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Power and the Causes of Unequal Distribution in
The Tempest and Twelfth Night

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ENGL 220/ Mallette

Power and the Causes of Unequal Distribution in *The Tempest* and *Twelfth Night*

There are many different elements to consider when analyzing the plotlines of Shakespeare's plays. One might explore the impact of the environment in which the work takes place, the effects of gender roles and class divisions between the characters, and the nature of love and its influence on the conclusions. In order to interpret his work, all of these topics are crucial to understand, but each is only a small piece of a larger picture. Without the presence of power, dominance, and authority in the plots, none of above subjects would exist to take into account. For instance, gender roles and class divisions are simply effects of an unequal distribution of power. The significance of power, dominance, and authority is defined and examined in the text and productions of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night and The Tempest, as are the roles of titles, love, environment, and education in power dispersal.

Power is a broad term that simply describes one character's control over the actions of other characters in the play, and will be utilized in this paper when not designating a specific type. There are two different categories of power present in Twelfth Night and The Tempest. One type, particularly used in Twelfth Night, is based more on prestige, social influence, and willful submission to another character bearing a title. For the purpose of clarity, this form will be referred to as authority. The other type, mainly used in The Tempest, is derived more from force, political influence, and reluctant submission to another character without a title, or a non-established title. This form will be labeled dominance.

One of the methods in which power is produced in the two plays is the through the use of titles. Titles seem like an effective way to acquire and retain power, but some obstructions still occur. The employment of titles in The Tempest is different from that of Twelfth Night. In The Tempest, titles are open to the risk of political usurpation, giving them a more fluid quality. For example, in the opening act of The Tempest, the fluidity of titles is highlighted as the Boatswain dominates over Alonso and Gonzalo: "If you can command these elements to silence...use your authority" (Tempest, I.i. 19-21). Sebastian, the king's brother, attempts to assert his rightful

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dominance due to his title over the Boatswain, calling him a “bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog,” while Alonso and Ferdinand are more obedient and go below deck (Tempest, I.i. 36-37). This shows that Alonso and Ferdinand are more accepting of the peaceful variability of titles throughout the play than Sebastian and Antonio, who view them as absolute and only attainable through violence. Even in the list of characters in the play, Shakespeare emphasizes the fact that titles and power are fluid by calling Antonio “the usurping Duke of Milan” (Tempest, The Persons of the Play). Antonio is indeed a usurper, because he was “lorded Not only with what [Prospero’s] revenue yielded But what [Prospero’s] power might else exact” (Tempest, I.ii. 97-99). Antonio was able to usurp because Prospero failed at acting the role of Duke of Milan. Now, Prospero’s need for control on the island is a direct result of his loss of title (Barbour, 287). When Prospero finally receives his usurped title at the end of the play, the production at Steppenwolf Theater portrays the title and power transference through the use of costumes. Prospero puts on a pink jacket that the rest of the characters with titles wear throughout the production.

It is important to note that if titles are political, as they are in The Tempest, they are fluid and vulnerable to usurpation. Since titles are derived more from social class in Twelfth Night, the vulnerability is missing, making the titles more concrete and inaccessible. For instance, Malvolio attempts to acquire a title and gain authority through his marriage to Olivia: “To be Count Malvolio!” (Night, II.v. 30). If Malvolio were to gain this title, he might use it to “disrupt traditional customs and rituals, and that such use of his ‘perogative’ will be motivated by an ambition to establish his superiority” (Malcolmson, 85). The disruption of social order is not permitted, and Malvolio is punished for attempting to gain power and play a role that his character is not suited for. This is especially emphasized in the production of Twelfth Night at The Chicago Shakespeare Theater, where the actor playing Malvolio exaggerates his character’s awkwardness while wearing the yellow stockings and the cross garters.

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In both works, titles are continually associated with role-playing, and this notion is particularly evident in Twelfth Night. When characters acquire a title, they are essentially portraying their own personal view of an authoritative ruler. For instance, the Countess Olivia wears a veil and is “addicted to melancholy” in the earlier acts of Twelfth Night (Night, II.v. 176). The fact that she “draw[s] the curtain and show[s] Cesario] the picture” so willingly might incriminate her of playing a role connected to her title (Night, I.vi. 204-205). In addition, throughout the beginning of the play, Olivia and Orsino do not use the word “sirrah” when addressing title-less inferiors. However, when both Olivia and Orsino are onstage together in act five for the first time, they both use the word: “Her husband, sirrah?” “Read it you, sirrah” (Night, V.i. 141, 292). This indicates a struggle for power between both of the characters, requiring them to act more authoritative: role-playing.

Shakespeare also addresses the fact that titles are parts to be played in The Tempest. Stefano establishes a title system on the island: “[Prospero’s] daughter and I will be king and queen...and Trinculo and [Caliban] shall be viceroys” (Tempest, III.ii. 101-103). Stefano begins acting like a dominant king, ruling Trinculo and Caliban because he has given himself a title. “The poor monster’s my subject, and he shall not suffer indignity,” says Stefano, suggesting that he has taken on a role (Tempest, III.ii. 34-35). This is highlighted in the production of The Tempest at the Steppenwolf Theater because Stefano wears a fake crown.

Another way that power is distributed is through love and marriage. Marriage spreads out power, so if characters wish to retain power, they must make a proper match. Improper passion is an impediment to authority and dominance. This concept is especially apparent in Twelfth Night. Orsino thinks he loves Olivia because she “purge[s] the air of pestilence,” but in reality, he wishes to exert his authority over her because his title is of a higher rank: “These sovereign thrones, are all supplied, and filled, Her sweet perfections with one self king!” (Night I.i. 19, 37-38). Because Olivia’s male family members are deceased, she has complete control

over her estate. A marriage to Orsino would allow him to annex her estate and gain more authority, significantly diminishing Olivia's (Bryant, 293). For that reason, Olivia cannot love him and will not "match above her degree" (Night, I.iii. 90-91). Instead, Olivia engages in improper, one-sided love with Cesario, a social inferior, to preserve her power. "Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind," says Olivia, recognizing the fact that her love for Cesario is improper but still continuing to love him ([Night, I.v. 279] [Green, 363]). Her disposition is altered by her love, signified in the production at The Chicago Shakespeare Theater by Olivia falling backwards into a pool of water. In the same production, Olivia begins to wear lighter clothing and expose more of her flesh, also suggesting a transformation. Her social inferiors even distinguish a change in her behavior in the text: "Since the youth of the Count's was today with my lady she is much out of quiet" (Night, II.iii. 118-199). The servants' recognition of a difference in Olivia's rule is another indication of the notion that improper love is an impediment to authority.

In The Tempest, a proper union is made, manipulated by Prospero. Kathryn Barbour states that the union of Ferdinand and Miranda is "absolutely necessary for Prospero's project" (290). By overseeing Miranda's marriage to Ferdinand, the heir to the monarchy, Prospero is securing himself and his future family a position of power: "Was Milan thrust from Milan, that his issue Should become kings of Naples?" (Tempest, V.i. 208-209). Before their engagement, Prospero exercises his dominance over Ferdinand by forcing him to "remove Some thousands of these logs and pile them up, upon a sore injunction" (Tempest, III.i. 9-11). Prospero and Ferdinand are now connected through a master-servant relationship, and he can continue to manipulate Ferdinand without even taking the title for himself: "On this couple drop a blessed crown" (Tempest, V.i. 205). In the production of The Tempest at the Steppenwolf Theater, Prospero's manipulation is portrayed through his observance of the couple from the box seats of the theater.

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Both Twelfth Night and The Tempest end with proper unions, allowing them to have happy endings. These unions are not based on love, but rather their practicality and preservation of power. When Olivia marries Sebastian, whom she has never properly met, she says, “Would thou’dst be ruled by me,” indicating that her power is maintained (Night, IV.i. 60). The union of Ferdinand and Miranda at the end of The Tempest allows Alonso and Prospero to reconcile: “I do forgive Thy rankest fault” (Tempest, V.i. 133-134). The fact that these matches may not be based on love is portrayed in the production of Twelfth Night through the use of the set. The sides of the stage curve up, almost forming the outline of a heart, but the heart is incomplete.

The environment in which the works take place also has an impact on the way authority and dominance is distributed. One of the similarities in the settings of Twelfth Night and The Tempest is the fact that both plays contain storms that alter power dispersal. In Twelfth Night, the storm brings Viola to Illyria, where her arrival spurs the disruption of love and authority (Bryant, 294). The storm in The Tempest brings the men from Naples to Prospero’s island, resulting in a “breakdown of authority” (Wymer, 295). Both storms seem to mark the beginning of a transformation of power distribution, with the Boatswain speaking above the nobles and Viola using a disguise to conceal her identity of a title-bearing woman.

Shakespeare does not include a great deal of direct information in the text about the environment in Twelfth Night: Illyria. It can be inferred through the characters’ dialogue and actions that Illyria is an extremely structured environment of social class, courtship, and law. Fabian’s dialogue with Sir Toby points towards Illyria’s structure and civilization: “Still you keep o’th’ windy side of the law” (Night, III.iv. 147). Sir Andrew also cites the law in his dialogue: “I’ll have an action of battery against [Cesario/Sebastian] if there be any law in Illyria” (Night, IV.i. 31-32). However, neither Cesario nor Sebastian is punished for injuring Aguecheek or Toby, which suggests that the order of power in Twelfth Night is flawed. In the production of Twelfth Night by the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, the set emphasizes this notion. There are

differing levels, representing social class, surrounded by an incomplete heart. This shows that Illyria has some semblance of order, but that order is disrupted through improper passion and an interruption of the balance of power.

The environment in The Tempest is referenced to in the text as being “full of noises, Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not” (Tempest, III.ii. 130-131). This frequent representation of the island’s mysterious qualities supports the perception that it does not contain the structure that Illyria has in Twelfth Night. Titles have already been dissolved by the tempest at the beginning of the play, which leads the characters to attempt to seek power in other ways: Antonio and Sebastian through violence, Stefano through simple domination of Caliban using alcohol, and Prospero through magic. Prospero uses the island to experiment with a variety of methods of power exertion and control (Barbour, 287). The mentality of using the island as a laboratory is emphasized in the production of The Tempest at the Steppenwolf Theater. The set is very minimal, exposing the mechanics of the theater, which promotes Prospero and the audience to envision the island in different ways. For instance, Prospero might imagine the island as a testing ground to experiment with different methods of dominance.

Education and wit also have an effect on power. In both plays, the most educated characters realize that power possession is accompanied by responsibility and they either consciously or subconsciously abdicate. In The Tempest, Prospero prizes his education above his dukedom: “My library Was dukedom large enough” (Tempest, I.ii. 109-110). Because Prospero puts his education before his title, he is “extirpate[d]...out of the dukedom” (Tempest, I.ii. 125-126). After his loss of power, Prospero travels to the island and “his domination is gained by the dispossession and subjection of the previous sovereign,” Caliban (Barbour, 287). Prospero is able to get back his authority and title at the end of the play because he abjures his “rough magic,” which is a result of his education (Tempest, V.i. 50). In short, Prospero subconsciously

relinquishes his power in Milan because of his education. He must also sacrifice his education in order to recover it.

In Twelfth Night, the most educated characters are Feste, Viola, and Maria. Feste continually proves himself knowledgeable through his use of wit, particularly in his verbal sparring with various characters: “If your four negatives make your two affirmatives, why then the worse for my friends and the better for my foes” (Night, V.i. 18-20). Feste, however, consciously makes no attempt to gain authority throughout the play: “I wear not motley in my brain” (Night, I.v. 49-50). Viola recognizes this, saying, “This fellow is wise enough to play the fool, And to do that well craves a kind of wit” (Night, III.i. 53-54). Viola is also witty, and does not make an effort to obtain power in the play. Instead, she voluntarily surrenders her authority based on her title at the beginning of the play: “Conceal me what I am...I’ll serve this duke” (Night, I.ii. 49, 51). Maria is the only witty character in Twelfth Night who makes an effort to gain authority through her marriage to Sir Toby. Douglas Green says that Maria “maneuvers her way into marriage through her clever deception” (363). Maria “drop[s Sir Toby’s] way some obscure epistles of love,” designing the device that “In recompense whereof he hath married her” (Night, II.iv. 148, V.i. 353).

The difference between education in The Tempest and Twelfth Night is that uneducated characters are taken advantage of in The Tempest, while in Twelfth Night, they are still allowed to remain in positions of power. For example, in The Tempest, Caliban allows Prospero to dominate him through the use of alcohol: “Thou strok’st me and made much of me, wouldst give me Water with berries in’t” (Tempest, I.ii. 336-337). It seems that Caliban learns nothing from Prospero’s deception, because he permits Stefano to do the same: “Poor monster’s in drink” (Tempest, II.ii. 150). This notion was portrayed in the Steppenwolf Theater’s production of The Tempest. As the performance progressed, Caliban became increasingly chained. At the beginning, the audience sees Caliban with a leash around his foot, but by the end of the

performance, Caliban is restrained by chains on his hands and neck. Miranda is also uneducated in *The Tempest*, because Prospero has control over the information she receives. Her ignorance of the real world allows Prospero to manipulate her union with Ferdinand, because she has never seen another man: "O brave new world That has such people in't!" (*Tempest*, V.i. 186-187). In *Twelfth Night*, uneducated characters remain in authoritative positions. For instance, Olivia is proved a fool by Feste: "The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother's soul, being in heaven. Take away the fool, gentlemen" (*Night*, I.v. 61-62). Olivia loses no authority, because later in the scene she exerts power over Feste, saying, "Go thou and seek the coroner," and Feste obeys (*Night*, I.v. 118). Another example of uneducated characters retaining power in *Twelfth Night* is Orsino. Orsino is verbally chastised by a witty social inferior, Cesario: "We prove Much in our vows, but little in our love" (II.iv. 116-117). Less than ten lines later, Orsino orders Cesario "To [Olivia] in haste" (*Night*, II.iv. 122).

Titles, love, environment, and education play a major role in the distribution of power in *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*. Without the presence of an imbalance of power distribution, these two works would not contain the subtleties and twisting plotlines that are characteristic of Shakespeare's works.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barbour, Kathryn. "Flout 'em and Scout 'em and Scout 'em and Flout 'em: Prospero's Power and Punishments in *The Tempest*." *Shakespearean Criticism* 94 (1998): 285–290.

The author examines the methods of control that Prospero employs to recover his title as Duke of Milan, and the punishment he inflicts on those who took part in the process. The words power and punishment are extensively used throughout, and the author reveals the connection between the physical punishment used on inferiors like Caliban, and the emotional punishment Prospero inflicts on those of higher rank, like Alonso. Barbour's thesis, located on page 286, is as follows: "*The Tempest* is one of several plays that deal with the interplay between the visibility of a ruler, his desire to be (or perhaps to be perceived to be) a benevolent ruler, his ability to retain power, and the means by which that power can be achieved and maintained."

Bryant Jr., J.A. "*Twelfth Night* in Shakespeare and the Uses of Comedy." Shakespearean Criticism

46 (1986): 291–296.

In Bryant's essay, he affirms that Twelfth Night contests the conventions of typical romantic comedy. Throughout the essay, he scrutinizes each love match found in Twelfth Night, and designates Viola as the cause many of the characters' improper passion. Bryant's thesis is found on page 292: "Hints about the limitations of conventional comedy had been lurking at the fringes of Shakespeare's vision all along, and the situation in Twelfth Night was calculated to make audiences uneasy almost from the outset."

Green, Douglas E. "Shakespeare's Violation: 'One Face, One Voice, One Habit, and Two Persons'." Shakespearean Criticism 46 (1992): 362–367.

The author discusses the representation of love and gender in Twelfth Night, first claiming that masculine love corresponds with narcissism. To prove this point, he examines Orsino's love of Olivia. On several occasions, Green calls attention to the fact that boy actors represented Shakespeare's female characters onstage during Shakespeare's time. He continues by examining love matches made throughout the play, including Maria-Sir Toby and Olivia-Cesario, and then concludes by claiming that men are the only trustworthy objects of desire.

Malcomson, Cristina. "'What You Will': Social Mobility and Gender in *Twelfth Night*." Shakespearean Criticism 19 (1991): 78–88.

Throughout her essay, Malcomson analyzes the effects of gender in Twelfth Night on all of the characters' ability to adjust their social positions. She discusses the idea that women are subservient to men in a master-servant relationship. Malcomson also places emphasis on marriage, and its influence on social mobility. The marriage between Maria and Sir Toby is used as evidence, as well as Malvolio's aspiration of marriage to Olivia. She also points out that Viola and Maria, the educated female characters in the play, have the ability to marry above their social class, while Malvolio, a male, is prohibited. Malcomson's thesis is located on page 79: "My thesis is a development of hers: we can understand how gender operates in Renaissance literature only if we consider its relationship to status or class, and only through focused historical research about socio-economic structures, as Kelly puts it, as well as sexual-familial structures."

Shakespeare, William. "*The Tempest*." The Norton Shakespeare. Second Ed. New York: W.W.

Norton and Company, Inc., 2008. 3064-3115.

Shakespeare, William. "*Twelfth Night*." The Norton Shakespeare. Second Ed. New York: W.W.

Norton and Company, Inc., 2008. 1793-1846.

Wymer, Rowland. "*The Tempest* and the Origins of Britain." Shakespearean Criticism 94 (1999): 291–295.

Wymer considers the relationship of the colonization of Great Britain to the colonization of the island in The Tempest. He also suggests that colonialism is not the main focus of the play. Wymer instead claims that The Tempest is centered around the ways in which power is wielded by those characters who have it. He establishes his thesis on page 292: “What I wish to do is to read The Tempest in the light of myths about the origin of Britain, an approach which takes the play’s questions about legitimate ruler-ship beyond a narrowly conceived version of ‘colonialism.’”