worthy to claim the title of Duke of Milan. His repentance and merciful actions justify his position both to himself and the others on the island.
The Great Chain of Being depicts a rigid order to the universe, but that strictness causes people to question the legitimacy to the positions they claim to inhabit. In *The Tempest*, Prospero reveals the only way to prove the right is to demonstrate repentance for one’s wrongdoings and forgive others for theirs.
Works Cited

