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Colonialism in *The Tempest* and passion in Shakespeare's sonnets

Chung Chin-Yi*

Abstract: Prospero's magical powers are that of a God like creator who seeks not to imprison and merely subjugate his subjects to bend them to his will but to redeem them and lead to their moral betterment and growth, as was seen in his attempt to give Caliban an education, his attempt to discipline Ferdinand through hardship, and his attempt to bring Alonso and Sebastian towards repentance. A postcolonial reading merely highlights colonialism as violence without acknowledging the redemptive nature of civilization as Alonso and Sebastian learn that sin has consequences, as does Caliban when he is punished by Prospero after his attempted rape of Miranda. Indeed it is true that Prospero tyrannically subjects all his subjects on the island to hardship but it is for their betterment and moral growth, like God desires towards sinners, that Prospero also desires and hence Prospero is not a mere tyrant but like God, a teacher of lessons through the suffering that he brings about in order to instill discipline, repentance and moral growth in his subjects. Two loves are thus contrasted in the sonnets, a Platonic, idealized, immortal and inspiring love Shakespeare experiences for the fair youth and a degrading, sensual, sinful and debauchorous love he experiences for the dark mistress in which Shakespeare does not idealize her or put her on a pedestal and recognizes that she is mortal and no goddess but nonetheless he appreciates her fully with all her deficiencies and defects. Shakespeare thus

makes an unusual ode to love in its multifaceted and varied forms, platonic and sensual, idealized and mundane.

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* Research Scholar, National University of Singapore.

Many recent readings of *The Tempest* have emphasized the postcolonial aspects to the play, a reading that I find more fitting is a reading of Prospero as a God-like figure who might appear tyrannical on the surface but has in mind the redemption and betterment of those he disciplines. It is after all, Alonso who had displaced Prospero from Naples in collaboration with Sebastian and the enacting of the tempest to bring them to the shores of the island which Prospero and Miranda inhabit is the attempt to bring these sinners to repentance for their wronging of him by bringing them through a moral journey of recognizing their sin and advancing towards repentance. Prospero's seemingly cruel treatment of his subjects, Ferdinand and Caliban, might also arguably be the stance of discipline in hopes of improving them. Prospero allows Ferdinand to experience hardship in transporting firewood in order that he might see that his struggles are toward an end and goal of being united with Miranda. While Caliban is resentful of Prospero's control of him, it is Prospero who taught him language while Caliban, a beast of nature from which nurture could never stick, rejects these civilizing processes by claiming language is a curse to him and makes a rape attempt on Miranda, which he does not deny and in fact wishes he had peopled the island with Calibans.

The problem with a purely postcolonial reading is that it denies the redemptive gestures that Prospero makes towards his subjects. Indeed, Prospero might seem a tyrant on the surface but it is not mere subjugation and power he seeks but the restoration of justice and the moral growth of his subjects, something analogous to God's control of us humans as subjects. Indeed Caliban is the descendant of the evil witch Sycorax and as such has a pure inclination towards sin and depravity, which is why he makes a rape attempt on Miranda and Prospero's disciplining of him has moral overtones towards it just as God disciplines those sinners whom he loves and desires the moral growth and betterment of. The problem with viewing Prospero as a mere tyrant

is that it overlooks the fact that it was Prospero who was wronged in the first place by Alonso through the illegal and scheming usurpation of his position as head of Naples and Prospero, by orchestrating the events leading to the ship wreck on the island, is seeking to restore justice for a wrong he had suffered and bring moral growth to those he disciplines by bringing them to acknowledge it was evil to usurp his position and wrongly overthrow him as the Duke of Naples.

A postcolonial reading also ignores the discipline and fortitude Prospero desires to cultivate in Ferdinand, who willingly suffers the hardship of transporting firewood in order to survive the trial to win the prize and hand of Miranda. Indeed the problem with a purely postcolonial reading is that it merely reads from the point of the necessity of resistance to Prospero's tyrannical power, without recognizing the fact that Prospero's gestures are civilizing and redemptive with the end of restoring justice and profiting his subjects through their moral growth brought about by his discipline. The emphasis in a postcolonial reading is colonial rule as an evil, while ignoring the civilizing and cultivating effects towards moral growth that Prospero's rule has on its subjects. It would not be rational to defend Caliban's rape of Miranda as something that is a right of Caliban, or Caliban's purported revolt against Prospero after all he has done to feed, teach and civilize him. Indeed post colonialists argue that the very act of trying to impose civilization on a subject is an act of violence, but as I have argued in a reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* not all subjects of colonialism experience the civilizing process as violence, indeed some from the Igbo tribe profit from the adoption of Christian religion as a new structure and order to their lives.

There are also Christian overtones to the trials that Prospero puts his subjects through. Prospero lets Ferdinand endure hardship in order to earn his prize of the hand of Miranda as well as experience the refining nature of suffering. The masque that Prospero stages with Ariel appearing as a harpy to chastise the usurpers Alonso and Sebastian has also the refining nature of suffering in mind, first to bring them through travails on the island to come to recognition of the sin that has landed them in the trial and bring them towards repentance of their immoral usurpation of Prospero's title in Naples.

There is also an analogy for magic as a creative process which Prospero relinquishes by the end of the play, perhaps an echo of Shakespeare's relinquishing his craft of creative writing,

and a suggestion that the creative act itself is a God like process an act which seeks the betterment and moral growth of his subjects, us, his readers. Indeed Shakespeare's plays have always been highly didactic, with his tragedies exposing the necessary punishment of sin and moral transgression such as Goneril and Regan's fall towards ruin after ruthlessly usurping Lear's property and Macbeth's descent into madness and destruction after murdering Duncan the king.

Hence Prospero's magical powers are that of a God like creator who seeks not to imprison and merely subjugate his subjects to bend them to his will but to redeem them and lead to their moral betterment and growth, as was seen in his attempt to give Caliban an education, his attempt to discipline Ferdinand through hardship, and his attempt to bring Alonso and Sebastian towards repentance. A postcolonial reading merely highlights colonialism as violence without acknowledging the redemptive nature of civilization as Alonso and Sebastian learn that sin has consequences, as does Caliban when he is punished by Prospero after his attempted rape of Miranda. Indeed it is true that Prospero tyrannically subjects all his subjects on the island to hardship but it is for their betterment and moral growth, like God desires towards sinners, that Prospero also desires and hence Prospero is not a mere tyrant but like God, a teacher of lessons through the suffering that he brings about in order to instil discipline, repentance and moral growth in his subjects.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, an apollonian love and platonic admiration for a fair youth or fair friend is contrasted with a Dionysian love and lust for the poet's dark mistress. The platonic love for the fair youth is described as a love which enriches and inspires him, love being a ladder which he ascends in improvement by meditating on the youth's beauty, while the lust he experiences for the dark mistress is a degrading passion which exhausts him and leaves him bereft of dignity and steeped in shame. Hence sonnet 144:

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair
Which, like two spirits, do suggest me still
The better angel is a man right fair
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,

And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride,
And whether that my angel be turned fiend
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell
But being both from me both to each friend
I guess one angel in another's hell
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt
Till my bad angel fire my good one out

The Dionysian love for the dark mistress is described as an evil and she is described as 'foul' and wanton, tempting the better angel, the fair youth from his side. Her female private parts are described pejoratively as a hell (I guess one angel in another's hell) and their lustful sensuous relations between Shakespeare as a hell (To win me soon to hell my female evil) and hence the relations with this dark mistress are described as sinful, degrading and shaming. This is seen in another sonnet 129:

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel not to trust
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe
Before, a joy proposed; behind a dream
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell

The passion and lust for the dark mistress are thus described in degrading and negative terms as lust, perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of flame, and described as an expense of spirit in a waste of shame, the opposite of the improving, spiritual, inspiring Platonic love that Shakespeare experiences for the fair youth. Again a woman's private parts are described pejoratively as a hell that shuns heaven and an entrapment, the love for the dark mistress are thus described as degrading, foul, lust, destined for hell as opposed to the heaven he experiences with the fair youth. The lust he experiences for the dark mistress is thus a damning one in which he does not experience spiritual edification as he does with the youth but damnation and degradation. The lustful and degrading nature of the sensual relations between Shakespeare and the dark mistress are contrasted with the improving, Platonic love for the fair youth in in sonnet 116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove,
O no, it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come
Love alters not with his brief hour and weeks
But bears it out even to the edge of doom
If this be error and upon me proved
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

The Platonic love with the fair youth is thus described as a marriage of true minds, a mental and spiritual connections and a marriage of intellect and soul rather than bodily degradation, a foul and degrading lust with the dark mistress, it is abiding as an ever fixed mark and thus lasts much longer than the temporal satiation of lust Shakespeare experiences with the dark mistress and this is seen again when he states that Love is not time's fool though rosy lips and cheeks within Time's sickle come, the love for the fair youth is thus depicted as Platonic and eternal contrasted

with the temporary satiation of degrading lust as rosy lips and cheeks Shakespeare experiences with the dark mistress. The love for the fair youth is thus Platonic, eternal, unshakeable and somewhat immortal as well as pure compared with the degrading lust and sensual passion Shakespeare experiences with the dark mistress. The love for the fair youth is also described as a form of self-love in sonnet 62

Sin of self- love possesseth all mine eye
And all my soul, and all my every part
And for this sin there is no remedy
It is grounded inward in my heart
Methinks no face so gracious as mine
No shape so true, no truth of such account,
And for myself mine own worth do define
As I all other in all worth's surmount
But when my glass shows me myself indeed,
Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity
Mine own self-love quite contrary I read
Self, so self-loving, were iniquity
'Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise
Painting my age with the beauty of thy days

The love for the fair youth is thus described as a self-love, an idealization of the youth as a younger version of himself as Shakespeare 'paints' his 'age with the beauty of thy days'. Again, we see that the love for the fair youth is an idealized one in which he identifies a younger version of himself in the youth and thus experiences a self-love which he transfers as affection to the youth. Indeed, Shakespeare's ideal love is a form of self-love since he loves none better than himself, in contrast the sexual difference with the dark mistress proves to be not love but lust in an expense of spirit that degrades him sensually rather than improving him and inspiring him spiritually. In contrast to this Platonic, idealized and improving love the love for the dark mistress is not idealized at all but experienced as ordinary and mundane in sonnet 130:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lip's red,
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head
I have seen roses damasked, red and white
But no roses see I in her cheeks;
Again in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks
I love to hear her speak yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound,
I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare

Shakespeare does not idealize the mistress hence or put her on a pedestal, he recognizes that she is of no spectacular or extraordinary beauty, her eyes are nothing like the sun and her lips are not bright red, her hairs are stiff like wires and her cheeks are pale rather than rosy, aside from that she has body odour and her voice is not in the least musical, she is no goddess and she is a mere mortal who treads the ground. And yet Shakespeare experiences a love that is rarer than any belied with false compare, his love for her is exquisite and unique rather than tainted with false glamorizing and glorification of her, it is a love for the very ordinary and mundane nature of his mistress that he experiences rather than the idealized immortal love he experiences for the fair youth.

Two loves are thus contrasted in the sonnets, a Platonic, idealized, immortal and inspiring love Shakespeare experiences for the fair youth and a degrading, sensual, sinful and debaucherous love he experiences for the dark mistress in which Shakespeare does not idealize her or put her on a pedestal and recognizes that she is mortal and no goddess but nonetheless he appreciates her fully with all her deficiencies and defects. Shakespeare thus makes an unusual ode to love in its multifaceted and varied forms, platonic and sensual, idealized and mundane.

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