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In what ways, and to what effect, do 'The Knight's Tale' and *The Tempest* portray the exercise of authority?

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'The processes of his authoritarian, non-dialogic domination of others have shaped him into a reactionary, hardened, and unsocial being' (Doty)

In this essay, I will aim to present a comparison between Chaucer's 'The Knight's Tale' ('KnT') and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, exploring the ways in which each text portrays the exercise of authority by multiple characters and the implications thereof for the themes and ethos of each text. In medieval and renaissance literature, authority can be understood to mean in the political, religious, ecological, moral, or intellectual strata. While Chaucer presents symbolic and archetypal representations of authority, Shakespeare explores how fragile authority can become within more complex social structures.

First and foremost, the exercise of authority is presented primarily as a power reserved for male figures who strive for political ends. Chaucer's tale establishes Theseus, 'Of Atthenes he was lord and governour' (1.861), as a noble duke driven by conquest. His ruthless defeat of 'al the regne of Femenye' (1.866), a tribe of female warriors who forego any interaction with men, as well as of the Theban king Creon subsequently, introduce violent forms of military authority early on. Equally, Theseus' hasty appropriation of the Amazonian queen Ypolita as his wife, the narrator's use of the verb 'asseged' (1.881) evoking forced coercion, exemplifies his patriarchal authority. However, Chaucer also demonstrates how his erudition and stately influence are used to further his interests, namely through the dynastic marriage between Emelye, his sister-in-law, and either Palamon or Arcite, Theban princes who are imprisoned in Athens following the fall of their city. When proposing the notion of a battle between the two knights to win Emelye's hand, he employs a series of subtle rhetorical techniques to assert his will. He feels moved by '"[t]he god of love, a benedicite!"' (1.1785), seeming more merciful and receptive to the women's desperate pleading, before attending to the heart of the matter: the '"roial lynage and richesse"' (1.1829). Rather than framing the battle as a proposal, in fact, he silences any other perspectives in that '"[he] speke as for [his] suster Emelye"' (1.1833) and he expects the Thebans to accept his idea '"for plat conclusioun, / Withouten any repplicacioun"' (1.1845-6). Despite a strong belief in chivalric

values of justice and honour, Theseus' archetypal authority only considers the desires of the central protagonists and excludes female voices. The eponymous Knight's narration also casts little doubt on the morality of the king's stratagems, and so Chaucer presents the reader with a world in which chivalry is synonymous with patriarchal authority and political dominance, without room for interpretation.

Though Prospero, the usurped Duke of Milan in Shakespeare's play, undergoes a more marked shift than Theseus on his path to political restoration, he is also arguably even more manipulative and exerts control through supernatural psychological means. By contriving an encounter between his daughter, Miranda, and Ferdinand, King Alonso of Naples' son, through his 'brave spirit' (1.2.205), Ariel, he quickly establishes an intimate connection between them. The Duke knows that she will perceive Ferdinand as '[a] thing divine' (1.2.418) because she has known no other man since their banishment to the island. Prospero, like a 'god of power' (1.2.10) in Miranda's words, notes in an aside that '[t]hey have changed eyes' (1.2.441), maintaining an elevated position, as he does throughout the play, to observe the subjects of his machinations. By wielding absolute control over the land, he disrupts the natural order and subverts Jacobean beliefs in the Great Chain of Being. Although he shares an affectionate relationship with Miranda_'a cherubin / Thou wast that did preserve me' (1.2.152-3)_he also exerts patriarchal power over her sexuality. In Lauren Working's Introduction, she posits that 'gentleness and civility elide the darker forces of sexual desire and patriarchal control' (37) in relation to Prospero's warning to Ferdinand to remain chaste, since the legitimacy of the unification between Milan and Naples depends on the sanctity of this marriage contract. Although his ultimate plan to restore political order benefits Miranda as well, allowing her to return to civilised society, Prospero's duplicity and manipulation of his daughter's fate are primarily motivated by pride. What he most desires is the dukedom from which he was usurped. Thus, similarly to 'KnT', Miranda's body constitutes a kind of

political contract. Unlike Emelye, however, who reverts to a voiceless archetype after expressing her desire that '"[n]oght wol I knowe compaignye of man"' (3.2311) to the goddess Diana, Miranda uses her authority from Prospero's teachings to '[endow] [Caliban's] purposes / With words' (1.2.357-8). Although Prospero lies at the forefront of divine power in *The Tempest*, the text also suggests that the boundaries of authority are not so easily defined. Chaucer's Emelye remains the passive object of her fate and the marriage to Palamon imposed by Theseus' patriarchal authority, whereas Shakespeare's Miranda challenges her father's tormenting the stranded Italians and even directly proposes to Ferdinand.

In 'KnT', Chaucer imagines authority within various strata of the mortal and divine worlds and challenges the extent to which these divisions of power are strictly confined to an individual or political institution. On one hand, the narrator denotes that destiny is the ultimate power and that God's providence rules us all; 'Be it of werre, or pees, or hate, or love, / Al is this reuled by the sighte above.' (2.1671-2). Palamon, when in prison, questions '"[w]hat governance is in this prescience, / That giltelees tormenteth innocence?"' (1.1313-4), and why animals can die without the torture of purgatory, echoing a deeply Christian eschatological sentiment which reframes the poem's pagan setting in a medieval context. At the same time, however, Chaucer also invokes more humanistic ideas which subvert the medieval fatalism one would expect. Although one could view Ypolita and her 'retainers' as having persuasive power over Theseus, Mark Miller (citing Susan Crane) suggests that '"the interceding women come to resemble not agents of mercy but allegorical figures in a psychomachy of the ruler's decision making."' (68), that the feminine qualities they possess inform and add to a more complete male subjectivity for Theseus. Rather than imposing neat divisions between gods and humans, men and women, on one's interpretation, the poem explores the malleability of authoritarian structures. The 'psychomachy' mentioned

by Crane, the conflict between soul and body, could also be applied to that of Venus and Mars. This nuance is furthered by Chaucer's personification of the gods. Despite Palamon's and Arcite's faith in Venus and Mars respectively, Saturn ends up exacting fate because '[i]n elde is bothe wysdom and usage' (3.2448), the narrator characterising him as a veteran adventurer rather than an omnipotent deity. Ultimately, the one constant, Theseus concludes, is that '"al this thyng moot deye."' (4.3034).

In this regard, Shakespeare emphasises the illusory nature of authority on the mysterious island. Despite Prospero's final declaration of his magical influence over 'demi-puppets' and '[w]eak masters' (5.1.36-41), he can relinquish his 'rough magic' (5.1.50) with two simple statements: 'I'll break my staff, /…. I'll drown my book.' (5.1.54-7). The fragility of these powers is drawn attention to in The Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) production, which makes use of a spacious stage and relies heavily on body-capture technology to create immersive illusions (2016). While meticulously-animated projections of Ariel which fly around the space dazzle the audience and phantoms in the shape of barking hounds send Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano into a frenzy, the vastness of the stage also makes the material actors seem dwarfed by the island. This is especially highlighted after Prospero gives up his magical powers, addressing his countrymen face to face and without artifice. Even the authoritarian hierarchy which separates Ariel from Prospero is tested somewhat, since one might attest the latter's sudden anagnorisis in favour of his 'nobler reason' (5.1.26) partly to Ariel's divine powers. Given that, since the first scene they share, Ariel continuously reminds his master that '[he] did promise / [t]o bate [him] a full year' (1.2.248-9), without being granted his freedom, this is not implausible. Emma Smith, quoting Edward Dowden, claims that Prospero comes to a redeeming conclusion on his own on account of his 'sensitiveness to wrong' (312), but perhaps this is also due to Ariel's emotive description of Gonzalo, whom Prospero loves and admires: 'His tears runs [sic] down his beard like winter's drops / From

eaves of reeds.' (5.1.16-7). In fact, when he lays eyes on Gonzalo, still under the spell, for the first time, he declares '[his] eyes,… [f]all fellowly drops.' (5.1.63-4). In the epilogue, Shakespeare also bestows the ultimate authority upon the audience itself. Through our 'good hands [applause]' (Epi.10), we have the power to absolve Prospero and set him free from the confines of stagecraft. Given that '[e]very third thought shall be [his] grave' (5.1.310) when he returns to Milan, this gesture, like Arcite's asking for Emelye's mercy as he dies, also represents Shakespeare's own musings on mortality and that the legacy of the dead remains in the hands of the living. However, whilst *The Tempest* challenges the thresholds of authority on the island, he suggests that freedom for Caliban can never be fully attained as long as imperial control is exercised.

In spite of the ways in which 'KnT' explores the exercise of authority, the characters themselves fail to fully reconcile the power they wield with those beings which occupy the basest echelons in the social hierarchy. Chaucer could be interpreted as critiquing the chivalric worldview which allows Theseus to act with such disregard for the natural world. Firstly, akin to the archetypal knight's tendency to civilise one's savage surroundings and claim dominion over nature in accordance with the will of '"[t]he Firste Moevere of the cause above, / Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love"' (4.2987-8), the duke 'for to hunten is so desirus, / And namely at the grete hert in May' (2.1674-5). Theseus' lack of regard for limited natural resources is also striking: although the narrator chooses to gloss over unnecessary details throughout the poem, he nonetheless devotes three entire lines to listing the myriad species of tree which were cut down, including 'ook, firre, birch, aspe, alder,…' (4.2921), and details the chaotic consequences. As well as 'Nymphes, fawnes and amadrides' (4.2928) fleeing from their habitats, the 'the fyr, that brente as it were wood' (4.2950) and the funeral games themselves appear to encompass the most passionate and unruly customs of chivalry, which reflect the opposite of the self-restraint and dignity one would expect in

battle. Chaucer draws a paradoxical parallel here between a counter-intuitive combination of notions of "barbaric recreation" and "civilised killing", subtly scrutinising modes of patriarchal dominance. Therefore, by drawing attention to a natural world ravaged by the ignorance of man, the average reader is encouraged to think more carefully about their own position of authority within the medieval natural order, as opposed to a duke or a prince.

Similarly, Shakespeare presents a world in which modes of moral propriety have been warped, resulting in abuses of authority. On arrival upon the island, characters such as Antonio and Stefano, scattered and with no hope of rescue, immediately begin to plot and scheme, acting beyond the realms of what they might perceive to be civilised behaviour in Italy. Without the same social structure governing them, Stefano, Alonso's butler, spends the entire play in a drunk stupor_'My cellar is in the rock by th' / seaside, where my wine is hid' (2.2.118-9') _and Antonio, Prospero's treacherous brother, seizes the first opportunity he can to manipulate Sebastian into usurping the throne of Naples by murdering Alonso. Notably, Stefano reverts to a servile position when the entire company of Europeans is reunited. Shakespeare also creates a stark antithesis between Gonzalo, who notes Ariel's spirits 'are more gentle-kind than of / [o]ur human generation' (3.3.32-3), and Antonio, whose first thought when he sees Caliban is that he is 'no doubt marketable' (5.1.266). An examination of the relationship between Prospero and Caliban is crucial here. In perhaps the most progressive act by Prospero, he says '[t]his thing of darkness I / [a]cknowledge mine' (5.1.275-6). Jeffrey Doty suggests that Prospero is taking responsibility for Caliban's rough demeanour and rageful tendencies, since 'the processes of his authoritarian, non-dialogic domination of others have shaped him into a reactionary, hardened, and unsocial being.' (248). In recontextualising his relationship with Caliban as a reflection of his faults as a master, how he appropriated the island just as he himself was deposed and exiled, Prospero, unlike Theseus, reaches a point of partial moral restoration.

Both Chaucer and Shakespeare explore the various structures of authority within a medieval-Christian and more secular renaissance perspective. Though humanist sentiments are shared between the two texts, Shakespeare depicts a more nuanced and multi-faceted look at hierarchical social structures. Chaucer prioritises his characters' psychologies less, however the archetypes presented in 'KnT' also raise teleological questions about the nature of the will of man, particularly whether it is admirable to strive against the whims of fate or to make virtue out of necessity, as Theseus suggests.

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