

Evidence of the New Orthodoxy: Sound in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (A Formalist Critical Approach)

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Please Note: This is an academic exercise that takes a formalistic approach (focusing specifically on the use of sounds) to William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. This is not intended to be a well-developed critical paper, but it should prove a useful tool for examining **one aspect** of Shakespeare's work. It should also serve to provide an example for students of the formalistic critical approach to literature.

Critics have offered varying evaluations of the characters in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Some consider Prospero to be magnanimous for forgiving his enemies, for freeing Ariel from the confines of a tree, and for treating Caliban with great sympathy until the monster's attempted rape of Miranda. Others view Prospero as an oppressive colonizer and consider both Caliban and Ariel to be his innocent and mistreated subjects. In his article "Reading *The Tempest*," Russ McDonald argues that the new orthodox interpretation of *The Tempest*, "which exalts the colonized, is as narrow as the old, which idealizes and excuses the colonizer" (117). He argues that the actual status of the characters is considerably more ambiguous, and he supports his view by analyzing the rhetorical devices present in the play. However, a close examination of the various sounds disbursed throughout the work—including speech, silence, and music—tends to support a less ambiguous view of the characters. Indeed, it tends to lend support to the new orthodox view that Prospero is an oppressive colonizer, for he often threatens his enemies and servants with unpleasant sounds and demands silence from others, including his daughter.

The play begins with a ship's crew being subject to terrifying sounds that Prospero has ordered Ariel to produce. The sounds are all loud: "whistle," "storm," "cry," "thunderclaps," "fire and cracks," and "roaring" (1.1.7, 14; 1.2.203-5; 2.1.2). The terror that these sounds and the accompanying storm inflict upon the mariners is evidenced by their cries: "All lost! To prayers! To prayers! All lost!" (1.1.52). The infliction of these sounds is also made to appear unjust when Miranda pleads with her father: "If . . . you have / Put these wild waters in this roar, allay them. / . . . O, the cry did knock / Against my very heart. Poor souls, they perished!" (2.1.1-9).

Indeed, Prospero often refers to unpleasant sounds as a means of threatening others. "I will plague them all, / Even to roaring," he says of Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano (4.1.188-214). When Prospero believes Ariel is not providing an eager and willful service, he threatens the spirit with imprisonment in a tree, reminding Ariel that when he was previously trapped, his "groans / Did make wolves howl" (1.2.289-90). Prospero also tells him, "Thou hast howled away twelve winters" (1.2.298). Similarly, Prospero threatens Caliban, carrying out his threats and subjecting the monster to tortures accompanied by unpleasant sounds. Caliban describes them thus:

For every trifle are they set upon me,
Sometimes like apes, that *mow* and *chatter* at me
. . . Sometimes am I
All wound with adders, who with *cloven tongues*
Do *hiss* me into madness. (2.2.4-14; emphasis added)

Indeed, it seems that Prospero is fascinated with sounds that represent his power, his ability to control others. He reflects on his work, and in this short speech, he repeatedly employs sounds that emphasize its serious and powerful nature:

Ye elves of the hills . . .
. . . that rejoice
to hear the *solemn curfew*; by whose aid,
. . . I have . . .
Set *roaring* war; to the *dread rattling thunder*
Have I given *fire*, and *rifted* Jove's stout oak
With his own *bolt*; the strong-based promontory
Have I made *shake* . . . (5.1.33-47; emphasis added).

Interestingly, this sound-filled speech of Prospero's contrasts sharply with Caliban's own most sound-filled speech. Caliban refers to a number of sounds in his famous speech about the island:

Be not afeard. The isle is full of *noises*,
Sounds, and *sweet airs*, that give *delight* and hurt not.
Sometimes a *thousand twangling instruments*
Will *hum* about mine ears, and sometimes *voices*
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will *make me sleep* again . . . (3.2.137-42; emphasis added).

Caliban's sensitivity to these sounds, his ability to appreciate their beauty, and the fact that they affect him very deeply makes Prospero's authoritative claim that "stripes may move" him, but "not kindness" highly questionable (1.2.348).

In addition to using unpleasant noises to threaten others, Prospero also asserts his authority by demanding silence. When Ariel requests his liberty, Prospero demands silent obedience instead. "If thou murmurst," he tells Ariel, "I will rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails" (1.2.296-97). Prospero's angry insistence on Ariel's silence, accompanied with numerous reminders of the groans and howlings Ariel once endured and might endure again, suggests a tyrannical personality.

Prospero demands this constant silent submission even of his own daughter. "Ope thine ear," he tells Miranda (1.2.37). "Dost thou hear?" he asks (1.2.106). Miranda replies, "Your tale, sir, would cure deafness," which not only suggests the amazing nature of the tale but also hints at the tyrannical manner in which Prospero demands an attentive audience for it (1.2.106). He also tells Miranda to "cease more questions." Later he orders her, "Speak not you for him [Ferdinand]" and again "Speak not for him" (1.2.185, 506). Even more forcefully, he commands her, "Silence! One word more / Shall make me chide thee . . . Hush!" (1.2.479-81). At the masque for Ferdinand and Miranda's wedding, when his work is not being afforded the respect he apparently believes it deserves, he orders them both, "No tongue! All eyes! Be silent!" and "Sweet now, silence! / . . . Hush and be mute" (4.1.125-27, 59). His insistence on their silence seems to be an assertion of his own importance and a demand that they be subject to him and recognize his work as crucial (much as a colonizer might wish to receive gratitude for the good he has done his subjects).

Prospero's insistence on silence contrasts sharply with Caliban's humble request for it. Caliban asks Stephano and Trinculo, "Pray you, tread softly" and "Good my lord, give me thy favor still . . . speak softly. / All's hushed at midnight yet" (4.1.194, 204-7). "Prithee, my king," he pleads, "be quiet . . . No noise, and enter" (4.1.215-16). Caliban does not even ask for complete silence, only that all be done "softly," and he prefaces his requests with "pray" and "prithee." He is not demanding and, unlike Prospero, makes no threats.

Prospero's assertions are more like Stephano's, who says, "Be you quiet, monster" (4.1.236). Prospero also resembles the morally dubious Stephano in the way he orders others to speak. Stephano orders Caliban, "Mooncalf, speak"" (3.1.21). Likewise, Prospero orders Caliban, "Thou earth, thou! Speak" (1.2.317). Both preface their commands with a derogatory epithet. Prospero also commands Ariel, "Speak. Tell me" (1.2.262). He tells Ferdinand to "talk with her [Miranda]. She is thine own" (4.1.33). Prospero demands speech in much the same way that he demands silence. He expects others to remain silent and subject before him, speaking only when spoken to.

It is not true that there are no ambiguities about the issue of Prospero as the oppressive "colonizer" or of Caliban and others as the sympathetic "colonized." But an in-depth analysis of sounds in *The Tempest* does tend to support the new orthodox view of Prospero as a somewhat tyrannical colonizer. He threatens others with unpleasant sounds and demands silence of them. Of course, there are other issues that a formal analysis of sounds alone does not allow us to address. If Caliban is really an attempted rapist, might not Prospero's treatment of him be justified, perhaps even lenient? Might Prospero's treatment of his enemies, considering that they usurped his authority and set him adrift, be considered merciful? And yet, can it be considered just that Prospero allows Ferdinand to believe his father dead, when Ferdinand himself has played no role in the usurpation? These are questions worth examining in depth. A formal analysis of sounds merely allows us to scratch the surface of this ragging debate. But such an analysis does at least allow us to suggest that it is perhaps too early to dismiss even extreme interpretations, and far too early to determinantly conclude that the character of Prospero can only be considered ambiguous.

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