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Shakespeare

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**Power and Parenthood in *The Tempest* and *King Lear*<sup>1</sup>**

Although in many respects quite different, and at first glance entirely different, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* are indeed similar in several important respects--character and theme not least amongst them. Upon close examination, what we find in *The Tempest* is, essentially, a comic and romantic consideration of earthly power and parenthood which finds tragic treatment in *King Lear*.

It can hardly be doubted that *The Tempest* achieves the peculiarly Shakespearean balance between comic action and serious theme. Perhaps more descriptive than narrative, with plot, consisting mostly of Prospero's efforts to get the characters to the right place at the right time and in the right number of pieces--one piece per person, taking a minor role. What *The Tempest* lacks here, however, it makes ample compensation in theatrics: the "improvidently" providential storm and shipwreck; the fishy Caliban and flighty Ariel; farcical events as in the wild chase of Trinculo and Stephano by Prospero's "spectral hounds" and Caliban's comic drunken stupor.

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<sup>1</sup>I have attempted, in this introductory section, to include some comparisons to Macbeth also. This might seem like over-kill, but should be worth at least a few over-kill bonus points.

Alternately, although *King Lear* provides little comic relief in the traditional sense, where even the court jester seems more philosophical and prophetic than funny, there is still some degree of comedy provided by what we might consider absurdist theatrics, two examples being Edgar's insistence to the blind Gloucester that a flat field is a hill, followed by the suicidal jump; and Lear's heartfelt attempt to defy the storm. *The Tempest*, in addition to the theatrics already mentioned, incorporates magic as in no other drama<sup>2</sup>. It is this magical element that provides the atmosphere and sense of "other-worldliness" pervading the whole play; and from this point of view *The Tempest* shares a close affinity with *Macbeth*--though the magic of the two are, clearly, poles apart. Magic, present from the very beginning in both *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*--the storm which strands Alonso and the others on the island and the "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (*Macbeth* I.i.10) scene, it is certainly incorporated to a greater degree in *The Tempest*, appearing in such varied forms as the spectral banquet and the ever present melodies free floating about the island. Indeed, it could be argued that the whole exotic and mysterious island is itself a manifestation of the *mystical*--a combination of magic and religion, of the hero testing Vergilian underworld and the Christian redemption through trial. An indication of the consistent use of magic in *The Tempest* is provided by its

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<sup>2</sup>Such all encompassing statements actually encompass only the plays I have myself studied.

appearance in the opening as well as the closing scenes, where Prospero directly works his spells on Alonso and his companions.

Important as the theatrical--and especially magical--elements are in *The Tempest*, what makes the play more profound than such light hearted comedies as *Much Ado About Nothing* are its central themes of change and reconciliation, explored through the issues of earthly power and of parenthood and kinship. These are subjects that run deep within our own lives and so provide the play with a certain sense of immediacy as well as a relevance that is timeless.

Earthly power and parenthood are clearly favourite topics of exploration for Shakespeare--Hamlet's relationships with his uncle-father providing one such example. Even *Macbeth* explores this, if we consider--and we should--Duncan as a "father figure." *The Tempest's* most striking parallel is, however, with *King Lear*. It is between these two plays that the themes of earthly power and of parenthood are most closely related. And yet, by virtue of their respective outcomes, no two plays could be more different. Whereas the overturning of the natural order, the hierarchy of power--parenthood being only one case of this hierarchy, the less secular power of the monarch being the other--leads to deadly disaster in *King Lear*, in *The Tempest* this conflict against the natural order is resolved positively. This, of course, stems at least in part from certain comedic conventions, and so no *serious* threat to the power structure really exists. Indeed, the play begins with the intention to *right* of a breach already committed against the social order,

rather than with the *threat* of rending social fabric which is still in one peace.<sup>3</sup> But the matter is dealt with all the same, and in a manner reminiscent of *King Lear*. In *The Tempest* we have, as in *King Lear*, a monarch<sup>4</sup>, Prospero, displaced from power. Also Alonso, king of Naples, who believes he has lost his son, Ferdinand, and suffers for it much in the same way that king Lear comes to suffer as a result of his rejection of Cordelia--at least once he has realised his error. And most importantly, both Antonio and Prospero are shown to change and to have been changed, respectively, for the better through adversity, something which is absolutely unmistakable in king Lear.

There are other parallels which touch upon the issue of temporal power: the storms in each play a particularly striking example. The storm that concludes the second scene of the first act in *The Tempest* leads us into a state quite similar to the one in which Lear finds himself after the termination of the tempest which torments him. In each case the tempest at first seems indifferent to the mortal men it makes miserable, to the kings, to their power, to their position. This is underlined in *The Tempest* by the boatswain who cries, "What cares these roarers for the name of king?" (I. i. 16-17) Yet in both cases this is not really true. In *King Lear* the storm begins with

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<sup>3</sup>This is not bad spelling but even worse punning.

<sup>4</sup>For purposes of simplification, duke is equated with monarch.

Lear's madness and ends with his restoration. Nature rages in sympathy with Lear. The terrestrial tumult in the realm of political power is shown to have religious significance by the simultaneous tumult in the heavens. Earthly power then is not a law unto itself, but part of a chain which ascends into the heavens. In *The Tempest*, the storm is a prelude to the restoration of Prospero. From this perspective then, the storms in *King Lear* and *The Tempest* are not indifferent to those they affect, but a part of a larger scheme of things. This scheme in *King Lear* is heavenly ordained. Generally speaking, this is also the case in *The Tempest*, though it is particularly the scheme of Prospero: it is the first instrument by which he will set the natural chain of the social order and power to rights, in the process resolving his own problems as well as those of Alonso, his brother and Antonio.

This is something which helps bring out the most important difference between the two plays where their main protagonists are concerned. In *The Tempest* Prospero retains power despite being the victim of political usurpation--his power is dependent upon magic and, in terms of morality, his worthiness and not upon the position he no longer holds--and he can therefore control the situation. Lear's power, according to Goneril and Regan, is entirely tied to the position he has relinquished. It is from their point of view that Lear is seen clinging onto the illusion of power--power which he in fact has blindly given away while trying to retain its privileges. A more sympathetic reading would be one closer to that of Lear, seeing himself more

like Prospero's state, where authority and respect come from something more profound and more durable than position only. That something more profound and durable is clearly God's ordination; but in the pagan world of Lear, where the workings of God are only half witnessed, the rightful chain of authority seems an entirely secular one. And yet the presence of God in this pagan world is suggested by the morality which takes His place. Also, such crucial lines as: "She's dead as earth"; (V.iii.260) "Is this the promised end?"; (V.iii.263) and,

This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,  
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows  
That ever I have felt. (V.iii.264-266)

all suggest the secularism represented in Goneril and Regan to be, if the predominant view, also the short sighted view. And so, with his position gone, Lear is left at the mercy of people and the events which unfold around him. Prospero, on the other hand, only gives up his magical powers once he is secure in the knowledge that he will no longer need them--at the end of the play--when his earthly powers have been restored. It is first and foremost because of this difference that *King Lear* ends in tragedy, while *The Tempest* does not. Lear and the term "politically astute" do impossible bedfellows make--in fact they likely as not never even kissed. This, combined with the rash action of excluding Cordelia--the most worthy of his daughters--from the earthly power structure bind him and others to doom. His clear vision comes too late. Prospero, from the opening of the play, has already learned to see clearly. It is in the

lengthy exposition rather than the action of the play itself that we realise Prospero has already lived through, survived and learned from adversity--the adversity which only too late teaches Lear, as implored by Kent, to "see better." (I. i. 158) In this light, and even if the comic convention would allow for it, *The Tempest* cannot be resolved on a tragic note, since it is itself the resolution and conclusion to a problem concerning order and power which had come into existence prior to the time scale of the play and would therefore be a contradiction with the play's internal logic. Prospero, having already achieved by the beginning of *The Tempest* what Lear lacks until the end, until it is too late, is given no reason to fail. In this sense *The Tempest* can almost be thought of as a sequel to *King Lear*, the former starting where the latter leaves off.<sup>5</sup>

It is also true that Prospero and his daughter, Miranda, begin where Lear and Cordelia leaves off. Lear never truly sees Cordelia for what she is until the conclusion when they become prisoners. Prior to this, from the beginning of the play through to the storm, losing his "wits," yet regaining his humanity, Lear believed her to be--and had treated her as--a selfish ingrate child and traitor. The conclusion, however, as suggested by the above quotation, indicates his perception of her to have altered to such a degree that she seems later to be something

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<sup>5</sup>If this seems too absurd a statement, reading it with closed eyes might prove beneficial--at least beneficial to me, if not the statement.

akin to an angel—which is by far closer to the truth. Further, and perhaps clearer, proof of this shift of view is presented by his initial reaction upon waking and seeing her, once the storm has abated: “You are a spirit, I know. Where did you die?” (IV, vii, 49) The attending doctor claims his words are the result of disorientation, but this seems an excessively secular and pragmatic assessment perfect upon the lips of a physician. Lear may indeed be still somewhat muddled, but he is now aware of an inner vision, and seeing in her the “divinity,” sees what had been there all along. Prospero and Miranda, though, already have the relationship that Lear and Cordelia were never able to fully develop. From the very outset, Prospero attributes to his child the same “divine” qualities that Lear comes to see in Cordelia; it was Miranda too, who, in a sense, sustained her father and gave him the will to live during his time of trial, just as Cordelia did for her own father in his time of greatest distress. As Prospero states:

O, a cherubin

Thou wast that did preserve me! Thou didst smile,

Infused with a fortitude from heaven (I, ii, 152-

154).

It is not that Miranda and Cordelia necessarily have much in common--Miranda is, after all, hardly more than a shy, innocent child, whereas Cordelia is a paragon of virtue--but each has a touch of divinity in her, and each shows honest undaunted affection for her father.

If we closely examine Lear's character, we find it to be

almost a composite of Prospero and Alonso--though it certainly is greater than the sum of its parts, for Lear claims our sympathy more than both these combined and multiplied, more than almost any other of his characters in any other play. Although Prospero is the main protagonist of the play, it is Alonso whom<sup>6</sup> we see grieving and despairing, like Lear, believing his son is drowned, that he will never again see either his kingdom or his daughter. Here, as in *King Lear*, a father has lost everything he holds dear, and only then comes to realise their true importance. It is Prospero, on the other hand, who has lost his political position due to disinterest, remoteness, and the failure to see signs of the impending coup. Again, much like Lear, Prospero was far too absorbed in his own personal world to see the outside one clearly and the result was disaster. Despite his self-confessed poor qualities as a ruler, Prospero was loved by his subjects:

*Mir.* Wherefore did they not

That hour destroy us?

*Pros.* Well demanded, wench:

My tale provokes that question. Dear, they durst not,

So dear the love my people bore me. (I, ii, 139-141)

Prospero's usurpation was, therefore, a "national" as well as a personal tragedy: a trend which runs throughout the works of

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<sup>6</sup>So much for those working class principles. If this note means nothing you have either, a) a bad memory; b) read the wrong paper first.

Shakespeare where unlawful overthrow of the established temporal and social power structure is involved.

These ideas present themselves again in *The Tempest*, once Alonso and company are carried to the island. From then on, we are presented with numerous situations, comic and serious, that threaten the powers and lives of Alonso and Prospero. We are also presented with attempts, comic and serious, to seize power from Alonso and Prospero, by Sebastian and Antonio respectively, and by Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban who wish to overthrow the "king" of the island and rule it for themselves. While Alonso is faced with the serious possibility of assassination at his brother's hand, Prospero, who has already been deposed once, is the victim only of an attempted comic coup from Caliban--whom we might, at least for purposes of argument, consider his estranged "son"--and his new masters. Where we have death in *King Lear*, *The Tempest* offers painful "cramps"; a wild hound chase for Caliban; magical phantasms; sleep spells and paralysis spells for Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, and the rest.

Alonso, who supported and helped the usurpation of Prospero by Antonio, now finds that his situation is reversed. Like Antonio, he is powerless, though Antonio seems largely unaffected by this fact. Alonso, alternately, is deeply affected and has come to understand his basic helplessness. This is not caused by his family nor by his own failing--though he is threatened by his brother and could be accused of poor judgement in having helped the dethroning of Prospero--but rather by his old nemesis, Prospero. In this way, events are balanced out,

removal of power for removal of power. In addition, it should not escape our notice that Prospero holds his revenge in check and demonstrates a quality essential to the religious themes: forgiveness. In safeguarding Alonso's life, he both restores and preserves the proper order of temporal power.

There is also a rough parallel here between Gloucester's good and evil sons--Edgar and Edmund--in *King Lear* and Prospero's own loyal daughter and his treacherous "adopted son,"<sup>7</sup> Caliban. Just as Edmund--who rejects his parentage in essentially the same manner that Caliban rejects Prospero--betrays his father, so too does Caliban attempt at Prospero's disposal. Of course, Caliban is a "salvage and deformed slave"--as the *Dramatis Peronæ* makes clear--and so is bereft of personal power. Furthermore, he is everything of a simpleton, unlike Edmund, who possesses profound cunning and an astute understanding of human nature well beyond that of any other character in *King Lear*. Yet even after Caliban's disloyalty, Prospero forgives the "salvage." Where Caliban is concerned, Prospero represents a power much like Rousseau's "society," keeping "man" in check once he has been civilised.

*The Tempest*, therefore, can be seen to a large degree as presenting us with the same issues of earthly power and of parenthood which are central to *King Lear*. This is expressed in the relationships between Alonso and his brother, Prospero and Antonio, Caliban and Prospero, and Miranda and her father. *The*

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<sup>7</sup>Remember: for the sake of argument.

*Tempest*, however, cannot turn to tragedy since there is never any serious threat to Prospero's power. Caliban and his newly acquired masters can never hope to outmatch nor outwit Prospero—especially considering their drunken stupor and Prospero's constant vigilance through Ariel. Neither will Prospero allow the situation to take a tragic turn. His power is not only absolute, but it is directed by the wisdom wrought of long seclusion on the uninhabited island. It is through experience that Prospero learns the best use of power lies in understanding and forgiveness. As *The Tempest* comes to a close, order is restored, all elements find their proper place and the tragedy that engulfs the characters in *King Lear* is averted. Prospero and Alonso have found the peace of mind that king Lear was forbid.<sup>8</sup>

If there is indeed a paradise where we might find Lear with Cordelia, singing "like birds i' the cage" (V, iii, 9), who is to say it would not be unlike the isle of *The Tempest*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>It could be argued that king Lear dies not of a broken heart, but of a glad one, with the belief that his daughter Cordelia has in fact survived in one way or another. Nevertheless, any peace that Lear feels is certainly short lived and not sufficient to qualify the final tragedy.

<sup>9</sup>Actually, *I* would. But it's still a nice enough closing paragraph if we apply poetic licence and special permission from the government.