Nature, Nurture, and Control within *The Tempest*: The Role of the Servants

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In Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, the audience is presented with Prospero, the former duke of Milan, usurped by his own brother and exiled to a far-away island with his daughter. Initially, Prospero – or more specifically, what is left of what was once Prospero – is a man consumed by thoughts of revenge, cruel and not entirely sympathetic. He has enslaved the spirit Ariel and a wild native man Caliban, and seems the autocratic ruler of the island, having domain over all of nature, the land and the air (and indeed, he exercises this control in the opening scene over the tempest itself). In reality, however, he is a broken man who seeks to control his own internal nature - his primal instincts and base emotions as well as his compassion and imagination – in order to function using only reason as his guide. Over the course of the play, however, it becomes clear how unnatural this will to exercise control over the very things that make him human truly is. In order for Prospero to be at peace, he must relinquish his control over Ariel and Caliban, and accept the aspects of his own human nature that they represent.

The first servant introduced is Caliban, a native man referred to as a “monster” by the other characters, and as a man “as disproportioned in his manners / As in his shape” by Prospero (V.i.304-305). In the early days of his exile, Prospero took Caliban under his wing, and along with Miranda he attempted to civilize and cultivate Caliban, teaching the savage how to speak. Caliban was helpful in return, revealing to the family the fertility of the island, where to drink and what to eat. However, Caliban gave into the most abhorrent of primal instincts, and attempted to rape Miranda, and now he experiences harsh treatment from Prospero, and offers back the same. He is the very representative of nature: wild, an unwilling and uncontrollable servant who refuses to bend to Prospero, accepting physical punishment for his defiance as well as his fleshy – yet natural – desires.

Caliban's role seems to be to test the limits of Prospero's control, just as nature can test a man's patience with its unruliness. Within minutes of his first appearance, Caliban curses Prospero and Miranda, taking the opportunity to jest about his own attempted rape of Miranda, stating that he would have “peopled else / This isle with Calibans” (I.ii. 57-58). This is surely a conversation that they have had many times before, and surely even wild Caliban knows that his comment will bring Prospero's fury – but in fact, that is Caliban's intent. While Prospero hoped that his “pains, humanly taken” at civilizing Caliban would pay off, Caliban is simply not a man who feels bound by arbitrary social constraints, and so is one “on whose nature / Nurture can never stick” (IV.i.179-184). The idea of rape to a man of instinct like Caliban is ridiculous, as procreation is natural; he was merely fulfilling his basic need for reproduction. While Caliban knows that he must have done something “wrong” in order to upset Prospero so greatly, he does not understand the subtle distinction between the two ideas. Prospero does not see it this way of course. He is a civilized man, and rape is a crime – whether or not civilization is present.

For this reason, Prospero cannot acknowledge the dark instincts inside himself, the similarities between himself and Caliban. As mentioned, both men are extremely volatile, but it is only Caliban who acknowledges this, whereas Prospero is locked in a constant struggle to rein in his anger. Prospero is a pot of boiling water, but Caliban knows just how to make the pot boil over. It is a game to Caliban. He recognizes that when Prospero loses his control, even for a few seconds, then the two men, savage and civilized, are not so different after all. And while this may appear to be a childish sport, to call it so would be doing Caliban a disservice. While he is not particularly “educated,” Caliban is a man who has nothing if not a large sense of pride, and each back-and-forth exchange with Prospero challenges Prospero’s authority to command respect.
In fact, Caliban’s “game” is actually a power struggle that exists on two levels. On one level, there is a petty fight between the two men, master and servant, the one who demands respect and the one who demands a reason to give it. Beneath this, however, lies a second level, a struggle between primal nature and higher reasoning. When every outburst from Prospero grants the wild man a small victory over “civilization” on the first level, then a second victory also exists, one of a primal being over a learned one. Caliban achieves a certain kind of dignity in his servitude by refusing, if only sporadically, to bow before Prospero’s intimidation. In his refusal, he proves that nature can never be controlled – not entirely.

However, the line between “wild” and “civilized” does not only blur to one side. Caliban was shown some civilization, and while he may reject it, he cannot unlearn it. For example, while he insists that his only profit from learning Prospero’s language is that he “know[s] how to curse” (I.ii.337), he actually wields language quite beautifully. This is especially true when he talks of the island (III.ii.130-138); since Caliban is of the earth, his speeches often turn to “springs, brine pits” (I.ii.341), “bogs, fens, flats” (II.ii.2), crabapples and pignuts (II.ii.159–160), and his soliloquies are considered to be some of the most beautiful in the play. Perhaps it could be said that Caliban has “cherry-picked” the civilized ideas that suit him most, but the way his words flow imply that he was a being just waiting for the right way to express himself – after all, what is cursing if not expressing oneself? Indeed, despite Prospero’s opinion of Caliban as a “A devil, a born devil on whose nature / Nurture can never stick”, and Caliban’s refusal to admit the opposite, the seed of civilization still took hold in the wild man. And though neither of them will admit it, it would appear that Prospero’s “pains, / Humanly taken,” were not all as “lost, quite lost” as he had thought (IV.i.179-184).

Alas, Prospero does not realize any of this, and Caliban's ability not only to speak but to wield his words goes unnoticed by Prospero, implying that this “devil” has qualities within himself that not even Prospero recognizes. It is a classic case of “not seeing the forest for the trees”: Prospero is so busy detesting this instinct-driven, savage man that the beauty of the island is lost on him. He is too set on controlling his natural instincts to see the passion hidden within the “wild” man, one whom has arguably been his closest (and only) company for twelve years. His hate blinds him to anything good in Caliban – to admitting that anything good can be harbored within something so uncivilized – and so, while Caliban may be the slave, it is Prospero who is ruled.

Prospero's other servant is Ariel, a spirit whom he rescued from imprisonment in a tree. While still representative of nature, Ariel is associated with the air, a refined and lofty being who embodies the more intangible emotions of compassion and imagination. Ariel is certainly a powerful spirit, but unlike Caliban or Prospero, he has no inclination to rule. Instead, all Ariel desires is to lie among the flowers and fly through the sky, to exist and coexist, to simply “be”: “where the bee sucks, / There suck I” (VI.i). And while he may appear cool or cunning at times, Ariel is not prone to anger as Caliban and Prospero are. He is sympathetic to emotion however, freely expressing joy, trust, and elation, with some of his most beautiful lines coming in short passionate songs. But even though Ariel is more willing to serve amiably than his earthly counterpart, he is not safe from Prospero's wrath. For example, when Ariel reminds his master of his promise to release him, Prospero bursts into rage, threatening to return the spirit to his prison in the tree. However, it should be noted that just as the spirit is of an intangible nature rather than an earthly kind, Prospero's attempts to exercise control over Ariel are never physical, as they are with Caliban.
However, much like Caliban, this good-natured spirit tests aspects of Prospero's control; specifically, the control that Prospero enacts over his own sense of compassion – and his human spirit – when he becomes too preoccupied by his quest for revenge. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the short-tempered Prospero patiently guiding a wild boy through lessons or doting upon his small daughter, but nevertheless, the audience is aware that the events did once occur. This implies that Prospero was once compassionate, and that he must have lost his “softer” side over time as he let himself be consumed by thoughts of revenge. It’s for this reason that, similar to his ignorance to the passion within Caliban, Prospero could not recognize Ariel’s compassionate nature either. When he discovered Ariel, a manifestation of imagination and goodness, Prospero immediately sought to enslave the spirit. He could not see the beauty, only the untapped power that was waiting to be put to use.

Armed with his new servant, Prospero bides his time, denying Ariel his freedom and sinking farther into his own warping mind. It is no surprise that when his old enemies are near, Prospero sends Ariel and the tempest to bring them to his domain where he can control them and enact his revenge. He sends Ariel to trick and torture them, using his illusions to confuse and confound them. Of course, as his loyal servant, Ariel is bound to obey all of his master’s commands. He does so remarkably and without reproach or comment – with one exception. In act V, scene I, when Prospero asks Ariel to recount the condition of the visitors, Ariel lists off each torturous spell enacted upon them without pause, and ends by complimenting Prospero's power. But beneath the compliment is something more. A suggestion: “Your charm so strongly works 'em / That if you now beheld them, your affections / Would become tender” (V.i.16-18). Prospero asks him if he really believes so, and the spirit replies “Mine would, sir, were I human” (V.i.20).

This thinly veiled taunt is aimed exactly at what Prospero had tried to ignore: that his compassion, his own connection with humanity, has been set aside in his quest to regain the control he lost when he entered exile. To be reminded of pity by a servant (who rarely voices such blatantly bold remarks) is painful enough, but to be reminded by an inhuman spirit at that is rubbing salt in the wound. The insolence of the remark is not lost on Prospero, but neither is the point that Ariel sought to make. Ariel implies that a “human” should feel compassion, and Prospero is forced to make a decision. He must either face the realization that he has been void of his “softer” emotions for quite a while – or else face the fact that he has lost his humanity altogether.

This marks a turning point for Prospero. He is indignant in his reply, rebuking Ariel with what pride he can salvage from the blow:

And mine shall.
Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself;
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art? (V.i.20-24)

However, even in his indignation, it is obvious that Ariel's words strike Prospero in much the same fashion as Caliban's did: he is suddenly and painfully reminded of his humanity. He has been playing god while controlling his island and ordering his servants, but at this moment he realizes that he is no god after all, and destroying his humanity will not make him one. As if to prove to this insolent spirit that he is every bit as sympathetic as he is, Prospero exercises his “nobler reason 'gainst [his] fury” and orders Ariel to release his prisoners, so that he may break
his charms and restore their senses (V.i.26).

After this interaction, Prospero's temper begins to calm and his pride deflates, but more importantly, he begins to relax the iron grip of his self-control, allowing his more compassionate side to show through. As the act unfolds, Prospero becomes a more and more sympathetic character. The audience watches as Prospero, humbled by his rediscovered humanity, vows to break his staff and drown his magic book; as he forgives Alonso and regards Miranda with affection; as he finally offers Ariel the freedom that the spirit has so yearned for.

Unexpectedly, Prospero even does the unthinkable in forgiving his brother but not demanding the same in return. Prospero realizes that he cannot force Antonio into being respondent or remorseful, and that moreover, such an apology is not necessary anyway; he understands that the release is in forgiveness, not vengeance. His spiritual growth is sealed in his final command to Ariel, as he bids the spirit to give the ship a safe journey home. It is a request, not an order, and an act of goodwill towards those to whom he felt nothing but rage when the play began. When at last Prospero releases Ariel of his command, it is because his own human spirit is free once again as well.

Armed with his re-found self-knowledge, Prospero is able to look upon the wretched Caliban, the savage with whom he has fought with tooth-and-nail since the play's start. Caliban expects severe punishment and begins to grovel accordingly, his lines oscillating between exclaiming how fine his master is and expressing his fear that Prospero will chastise him (V.i.274-276). However, while his fear of punishment would have been founded had the scene occurred earlier in the play, Prospero does not strike Caliban, or even belittle him. Instead, he states: “This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (V.i.289-290). On the surface, he is referring to Caliban, but to a man so torn as Prospero, this statement means so much more. When he acknowledges Caliban, he is also acknowledging that dark place which lies within every “civilized” man, that which lies within himself, and releasing himself from it.

With that, he pardons Caliban, an offer that even the “uncivilized” Caliban can recognize as representing much more. Caliban vows to Prospero to be “wise hereafter / And seek for grace”, and the words feel sincere, implying that Caliban too has learned a lesson - one that could not have been taught through punishment (V.i.309-310). The two have finally found peace, each acknowledging themselves within the other – civilization within the darkness, and the darkness within civilization.

When examining the play, one might be inclined to say that in order to leave the island, Prospero must lose everything he controlled, and indeed, Prospero does begin with his small domain and end in “want [of] spirits to enforce, art to enchant” (V). However, that logic is backwards, as in reality, Prospero began with nothing – an empty man, separated from his home and fragmented from his own humanity – and over the course of the play he makes only gains, filling the holes left by hatred with grace and humility. It is only when this is complete – when he is whole once again – that he is able to return to Milan. It is only when Prospero allows himself, to live in harmony with his own humanity, with his own nature, with both the light and the dark, that he is free. It is only when he frees his Caliban and his Ariel, his flesh and his spirit, that Prospero's long exile can finally be at an end.
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**Works Cited**