Masters and Servants in *The Tempest*

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* masters and their servants are everywhere. In every scene there is at least one example of a master and his servant. The theme of *The Tempest* is obviously masters and servants, but why? Well in our world, though it may not be as apparent, masters and servants are everywhere too. Think of a mother and her child; the mother is clearly the master and the child is the servant. Perhaps Shakespeare was intending to help us see how prevalent masters and servants are in the world around us; and perhaps, to help us sympathize for our servants and treat them as the people they are. So in *The Tempest*, the way that the masters and servants interact with each other could be alluding to the way that masters and servants interact with each other in the real world and how they should act.

*Prospero*, as the main “master” in *The Tempest*, shows more of his character as a master than the other characters. Prospero has three servants, Caliban, Ariel, and Ferdinand; though Ferdinand is only his servant for a short period of time. He clearly prefers Ariel more and gives him the preferable jobs; and the ones that require the use of magic since Ariel can use magic. He hates Caliban, and therefore Caliban gets the less preferable jobs such as carrying wood and other laborious tasks. Prospero is a kind man and even though he has extreme dislike for Caliban, in the end he still frees him because of his sympathy and kindness. He also takes off time from Ariel’s service and frees him in the end. Ariel owed Prospero service because Prospero once freed him from another “…Refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee, By help of her more potent ministers, And in there most unmitigable rage, Into a cloven pine; within which rift Imprisoned thou didst painfully remain A dozen years…”
(Shakespeare, Act I, Scene II, lines 275-280). Perhaps Prospero’s kindness to his servants was a reflection of how Shakespeare thought that servants should be treated in this world.

However, even though Prospero is kind, he can also be cruel. He has an extreme dislike for Caliban and because of this he is cruel and uses spirits torture him. The reason that he hates Caliban is that Caliban tried to rape Miranda. So although Caliban had been living with, he is now treated like a slave. Perhaps Prospero’s cruelty to Caliban is a reflection of how masters usually treat their servants, not how they should.

King Alonso is another master pictured by Shakespeare in The Tempest. Alonso was likely a picture of the ideal master; he was kind to his servants and felt regret in regard to supplanting one of them. He still showed kindness to those who were planning on killing him; of course he may not have known what they were planning.

Stephano and Trinculo were terrible masters. They were selfish and only wanted glory and power. The power that they wanted was only the pleasures of authority, not the responsibility. Stephano and Trinculo are likely pictures of a certain person that Shakespeare knew of who abused their power and didn’t take full responsibility for their actions.

Caliban is one of the main “servant” characters. He was good and kind when Prospero first came to the island and he showed him all of the good things on the island; like the springs, good fruit, and other pleasures. However, he violated certain rules so now he is treated poorly and he also treats them poorly. He is always reluctant to do tasks, unless one of Prospero’s spirits comes around, and he curses Prospero constantly. Caliban is possibly the portrayal of the servant who is abused by his master and doesn’t handle it well.
Gonzalo is perhaps the image of the perfect servant. He doesn’t complain about his work, and he tries to help his master in every way he can. Although he is a higher servant, counselor, he is still a servant and takes orders. Even when his master is low and cannot seem to be cheered up, he still does his best to help.

Ariel is another picture of a good servant, though perhaps not the perfect servant. He gladly does all his master tells him, “All hail, great master! Grave sir, hail! I come To answer thy best pleasure, be ’t to fly, To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride On the curled clouds. To thy strong bidding, task Ariel and all his quality.” (Crowther, Act I, Scene II, lines 190-194) Even when Prospero is being mean, Ariel still obeys. He occasionally talks back and he demands his freedom, but he works hard for his freedom “…Remember I have done thee worthy service; Told thee no lies, made no mistakings, served Without or grudge or grumblings…” (Shakespeare, Act I, Scene II, lines 246-249). Ariel may represent the servant who is treated both well and harsh, but handles it well.

Ferdinand is a picture of another perfect servant, just under different circumstances. Though he is a prince, he is put to work unjustly. However, he does not complain but he finds joy in it because he gets to see his dear Miranda. Ferdinand portrays the servant that although treated unjustly, finds joy in his work and accomplishes it happily.

There are various ways that master keep control of their servants. One common way is through fear. Caliban stays under Prospero’s “rule” because of his fear of Prospero’s spirits. Threatening is a particular way to control by fear, such as when Prospero threatens to trap Ariel in a tree similar to what Sycorax did to him years earlier. Another way is by bribery, saying “If you obey me, I’ll do this for you” or “I’ll give this to you”. Stephano and Trinculo are an example of this kind of control; if Caliban is a good servant, they give him more liquor. Other masters rule by kindness, which is the best kind of ruling. Alonso is kind to all his servants and therefore, they wish to serve him because they are treated well.
When servants are mistreated, they often want to get rid of their master. Caliban endeavors to do this by attempting to get Stephano and Trinculo to kill Prospero. Antonio and Sebastian, although they are treated well, want their master dead because he is in the way of them gaining more power. Like Antonio and Sebastian, some servants simply want more power, and they can only have more power if there is no one controlling them. Some servants however, simply want to be free. Ariel for instance, wishes to fly free and not be ordered around all the time. He asks for his freedom, but since he owes a debt to Prospero, he has to serve him for a certain amount of years. However, they make a deal that if Ariel behaves well and serves Prospero for a certain amount of time, he will be set free early.

Although to some people Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* may seem just like a delightful story about a storm, a young couple, and magic; it is really about how masters and servants act and how they should act. Just like *The Tempest* would be nothing without masters and servants, our world would be nothing without them. Even the Bible talks about masters and their servants; Jesus uses masters and servants in several of his parables including this passage:

> No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (*New International Version*, Matt. 6:24)

As you can see, masters and their servants are everywhere and the way they interact is what makes up the world. So again, though *The Tempest* might seem like just a story, it is really a reflection of how masters and servants affect and make up our world.

**Works Cited**


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