

# Prospero as an Analogy for God and the Creative Process in the Tempest

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## Abstract:

*Hence Prospero's magical powers are that of a God like creator who seeks not to imprison and merely subjugate his subjects to bend them to his will but to redeem them and lead to their moral betterment and growth, as was seen in his attempt to give Caliban an education, his attempt to discipline Ferdinand through hardship, and his attempt to bring Alonso and Sebastian towards repentance. A postcolonial reading merely highlights colonialism as violence without acknowledging the redemptive nature of civilization as Alonso and Sebastian learn that sin has consequences, as does Caliban when he is punished by Prospero after his attempted rape of Miranda. Indeed it is true that Prospero tyrannically subjects all his subjects on the island to hardship but it is for their betterment and moral growth, like God desires towards sinners, that Prospero also desires and hence Prospero is not a mere tyrant but like God, a teacher of lessons through the suffering that he brings about in*

*order to instil discipline, repentance and moral growth in his subjects.*

## Keywords:

*Shakespeare, Tempest, Colonialism, God, Violence*

Many recent readings of the *Tempest* have emphasized the postcolonial aspects to the play, a reading that I find more fitting is a reading of Prospero as a God-like figure who might appear tyrannical on the surface but has in mind the redemption and betterment of those he disciplines. It is after all, Alonso who had displaced Prospero from Naples in collaboration with Sebastian and the enacting of the tempest to bring them to the shores of the island which Prospero and Miranda inhabit is the attempt to bring these sinners to repentance for their wronging of him by bringing them through a moral journey of recognizing their sin and advancing towards repentance. Prospero's seemingly cruel treatment of his subjects, Ferdinand and Caliban, might also arguably be the stance of discipline in hopes of improving them. Prospero allows Ferdinand

to experience hardship in transporting firewood in order that he might see that his struggles are toward an end and goal of being united with Miranda. While Caliban is resentful of Prospero's control of him, it is Prospero who taught him language while Caliban, a beast of nature from which nurture could never stick, rejects these civilizing processes by claiming language is a curse to him and makes a rape attempt on Miranda, which he does not deny and in fact wishes he had peopled the island with Calibans.

The problem with a purely postcolonial reading is that it denies the redemptive gestures that Prospero makes towards his subjects. Indeed, Prospero might seem a tyrant on the surface but it is not mere subjugation and power he seeks but the restoration of justice and the moral growth of his subjects, something analogous to God's control of us humans as subjects. Indeed Caliban is the descendant of the evil witch Sycorax and as such has a pure inclination towards sin and depravity, which is why he makes a rape attempt on Miranda and Prospero's disciplining of him has moral overtones towards it just as God disciplines those sinners whom he loves and desires the moral growth and betterment of. The problem with viewing Prospero as a mere tyrant is that it overlooks the fact that it was Prospero who was wronged in the first place by Alonso through the illegal and scheming usurpation of his position as head of Naples and Prospero, by orchestrating the events leading to the ship wreck on the island, is

seeking to restore justice for a wrong he had suffered and bring moral growth to those he disciplines by bringing them to acknowledge it was evil to usurp his position and wrongly overthrow him as the Duke of Naples.

A postcolonial reading also ignores the discipline and fortitude Prospero desires to cultivate in Ferdinand, who willingly suffers the hardship of transporting firewood in order to survive the trial to win the prize and hand of Miranda. Indeed the problem with a purely postcolonial reading is that it merely reads from the point of the necessity of resistance to Prospero's tyrannical power, without recognizing the fact that Prospero's gestures are civilizing and redemptive with the end of restoring justice and profiting his subjects through their moral growth brought about by his discipline. The emphasis in a postcolonial reading is colonial rule as an evil, while ignoring the civilizing and cultivating effects towards moral growth that Prospero's rule has on its subjects. It would not be rational to defend Caliban's rape of Miranda as something that is a right of Caliban, or Caliban's purported revolt against Prospero after all he has done to feed, teach and civilize him. Indeed post colonialists argue that the very act of trying to impose civilization on a subject is an act of violence, but as I have argued in a reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* not all subjects of colonialism experience the civilizing process as violence, indeed some from the Igbo tribe profit from the adoption of Christian religion as a new structure and order to their lives.

There are also Christian overtones to the trials that Prospero puts his subjects through. Prospero lets Ferdinand endure hardship in order to earn his prize of the hand of Miranda as well as experience the refining nature of suffering. The masque that Prospero stages with Ariel appearing as a harpy to chastise the usurpers Alonso and Sebastian has also the refining nature of suffering in mind, first to bring them through travails on the island to come to recognition of the sin that has landed them in the trial and bring them towards repentance of their immoral usurpation of Prospero's title in Naples.

There is also an analogy for magic as a creative process which Prospero relinquishes by the end of the play, perhaps an echo of Shakespeare's relinquishing his craft of creative writing, and a suggestion that the creative act itself is a God like process an act which seeks the betterment and moral growth of his subjects, us, his readers. Indeed Shakespeare's plays have always been highly didactic, with his tragedies exposing the necessary punishment of sin and moral transgression such as Goneril and Regan's fall towards ruin after ruthlessly usurping Lear's property and

Macbeth's descent into madness and destruction after murdering Duncan the king.

Hence Prospero's magical powers are that of a God like creator who seeks not to imprison and merely subjugate his subjects to bend them to his will but to redeem them and lead to their moral betterment and growth, as was seen in his attempt to give Caliban an education, his attempt to discipline Ferdinand through hardship, and his attempt to bring Alonso and Sebastian towards repentance. A postcolonial reading merely highlights colonialism as violence without acknowledging the redemptive nature of civilization as Alonso and Sebastian learn that sin has consequences, as does Caliban when he is punished by Prospero after his attempted rape of Miranda. Indeed it is true that Prospero tyrannically subjects all his subjects on the island to hardship but it is for their betterment and moral growth, like God desires towards sinners, that Prospero also desires and hence Prospero is not a mere tyrant but like God, a teacher of lessons through the suffering that he brings about in order to instil discipline, repentance and moral growth in his subjects.

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