

UNDERGRADUATE PAPER

**A Stranger to His State:
Prospero's Isolation through Art**

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Richly imaginative and vividly engaging, *The Tempest* showcases some of Shakespeare's most fantastical work. A dichotomy of art and nature in the play works to emphasize a variety of contrasts between civil and savage, freedom and bondage, and community and isolation, contributing depth of interpretation to an otherwise minimally complex plot. Standing at the heart of these oppositions, Prospero controls the play's action as the conflict of art and nature revolves around his identity. Though he isolates himself by resisting human nature and instead pursuing the intellectual edification of his art, Prospero must reconcile both as aspects of humanity to attain the freedom to rejoin society.

Prospero's art is more complex than it perhaps appears. It comprises the liberal arts, meaning the study and related knowledge of culture, philosophy, and natural science, as well as supernatural disciplines like astrology and alchemy. Consequently, though his art includes magic, it is certainly not limited to it. He begins his relationship with the mind

while still the Duke of Milan, where he is “reputed / In dignity, and for the liberal arts / Without a parallel”¹ (*Tempest* 1.2.72-74). His reference to the liberal arts is noteworthy, as they form the foundation of his philosophy of the primacy of the mind that will inevitably alienate him from his own humanity. Noting that the “very idea of education” forms the “essence of . . . humanism” in Europe, Professor Jonathan Bate cites Prospero’s liberal arts as a “specific . . . allusion” to the “humanist curriculum,” which includes instruction in language, logic, arithmetic, music, and astronomy.² In this vein, Prospero perceives himself as a scholar before all else. However, by abandoning the government of his dukedom to his brother, Antonio, and “neglecting worldly ends” to improve his mind in seclusion (1.2.89), he does himself a grave disservice. Antonio betrays him, resulting in the former duke’s exile on his forsaken isle, but Prospero first betrays himself, for turning fully toward his art entails turning away from his identity as the Duke of Milan.

On the island, Prospero begins a new phase of life. His devotion to art intensifies with his nearly perfected isolation, and fresh experience with betrayal increases his aversion to the faithless nature of humanity. Scholar Dustin Gish notices that, at this point, Prospero’s “art . . . is no longer limited to books; it is partly derived from [his] study of nature itself,” referring to the inhuman nature of the world around him, as opposed to that of human society.³ This added focus on the inanimate serves to deepen the psychological isolation that leads to Prospero’s expulsion from society in the first place. He conceptualizes a binary relationship between art and human nature with study and instruction ideally providing a correction to nature’s influence on the human character. While he largely fails in applying this principle to Caliban—who disowns his education with the sentiment that all he gained from language is the capacity to curse (1.2.366-67)—Prospero more easily influences Miranda. On seeing Ferdinand for the first time, her indoctrination

against the possibility of a higher capacity in nature becomes evident, for she believes him to be divine (*i.e.*, not human) based on the principle that “nothing natural” could be “so noble” (1.2.422-23).

Prospero’s negative reaction toward nature is visible when he responds sharply to his daughter’s defense of Ferdinand, threatening that any additional outburst will make him “chide [her], if not hate [her]” (1.2.480). Considering that Prospero’s goal requires the two to fall in love, the intensity of his reaction suggests a response on a philosophical level. As Miranda repeatedly questions her father’s actions toward Ferdinand, Prospero rebukes her, saying, “My foot my tutor?” (1.2.473). He seems to feel that nature’s assertion of power over the art he has imparted to his daughter motivates her repeated protestations against him.

The power of Prospero’s art derives not from the art itself but from his unbalanced devotion to it at the expense of human nature. For this reason, his art is associated with the inhuman, frequently in terms of the divine. Prospero promises Miranda:

I have with such provision in mine art
So safely ordered that there is no soul—
No, not so much perdition as an hair
Betid to any creature in the vessel
. which thou saw’st sink. (1.2.28-32)

Insinuating he possesses God-like powers of protection, he speaks in terms reminiscent of the reassurance found in the Gospel of Matthew that “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” by God.⁴ Later, Ariel claims, “Not a hair perished” echoing the sentiment as the embodiment of Prospero’s power (1.2.218). Additionally, Caliban recognizes that Prospero’s “art is of such power / It would control my dam’s god, Setebos, / And make a vassal of him” (1.2.375-77). Thus, ultimate nature in the form of a pagan god would bow to the absolute art that Prospero seeks to perfect, yet in pursuing inhuman power, he must deny his own humanity. The mage’s

staff and arcane book featured throughout the play as tools of Prospero's power represent this same singular devotion. As long as the former Duke of Milan wields art over others, he cannot exist alongside them.

For Prospero, the knowledge and mental discipline of art counter what he perceives as the failings of a human nature entirely dominated by negative attributes. His experience with Caliban leads him to conclude that the evil impulses of nature resist, and even refuse, improvement by art. Antonio, Sebastian, Stephano, and Trinculo all enact the corruption Prospero expects. Already established as the "false brother" (1.2.89) who usurped his rule in Milan, Antonio once again acts on the greed of his ambitious nature by inciting Sebastian to overthrow his own brother, the King of Naples. Equally influenced by his base nature, Sebastian willingly joins the plot against King Alonso. He questions Antonio's experience first, asking after the state of his conscience, but Antonio satisfies any reservations the other may have had, responding, "Ay, sir, where lies that?"—as if moral consideration can be simply laid aside (2.1.277-8). Although Sebastian is not intending to personally kill his brother, instead leaving that to his co-conspirator, it is darkly ambiguous whether he would have, given the opportunity. In a less sinister but equivalently distasteful pattern of behavior, the two persistently mock old Gonzalo's efforts to cheer the king, who believes his son to be lost to the sea; and Sebastian antagonizes his brother directly, noting, "you may thank yourself for this great loss" (2.1.125). Heartless nature informs his actions, reinforcing the idea of human nature that Prospero resists.

Though not as egregious in behavior as the would-be usurpers, Stephano the butler and Trinculo the jester also validate Prospero's notion of base nature. As alcoholics completely devoted to the satisfaction of their appetites, they actually manage to remain intoxicated the entire time they spend together on the island. Furthermore, once Caliban has pledged himself to Stephano, the butler commands, "Drink,

servant monster, when I bid thee,” imposing the nature that rules him on those in his service (3.1.8). When he learns about Prospero and Miranda, Stephano also agrees to kill a man he has never met and take his daughter to satisfy his appetites (3.2.106-107). Their contemptible nature does not even value an individual’s life or freedom beyond possible monetary gain; for, upon encountering the prone form of Caliban exposed to the elements, Trinculo’s first impulse is to guess at his market value as an oddity. Similarly, the hope of possibly selling the man motivates Stephano to “recover” Caliban using his wine as a restorative (2.2.76). This pattern of values and behavior illustrates Prospero’s motivation in his resistance to nature.

Like some of the nobles newly stranded on the island, Caliban takes this opportunity to attempt to overthrow his master. His instructions to Stephano to “[b]atter [Prospero’s] skull, or paunch him with a stake / Or cut his weasand with thy knife” (3.2.90-91), however, reveal a depth to his brutality that surpasses the violent nature of the others. In his Arden edition of *The Tempest*, Frank Kermode observes that, “Caliban represents...nature without benefit of nurture; Nature, as opposed to an Art which is man’s power over...himself.”⁵ Kermode touches on, but does not quite explain, the idea that Caliban exemplifies Prospero’s idea of base nature. His cursed origin as the child of a witch and a demon, his outward deformities, his lust, and his defiance all illustrate Caliban’s role as a mirror of Prospero, dedicated to a corrupt human nature at the expense of art. This singular fixation on one element and exclusion of the other leads the audience to perceive Caliban as inhuman. Just as Prospero cannot participate in humanity while serving only art, Caliban cannot be human without it. It is also reasonable to assume that his servant’s unapologetic attempt to rape Miranda accounts for Prospero’s excessive admonitions against the breaking of chastity before marriage. As critic Michael Payne observes, “[E]ven Miranda believes she is defying her father

in loving Ferdinand.”⁶ Prospero wants nothing more than for the two to be together, however, publicly evidenced by the wedding masque he orchestrates for the couple with his art. His philosophy may condemn lust as base human nature, but it celebrates love as an ideal goal.

Ultimately, Prospero must reconcile the humanity of both art and nature before he can return to the dukedom he loves. His pursuit of absolute art has caused him to reject his own humanity, leading him to lose the ability to participate in society. In applying art's justice, unmitigated by human tenderness, Prospero throws his proclaimed enemies into a maze of psychological torment, leaving them in that state while he directs his masque to entertain the newly engaged couple. His intentions toward his prisoners are unclear, even as he asks Ariel's impression of their condition. However, when the spirit notes that “if [Prospero] now beheld them [his] affections / Would become tender” (5.1.18-19), interjecting that his own would as well, “were [he] human” (5.1.21), the mage acknowledges that his feelings shall be similarly moved—for he has come to the realization that, “the rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance” (5.1.27-28). Faced with Ariel's assessment of the tender affections of humanity, Prospero owns his own nature, acknowledging his connection to mankind as “[o]ne of their kind,” with the consequent empathy that should entail (5.1.23). He recognizes the co-existence of reason with nature, for there can be no justice when empathy—humanity, even—is sacrificed for vengeance. Critic Maurice Charney isolates this as the “turning point of the play” where “Prospero recovers his human warmth and fallibility.”⁷ Though certainly integral to Prospero's character, this moment follows another that echoes its sentiment of human frailty with even greater implications.

During the pinnacle performance of Prospero's art, the “most majestic vision” that he orchestrates as a demonstration of his power, he experiences a lapse that punctuates the climax of his development as a character (4.1.118). Recalling

Caliban's conspiracy to murder him causes Prospero to abruptly terminate his production in a state of rage and upset like nothing his daughter has ever seen him display (4.1.134-5). This is the moment that leads him to recognize the failure of his philosophic approach and his need to accept nature. Clearly, Caliban and a few drunken Neapolitans hold no threat for him. Instead, he reacts to his own failure to account for something he had forgotten. The realization that flawless control is unattainable triggers his emotional outburst and rapid reassessment of his human existence. He excuses himself, asking Ferdinand to, "Bear with my weakness," marking his first true admission of vulnerability (4.1.159). Already, Prospero explores his new mode of thinking about natural existence. Eloquently noting the ephemeral quality of individual life, he reflects, "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep," contemplating mortality as a necessary aspect of living—nature's final punctuation (4.1.156-58). By accepting fallibility and mortality as universal commonalities, Prospero progresses toward reestablishing his connection to humanity.

To perfect his blended approach to nature and art, wherein intellect tempers a complex nature capable of both positive and negative traits, Prospero must give up the power that separates him from the rest of humanity. Regarding this motivation, scholar Robert Kimbrough writes, "Prospero will turn from his books, not for theological reasons, but for human ones; his studies have removed him from the pale of mankind and he knows that he must return...human as he is."⁸ He has learned that power is not worth isolation, and he no longer needs the ability to exert control if he is not also able to participate. In breaking his staff, drowning his book, and abjuring his "rough magic," Prospero renounces the tools, symbols, and power associated with his misguided singular devotion to art and denial of nature (5.1.51-57). Correcting the imbalance of his approach to humanity, he abandons his power to exceed human ability and is left with

the natural results of his studies: knowledge, understanding, and authority.

A theme of freedom traces its way through the narrative of *The Tempest*, contributing to that noticed by historian and literary critic Frances Yates, who writes that the “language [of the play]...is infused through and through with spiritual alchemy and its theme of transformation.”⁹ Caliban and Ariel both yearn for liberation and successfully transition out of their own sorts of bondage at the hands of Prospero, yet the master himself is not free. Prospero cannot leave his island until he has the capacity to rejoin the society that ejected him. By accepting himself with his fallibility, vices, and weakness, and by acknowledging the need for assistance from the very audience he has been playing to, Prospero demonstrates his transmutation into a whole man at last (Epilogue.16-20).

Notes

1. References are to act, scene, and line of the following edition: William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. David Bevington (Boston: Pearson, 2014).
2. Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of Shakespeare* (New York: Random House, 2009), 118, 199.
3. Dustin Dustin, “Taming *The Tempest*: Prospero’s Love of Wisdom and the Turn from Tyranny,” in *Souls with Longing: Representations of Honor and Love in Shakespeare*, ed. Bernard Dobski and Dustin Gish (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 187.
4. Matt. 10:30 (English Standard Version).
5. Frank Kermode, introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), quoted in David Daniell, *The Tempest: The Critics Debate* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 40.
6. Michael Payne, “Magic and Politics in *The Tempest*,” *Shakespearean Criticism* 45 (1999): 276.
7. Maurice Charney, *Shakespeare’s Style* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), 150.
8. Robert Kimbrough, “Prospero and the Art of Humankindness,” *Shakespearean Criticism* 16 (1992): 442-51.
9. Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (Boston: Ark, 1979), 162.