

Power and Wonder in *The Tempest*

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William Shakespeare's magical romance play *The Tempest* is often characterised by the power and authority that certain characters influence over each other. This essay will describe in detail the ways in which the exercise of power by characters in this play depends on reward and punishment.

The principle character who exercises power over others is Prospero, the usurped former duke of Milan. Prospero exercises his power over other characters in various ways, but quite often he does it by offering a reward or threatening punishment. These methods are most evident in the dialogue between Prospero and Ariel in the middle of scene two in act one. Ariel first appears in the play at the beginning of this scene, having been commanded by Prospero to report on the outcome of a task given him. Through the conversation, the audience learns that Ariel was once imprisoned in a pine tree by the witch Sycorax who ruled the island before Prospero. Ariel asks Prospero, with some trepidation:

Ariel: Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains, let me remember thee what thou has promised, which is not yet performed.

Prospero: How now? Moody? What is't thou canst demand?

Ariel: My liberty.

Prospero: Before the time be out? No more.

Ariel: I prithee, remember I have done thee worthy service, told thee no lies, made no mistakes, served without grudge or grumblings. Thou did promise to bate me a full year.

Prospero: Dost thou forget from what a torment I did free thee?

Ariel: No.

Prospero: Thou dost! And think'st it much to tread the ooze of the salt deep, to run upon the sharp wind of the north, to do me business in the veins o'th'earth when it is baked with frost.

Ariel: I do not sir.

Prospero: Thou liest, malignant thing. Hast thou forgot the foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy was grown into a hoop? Hast thou forgot her?

Ariel: No, sir.

(Act one, scene two, line 242-259)

Prospero goes on to remind Ariel of the torment he suffered at the hands of Sycorax, and tells of how he freed Ariel from the pine tree. He then concludes their conversation with this:

Prospero: If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak and peg thee in his knotty entrails till thou hast howled away twelve winters.

Ariel: Pardon, master. I will be correspondent to command and do my spiriting gently.

(Act one, scene two, line 294-298)

These lines paint Prospero as an unkind, unsympathetic master to Ariel, and gives the impression that Ariel is only in his servitude out of gratitude and fear of punishment. However, Prospero then offers this reward for Ariel's continuing obedience:

Prospero: Do so [as I command]; and after two days will I discharge thee.

(Act one, scene two, line 299)

This exchange gives the impression that Prospero is inclined to punish those who do not perform as he commands, but that he is also willing to reward loyal servitude with freedom.

This conversation is an adequate example of Elizabethan hierarchy and rank, in which an indebted individual was obliged to serve their debtor for a certain amount of time before being granted their liberty.

There are other small instances in the same scene in which Prospero reminds Ariel of his promise of freedom. For example, further on in the same scene, Prospero has Ariel sing a song to the prince Ferdinand to make him believe that his father is dead. Prospero is pleased with the song's effect, and says:

Prospero: [To Ariel] Spirit, fine spirit, I'll free thee within two days for this.

(Line 419)

In the same scene, several lines further on, Prospero's scheme for Ferdinand and Miranda is going well, and he says to Ariel:

Prospero: Delicate Ariel, I'll set thee free for this!

(Line 440)

Prospero: [To Ariel] Thou hast done well, fine Ariel... Hark what thou else shalt do me...

(Line 493)

Prospero: [To Ariel] Thou shalt be as free as mountain winds; but then exactly do all points of my command.

(Line 498)

Throughout this scene Prospero does not offer any extra rewards to Ariel, but merely reminds him of the reward he has already been promised. This is because Prospero considers himself an honest, just master, and he needs Ariel's services to bring his various plans to fruition.

Prospero's reward to Ariel also seems to be dependent on his own schemes going to plan. That is, when Prospero's scheming rewards itself, he reminds Ariel of the reward he will bestow on the spirit, as demonstrated by the example above.

Ariel is bound to Prospero in a manner that is never fully explained in the play, but is left to the imagination of the audience. Prospero's power over Ariel is not only in the mysterious bondage that has the spirit in servitude, but also by Ariel's fear of being punished for angering Prospero. Much later in the play Prospero suddenly remembers that a band of men are going to try and kill him, and calls Ariel to him. Ariel says:

Ariel: Ay, my commander. When I presented Ceres I thought t'have told thee of it [the men's plot to kill Prospero], but I feared lest I might anger thee.

(Act four, scene one, line 167-169)

From this small statement it is clear that Ariel fears Prospero's anger and punishment, and subsequently Prospero holds power over him.

The second most prominent utilisation of power through reward and punishment is that exercised by Prospero over Caliban. Prospero does not reward Caliban for anything during the play, although it is mentioned as part of the background story that Prospero found Caliban and educated him enough to speak and to serve in exchange for him telling Prospero secrets about the island. Since then, however, their relationship had soured. When Caliban first enters the scene, it is with a barrage of curses and insults directed at Prospero, to which Prospero replies:

Prospero: For this, be sure, tonight thou shalt have cramps, side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins shall, for that vast of night that they may work, all exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinched as thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging than bees that made 'em.

(Act one, scene two, line 326-331)

Prospero is already known to possess an 'art', referred to as a form of magic, and it is apparent that Prospero is capable of using magic to harm Caliban. Further on Prospero says:

Prospero: Hag-seed, hence! Fetch us in fuel; and be quick, thou'rt best, to answer business. Shrug'st thou, malice? If thou neglect'st, or dost unwillingly what I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps, fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar, that beasts shall tremble at thy din.

Caliban: No, pay thee. [Aside] I must obey; his art is of such power, it would control my dam's god Setebos, and make a vassal of him.

(Act one, scene two, line 365-373)

This is the only instance in the play where Prospero makes a direct threat of punishment at the prospect of defiance, and it is made clear by Caliban that he only obeys Prospero out of fear of being punished. This is a clear example of the exercise of Prospero's power often being dependent on his threats of punishment, and of other character's fear of disobeying him.

Another character who suffers from the power of Prospero, if only briefly, is Ferdinand. When Ferdinand first wanders into Prospero and Miranda's camp, he falls in love with Miranda upon seeing her. Prospero intends for this to happen, and to encourage and reinforce their affections, he forces Ferdinand to do some work for him to prove he is not a spy. Ferdinand does the work that Prospero commands him, but only because he believes he will be rewarded with Miranda's affections and hand in marriage. The audience is aware, through Prospero's speeches aside from the action, that he is only pretending to be suspicious of Ferdinand in order to encourage the affection and attachment between Ferdinand and Miranda. In light of this, we know that Ferdinand will eventually be rewarded for submitting to Prospero's power and obeying his demands. Ferdinand's hope for reward is made obvious in a conversation between him and Miranda, in which he says:

Ferdinand: I am in my condition a prince, Miranda; I do think a king – I would not so – and would no more endure this wooden slavery than to suffer the flesh-fly blow my mouth. Hear my soul speak. The very instant that I saw you, did my heart fly to your service, there resides to make my slave to it, and for your sake am I this patient log-man.

(Act three, scene one, line 61-68)

Ferdinand is rewarded for his work in the next act:

Prospero: [To Ferdinand] 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; who once again I tender to thy hand. All thy vexations were but my trials of thy love, and thou hast strangely stood the test. Here, afore heaven, I ratify this my rich gift. O Ferdinand, do not smile at me, that I boast of her, for thou shalt find she will outstrip all praise and make it halt behind her.

Ferdinand: I do believe it against an oracle.

Prospero: Then, as my gift, and thine own acquisition worthily purchased, take my daughter...

(Act four, scene one, line 1-14)

This exchange confirms that Ferdinand attained his reward by submitting to Prospero's power. The whole exchange was a trick on Prospero's part to gain Ferdinand as his son-in-law, however, he would not have been able to achieve his goal had he not exercised power over Ferdinand by promising Miranda as a reward for his submission. This is a prime example of Prospero's ability to exercise power over other characters through reward and punishment.

Another example of power being exercised dependent on reward and punishment is in the exchanges between Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban in act three. Caliban meets Trinculo and Stephano when he is out on the island gathering wood for Prospero. Trinculo, a jester, and Stephano, a drunken butler carrying a bottle of alcohol, have both been shipwrecked on the island during the tempest. Upon meeting Caliban, these two characters joke about becoming rulers of the island, and soon Stephano playfully (and perhaps a little drunkenly) steps into the role of master. He says:

Stephano: My man-monster hath drowned his tongue in sack. For my part, the sea cannot drown me – I swam, ere I could recover the shore, five and thirty leagues off and on. By this light, thou shalt be my lieutenant, monster, or my standard.

(Act three, scene two, line 11-14)

In this throw-away phrase Stephano is already joking with the idea of rewarding Caliban if he joins him in ruling the island. However, their joke soon becomes more serious, and Trinculo is suspicious of Caliban, calling him a liar, to which Stephano replies:

Stephano: Trinculo, keep a good tongue in your head. If you prove a mutineer, the next tree. The poor monster's my subject, and he shall not suffer indignity...

Trinculo, if you trouble him any more in's tale, by this hand, I will supplant some of your teeth.

(Line 30-32 and 42-43)

Caliban offers to reward Stephano with servitude if Stephano overthrows Prospero as ruler of the island:

Caliban: I say by sorcery he got this isle; From me he got it. If thy greatness will
revenge it on him – for I know thou dar'st, but this thing dare not –

Stephano: That's most certain.

Caliban: Thou shalt be lord of it, and I'll serve thee.

(Line 46-51)

Ariel, while invisible, interferes in their conversation, inciting anger between Caliban and Trinculo, and causing Stephano to say:

Stephano: Trinculo, run into no further danger. Interrupt the monster one word
further, and by this hand, I'll turn my mercy out o'doors, and make a stockfish of
thee.

(Line 62-64)

Ariel interferes again, and Stephano strikes Trinculo, saying:

Stephano: Take thou that! As you like this, give me the lie another time.

(Line 79)

At this point it is evident that the joke of Stephano ruling the island has become a reality to him, and he brings it upon himself to exercise power over Trinculo and punish him when he is apparently disrespectful. This sequence is a smaller, subtler example of power being exercised dependent on reward and punishment, but it is an instance of it nonetheless.

Another joking scene of power is played out when Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban go to Prospero's residence with a plan to kill him. There they find clothes, put there by Prospero, and have a witty conversation. This conversation includes more jokes about reward and punishment at the hands of Stephano's assumed power, including the following statement:

Stephano: I thank thee for that jest; here's a garment for't. Wit shall not go
unrewarded in while I am king of this country. 'Steal by line and level' is an
excellent pass of pate: there's another garment for't.

(Act four, scene one, line 237-239)

This small statement demonstrates Stephano's assumption of power over Caliban, and his tendency to reward where he sees fit. In this scene Caliban submits to Stephano's power to receive reward, and it demonstrates Stephano's belief that power is exercised by rewarding and punishing his 'subjects'.

A further example of power being exercised through punishment and reward is a scene in act three in which Ariel appears to Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio, and says:

Ariel: You are three men of sin, whom Destiny – that hath to instrument this lower world, and what is in't – the never-surfeited sea hath caused to belch up you. And on this island, where man doth not inhabit – you 'mongst men being most unfit to live – I have made you mad; and even with suchlike valour men hang and drown their proper selves.

(Act three, scene three, line 53-59)

In this statement Ariel holds the king and his two men accountable for their past actions; he implies that they are being punished for their sins. In direct correlation to this statement, Alonso, upon reuniting with Prospero two scenes later, says:

Alonso: ...Thy pulse beats as of flesh and blood; and since I saw thee, th'affliction of my mind amends, with which I fear a madness held me. This must crave, and if this be at all, a most strange story. Thy dukedom I resign, and do entreat thou pardon me my wrongs...

(Act five, scene one, line 111-119)

In this statement Alonso has not only granted Prospero his dukedom back, but also begged his forgiveness as an act of repentance for his past sins. This entire situation is orchestrated by Prospero, indicating his knowledge of how to wield power. Alonso's repentance is a direct result of his (perceived) punishment, thus demonstrating that power, in this setting, is dependent on punishment.

There are many cases of power being dependent on reward and punishment in *The Tempest*. Sometimes the rewards and punishments are real, and sometimes trickery and deception is involved. But it is clear that the most effectively wielded power in this play is that which is exercised through the promise of reward or the threat of punishment by a character who understands that weaker minds, or 'subjects', must be coerced or threatened into action.

References

The Tempest, (The New Cambridge Shakespeare Edition, 2012), written by William Shakespeare, edited by David Lindley