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Patriarchy and Shakespeare: A Tragicomedy in *The Tempest*

Despite being recognized as one of the greatest playwrights of all time, Shakespeare is well known to have many problematic relationships to power that are extended into his texts. One example of this is patriarchy and his portrayal of women, and lack thereof. *The Tempest* is an example of this through Shakespeare's near total exclusion of women from the play. Miranda is the only woman that ever appears in this play, and the only other one that is mentioned is Sycorax, who is dead long before the events of the play take place. This leaves limited options when examining gender relations within the play. The portrayal of Miranda serves as a good point of analysis as the only woman, however, particularly in her relationship to her father. Prospero, her father, is one of the major perpetrators of this, as he keeps her isolated and controls what she learns, which serves to maintain his power over her and the island. He uses many techniques of patriarchal abuse in order to keep this power dynamic upheld. On top of this all, Prospero also uses rhetorical objectification within his discussion of Miranda and planning of his future, as he seems to care little about her feelings or needs. These examples help us to understand how patriarchy pervades the play and shades our understanding of the characters within away from what Shakespeare and his audience may have perceived. Rather than the good, heroic wizard that audiences may have

perceived him to be, I argue that these analyses prove that Prospero is not heroic, but abusive, controlling and hungry for power.

The portrayal of Miranda throughout *The Tempest* is one of near enslavement, as Prospero controls every aspect of her life. By keeping her on the island, Prospero literally severs all contact with the outside world, to the point where Miranda has never even seen another human outside of her father. This is shown when upon seeing Ferdinand, Prospero asks her what her reactions to the first human she has seen is and she says “What is’t? a spirit?/ ...It carries a brave form. But ‘tis a spirit.” (Shakespeare 1.2.411-13). She literally cannot comprehend the idea of there being another person on the island, despite the fact that she finds herself naturally attracted to Ferdinand. She twice convinces herself that it is simply one of her father’s familiars. This is a kind of isolation that is certainly unhealthy in regards to human development, as we need socialization in order to develop as has been shown many times now by science. This interaction, however, really shows the level of control that Prospero maintains over her alone, in both that her knowledge of other people is clearly limited and that the only interactions she has are ones that have been planned by Prospero himself, revealed before this when Prospero commands Ariel to “Go make thyself like a nymph o’ th’ sea.” in order to lead Ferdinand into Miranda’s sight (1.2.301). Shortly after we can see this extended when Prospero and Miranda go to meet Ferdinand. When Prospero asks him to prove his worth, Miranda asks him to have pity and take it easier on Ferdinand. Prospero uses this and her lack of experience with humans (which he orchestrated) against Miranda while also undermining her view of Ferdinand with his subsequent monologue:

Though think’st there is no more such shapes as he,

Having seen but him and Caliban. Foolish wench!

To th' most of men this is a Caliban,

And they to him are angels. (Shakespeare 1.2.479-82)

The way that Prospero derides Miranda as foolish because of her isolation is reminiscent of a common tactic of patriarchal power relations called gaslighting, whereby a person in a controlling relationship tries to make the person they are controlling feel guilty and dependent on the controller. Prospero, then, seems to be only interested in ensuring his control over Miranda's perception of Ferdinand, as he has controlled her perception of the rest of the world through the isolation. He follows this directly by undermining her original opinion of his beautiful form by saying that he is comparable to Caliban, described and often portrayed as beastly to Prospero. By doing so, he reinforces the idea that she should be reliant on Prospero for her opinions and understandings. This is even more true in the larger context of the play, insofar as Prospero's motivation for doing all of this is to keep Ferdinand and Miranda from getting too close before he can arrange a marriage, which he considers to be the only pure form of sexual relationship. This is the moral basis that people use today to stigmatize sexually active women through slut-shaming, although at the time the moral framework of sexual purity was certainly spread to both men and women. This is shown in the play as well, through the portrayal of the shipwrecked noblemen as almost scoundrels in both their rampant sexual behaviors and their schemes to betray one another. Prospero, by modern standards, seems to be abusive and controlling with his daughter in almost every way.

Prospero also serves to undermine Miranda's value throughout the play by objectifying her endlessly. In all of his plans, he is only interested in Miranda as a pawn; he wants her to marry a nobleman so that he can regain and legitimize a claim to nobility when he finally is able to return to the mainland, assumed to be England. This in itself is another way that we can see how

problematic his relationship to Miranda is. Despite being her father, there is no consideration really of her future whatsoever. One could likely make the argument that this was emblematic of the times, as women had little future or bearing on the world in the traditional thought, however it seems to be much more apparent in this play when compounded with the previous evidence. The women are almost literally props in this play, an afterthought that at best indirectly influences the plot. Later scenes show this rhetorically as well as Prospero mentions his daughter multiple times as property. When Prospero finally gives Ferdinand the permission to marry his daughter, he says

PROSPERO

If I have too austerely punished you,

Your compensation makes amends; for I

Have given you here a third of mine own life,

Or that for which I live (4.1.1-4).

By saying this he objectifies Miranda into nothing more than compensation for his tasks, dehumanizing her much along the same lines as his undermining her opinions earlier. In this speech, he also gives her value only in relationship to himself; in letting Ferdinand marry his daughter, Prospero is not helping them have a happy future but giving Ferdinand a piece of himself. She only has value in relationship to the men in her life according to the play. He later solidifies this when he says “Then, as my gift, and thine own acquisition/Worthily purchased, take my daughter” (4.1.13-14). He genuinely seems to consider his daughter something which has been purchased through Ferdinand’s completion of Prospero’s tasks. These rhetorical slips give insight into Prospero’s view of his relationship to Miranda. All indicators point to the idea that Prospero views Miranda simply as nothing more than a means to his ends of gaining revenge and power

over everything he can. Miranda simply is caught in this, and while she seemingly gets a happy ending in escaping his control through marriage to Ferdinand, Prospero is almost assured to extend his abusive, patriarchal tendencies to someone or something else.

All in all, the text of the play seems to contradict what may have been Shakespeare's intended message, and almost certainly was how audiences of his time perceived it. Despite the fact that much of the play sets up Prospero as the protagonist who we are supposed to set free in the end, it seems that he is hardly worth it. Miranda, as the only woman portrayed in the play, is constantly under his control in a variety of ways, which sets Prospero up not as a protagonist but as an abusive father who relies on patriarchal oppression to maintain a feeling of power. Prospero controls every aspect of Miranda's life, including everything that she knows and everybody that she meets. She is isolated from anybody except for her father and Caliban until Ferdinand comes along. Even then, Prospero orchestrates the entire encounter in order to benefit himself. He even engages in gaslighting by convincing Miranda that her naivety, which Prospero purposefully constructed, is a negative thing and reason that she should not trust herself. Later in the play, we can also begin to extract how Prospero views his relationship to Miranda through his rhetorical positioning when finally agreeing to let Ferdinand marry her. He objectifies her multiple times by referring to her as property, which serves as a way of dehumanizing Miranda to others which impacts her self-worth inherently. He also compares her value only in terms of his own life and as his own offspring, which in turn rejects and undermines any inherent value she may have as a human being. It seems that all of the evidence points to Prospero being anything but the heroic wizard that we are asked to view him as through the play. So when the ending comes around, and we are asked to pardon Prospero from his crimes, I think that there is only one possible response: rejection.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. "The Tempest". *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare Ed*, edited by Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller, Penguin Group, 2002, pp. 730-761.