

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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There are so many "parallels, connections, echoes and analogies" at work in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* that it is difficult to know where to start. Nonetheless, a partial list:

*The sea voyage that brings Alonso, Ferdinand, and the rest to Prospero's island is echoed by the exiled Duke's tale of how he and daughter Miranda came there.

*The spirit Ariel's persistent plea for freedom from Prospero is echoed by another of his slaves, the deformed Caliban; each is threatened with imprisonment in, respectively, a tree and a rock. Ferdinand, Caliban's witch-mother Sycorax (also an exiled maker of magic), the other men shipwrecked on the island, and Prospero himself also echo this imprisonment.

*Caliban's contention that Prospero betrayed his love, stole the island away from him, and then imprisoned the "monster" echoes Antonio's usurping of Prospero's Dukedom.

*Prospero inverts his own history of being usurped by brother Antonio by initially accusing the honest Ferdinand of attempting to "usurp the name thou ow'st not" (59) and of being a spy who wishes to steal the island from its rightful "owner."

*Prospero "imprisons" Ferdinand in a "dream," rendering him unable to defend himself, and performs a spell on Antonio and Sebastian as well.

*Gonzalo ruminates at one point on the kind of Kingdom *he* would create -- one ruled not by men and their greedy antics but instead by nature. (67-68) In so doing he inverts the usurping designs of others on the island (Antonio, Sebastian, and, to a lesser degree, Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban). His emphasis on the rule of natural order, rather than chicanery or sorcery, also indicts Alonso and Prospero.

*Both Alonso and Prospero are fathers, and share a paternal love for their offspring, who (with the possible exception of Gonzalo) represent the purest forms of integrity and innocence in the play. Prospero claims to have lost his daughter Miranda at one point (114), a parallel to Alonso's loss of son Ferdinand. I actually thought of these two as quasi-brothers.

*Gonzalo says (on 116) "In one voyage did Claribel her husband find at Tunis, and Ferdinand her brother found a wife where he himself was lost; Prospero his dukedom in a poor isle; and all of us ourselves when no man was his own. " The rough but corresponding relationships between: the journey over sea to an unknown place which led both Ferdinand and his sister to find their mates (sister finding husband, brother finding wife); the exiled Prospero who loses his lawfully recognized Dukedom but gains an "unofficial" one; the freedom that is eventually granted to Ariel; the "guilt" of Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian which is ultimately expiated -- all of these echo one another.

*Their is an interrelationship between the brothers Prospero and Antonio and Alonso and Sebastian. Antonio has usurped Prospero's title and banished him to a far-off island, while Sebastian at one juncture plans to murder *his* brother Alonso, who, inverting Prospero's situation, has never lost his crown. At plays end, both sets of brothers are reconciled (though it wasn't clear to me whether Alonso was consciously aware of brother Sebastian's duplicity), and, at least in part, matters return to their rightful order.

The connection I find most interesting is the one cited as number #6 above. In this parallel, "man-made" machinations to either usurp royal power through murder (Antonio and Sebastian scheming to run Alonso and Gonzalo through so that Sebastian might become King of Naples, and Stephano and Trinculo conspiring to "brain" a sleeping Prospero in order to wrest control of his "kingdom"), or exact revenge and return things to their proper order by dint of sorcery (Prospero's goal) are contrasted with the bounty Gonzalo envisions if man allowed nature to rule his fortunes.

Rather than build a Kingdom centered primarily around royal power, Gonzalo looks to nature -- that is, the natural order of a universe unsullied by tendencies toward blasphemies like unquenchable greed and envy -- to provide a non-hierarchical, less power-mad "Paradise on earth":

"I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries execute all things. For no kind of traffic (trade) would I admit; no name of magistrate; Letters (learning) should not be known; riches, poverty, and use of service (servants), none; contract, succession (inheritance) bourn, bound of land, tilith, vineyard, none; No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil; No occupation; all men idle, all; And women too, but innocent and pure; No sovereignty... All things in common nature should produce without sweat or endeavor. Treason, felony, sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of engine would I not have; but nature should bring forth, of it own land, all foison, all abundance, to feed my innocent people." (67-68)

In this passage, Gonzalo indicts the treacherous usurping of Prospero's title by evil brother Antonio and the planned murder of Alonso by Sebastian for the same purpose. He also condemns the kind of legal trickery practiced by Alonso and Antonio to deprive Prospero of what is rightfully his, and by extension the very idea of "magistrates," property ownership and titles to begin with. Gonzalo suggests that much sorrow -- the kind we have seen visited upon Prospero by Antonio, and in Sebastian's plan to kill Alonso -- would be avoided if the concept of inherited wealth bit the dust, which, in turn, complicates the validity of Prospero's grievance. The same can be said of Gonzalo's injunction against sovereignty.

More important, as far as Prospero and how we view him are concerned, Gonzalo takes aim at the practice of learning; remember that overdevotion to books and knowledge were at least partially responsible for Prospero's troubles. There is the intimation that the development of the intellect (and occult sciences) can only distract mankind and lead him astray, as Prospero's misfortune illustrates. Similarly, Gonzalo deplores the use of servants -- a habit the self-righteous Prospero, himself a victim of imprisonment and human cruelty, indulges with a vengeance. The slighted ex-Duke, after all, suffers little the pangs of conscience when berating and threatening the likes of Ariel, Caliban, and, on a smaller scale, Ferdinand. In all of this there is the unmistakable imputation that while Prospero *has* been wronged, he is far from guiltless. Gonzalo's final, pointed use of the phrase "my innocent people" only highlights the obvious; not one of the representatives of royal power in *The Tempest* (save Ferdinand and Gonzalo himself) is free from some kind of moral stain. In that sense we might see the protagonist and his guests as products of a failed social system, a system which shamelessly sacrifices integrity and rewards deceit.

In larger terms, Gonzalo's treatise on a society where nature reigns supreme is analogous to another world-view, one that looks with disfavor upon man's pretensions toward greatness and glory (which in the context of *The Tempest* and many of Shakespeare's works is equated with royal power), perceiving them instead as petty self-aggrandizement. Yet the overall "point" of the play is a good deal more ambiguous. Though Antonio has usurped what is rightfully his brothers and contemplated murdering Gonzalo, Sebastian has considered rubbing out sibling Alonso, and Prospero has engaged in the black arts to ensnare his victims (as well as marry off his daughter), by the time the final curtain falls all of them are on reasonably good terms and see better days ahead. If the reader is searching for rigid moralizing, he is obliged to hunt elsewhere. For that reason a useful reading of *The Tempest* and its treatment of royal power requires an open mind and an appreciation for complex, unresolved meanings.