

That Darker Side

Of all the colorful and eccentric characters in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Prospero, upon whom the entire plot hinges, is arguably the most driven and conflicted. His relationships with the other individuals on his island of exile expose much about his true moral fiber and underlie many of the actions he undertakes throughout the play. The three beings he has lived with for the years before *The Tempest* takes place -- Miranda, Caliban, and Ariel -- are three very different characters that serve distinct purposes in both Prospero's life and the text itself. All three are certainly important, but Caliban and Ariel especially reveal more about Prospero's values, insecurities, and aspirations than any other characters that we meet -- though it seems expected that instead, Prospero's interaction with his shipwrecked enemies should serve as the climax effecting the unveiling of his true character. But we see his relationship with Caliban and Ariel conveying his complicated nature: Prospero's reality as an earth-bound human is visibly in conflict with his aspirations toward the supernatural and magical realm. His insecurities about his own humanity are thus revealed by the way he treats the two nearly opposite characters, disparaging and devaluing the crude beast/human while favoring the useful spirit.

Before examining how Caliban and Ariel somewhat hyperbolically represent the conflicting sides of Prospero's character, it is important to first look at the nature of Caliban and Ariel individually. Caliban is a barely-human beast, the rightful heir to the mysterious island, who was induced into slavery by Prospero some time after the dishonored Duke and his daughter first arrived. Caliban exemplifies the lowest of humanity: he is dirty, ugly, uneducated (except

for his comprehension of language, which Prospero and Miranda taught him), and has significant knowledge only of the island, his home. It is clear (and understandable) that he knows nothing of social customs or basic human morality; in the past he tried to rape Miranda. Visibly interested only in the basest of human behavior - eating and sex, for example - and resigned to slavery, he represents the crudeness of human nature that Prospero despises.

In Act IV, Scene I, Prospero calls Caliban “A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick” (*The Tempest*, 4.1.188-189). This quotation, along with various others throughout the text, bluntly expresses Prospero’s deeply held sentiments of enmity and frustration toward Caliban. This specific quotation, though, seems to implicate more than just Caliban as the target of his disgust, but also humanity as a whole, by involving the famous “Nature vs. Nurture” debate. In the example of Caliban, humanity is naturally evil, base, and sinful, and these characteristics immutable: an existence that Prospero detests and strives to rise above. He abuses Caliban in order to devalue and debase the cruder side of human nature, that side that Prospero may see as a threat to his higher ambitions because he, like any human, contains that crudeness somewhere within him. By beating down Caliban, the illustration of human baseness, while respecting Ariel, the illustration of the supernatural realm that Prospero strives for, Prospero demonstrates his true ambitions.

Ariel, like Caliban, is Prospero’s slave, but Ariel is treated and viewed differently than Caliban. While Caliban infrequently lends more than tension and trouble to Prospero’s life, Ariel is a dutiful servant whose service is valued and necessary, especially in carrying out Prospero’s plan for revenge. When Ariel returns to Prospero after “performing” the Tempest, Prospero proudly calls Ariel his “brave spirit” (1.2.194, 206). His work is important to Prospero, but Prospero still ensures that Ariel remembers his status as a slave (1.2.242-300). Prospero’s

attitude toward Ariel, a combination of overpowering authority and respect, is complicated but ultimately beneficial to both characters. Prospero, with his own magical powers, highly values the supernatural realm that Ariel embodies. And when Prospero takes up his magical robe and staff and books and works his magic, he takes a conspicuous step into that spiritual realm.

Just as Prospero devalues Caliban and his associated evil, Caliban devalues the opposite end of Prospero's persona: he writes off Prospero's tools of magic as nothing "but trash" (4.1.222). But interestingly enough, he still fears his master's wrath, warning Stephano and Trinculo soon after that "[Prospero]'ll fill our skins with pinches, / Make us strange stuff", and "We shall lose our time, / And all be turn'd to barnacles, or to apes / With foreheads villainous low" (4.1.231-232, 245-247) if they are caught trying to murder Prospero, as they plan to do. Earlier, Caliban expressed similar skepticism of Prospero's supernatural leanings, telling Stephano, "Remember / First to possess his books; for without them / He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not / One spirit to command" (3.2.88-91). This quotation is particularly important because Caliban is claiming outright that Prospero, no matter his tendencies or ambitions otherwise, is no better than Caliban: a simple, unsophisticated, and all too easily immoral human.

This assertion is shocking: how could Caliban, obviously the lowly and amoral half of the pair, possibly posit that the mighty Prospero is no better than he? After seeing how loathe Prospero is to accept the baseness of humanity, could he truly embody those flaws after all? It may not be due to Caliban's claims, but at the end of the play we do see a startling change of heart in Prospero. In conversation with Ariel, Prospero is convinced to end his torture of the king and his men and relinquish his magical power over the events and people on the island. When Ariel shows pity for the tortured men at the beginning of Act V, it causes an immediate change in Prospero's attitude. "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?" (5.1.21-24). Prospero's sudden realization that he has forgotten the virtues of pity and forgiveness in his quest for both revenge and a higher realm of being must be the single most important turning point in the play. Rather than destroying the men who wronged him along with their followers, some no more than innocent bystanders, Prospero seems to recognize that the great and furious lengths he has gone to in order to exact revenge may have been unwarranted and, frankly, evil. Whether or not we, as readers, approve of his sympathetic turn, its significance cannot be understated. Although the evil of humankind was what Prospero sought to deny in himself, his alternate existence in the higher supernatural and spiritual realm left him just as susceptible to evil and sin as his human existence, a paradox that finally leads to his denunciation of his "so potent art" (5.1.50). "...This rough magic / I here abjure", he announces, and thereafter abandons it (5.1.50-51).

Through a series of symbolic gestures in Act V, we see Prospero finally accepting and embracing his humanity. First, he promises to break his staff and drown his book, two of the powerful instruments of his magic (5.1.54-57). Then, with Ariel's assistance, he exchanges his magician's clothing for "the hat and rapier" that represent the aristocratic life he once led and now wishes to return to (5.1.84). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Prospero grants Ariel his freedom, saying, "I shall miss thee, / But yet thou shalt have freedom" (5.1.95-96). He is finally and permanently releasing his hold on the supernatural sphere, although he will admittedly miss it. And interestingly enough, just as Prospero returns to humanity, Caliban also undergoes a change of his own. He pronounces, "I'll be wise hereafter, / And seek for grace." (5.1.294-295). Perhaps, as Prospero failed to recognize, humanity is not so inherently bad after all; for it is not static, and has the capacity to improve itself. The simple fact that humans have

the ability to do evil and base things does not confirm the absence of compassion and good in human interaction, characteristics the likes of which often robustly outshine that darker side of humanity so abhorred by Prospero.