

Daughters as means of power in shakespeare's the tempest

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Familial relationships are the principal driving force behind the plot of Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*. For example, the sole reason Prospero, the protagonist, is on the island is because of his brother, Antonio, usurping him. Despite the plot seemingly revolving around this relationship, in actuality, the entire play mostly concerns itself with father-daughter relationships, more specifically, Alonso and Claribel and Prospero and Miranda. At first glance, it appears that these fathers only want the best for their daughters and are trying to give them lifelong happiness through marriage; however, after analyzing the true motives behind these marriages and Prospero's constant anxieties about virginity, one can tell that these fathers are solely using their daughters as a means to expand their power.

The only reason that Alonso and his men become shipwrecked on the island and the play is able to take place is due to Claribel's marriage to the prince of Tunis in Africa. According to Stephen Orgel, the author of this play's introduction, this marriage was "not a happy occasion, to which the bride went unwillingly, and of which much of the court disapproved" (30). Much of the reason the court disapproved was because the marriage was to an African and not a fellow European. In turn, this voyage of Africa leads many of the men to blame Alonso for the shipwreck, which can be seen when Sebastian states: Sir, you may thank yourself for this great loss, That would not bless our Europe with your daughter, But rather lose her to an African, Where she, at least, is banished from your eye, Who hath cause to wet the grief on't. (2. 1. 121-125) Here, Sebastian is telling Alonso that the shipwreck is entirely his fault for marrying off his daughter to an African, where he will never see her again, as opposed to a European. This argument makes sense

and leaves the readers wondering why Alonso did choose to marry her to a man so far away. The most likely reason is that the marriage was solely a political move. If Alonso, the King of Naples in Italy, marries his daughter off to the Prince of Tunis in Africa, his rule would then expand across the entire Mediterranean Sea, giving him ultimate power over this area. This, in turn, makes Claribel more than just a daughter, but a form of currency for expansion and power, which Alonso hastily uses for his benefit.

Alonso is not the only father in this play to use his daughter for his own benefit; Prospero's willingness to let Miranda marry Ferdinand, Alonso's son, is not as innocent as it seems. Orgel writes, "Claribel's marriage will give us notice that more is at stake in the match Prospero is arranging than the happiness of two young people" (30). Here, Orgel is stating that, in the context of Claribel's marriage to the Prince of Tunis, the readers can more easily see that Prospero is marrying off his daughter to further his own power, much like Alonso. This is not only seen in Orgel's words and the context of the play but Prospero's own words as well. When he is listening in on Miranda and Ferdinand's first meeting, he states "They are both in either's powers; but this swift business/ I must uneasy make lest too light winning/ Make the prize light" (1. 2. 451-453). He refers to Miranda and Ferdinand falling for each other and most likely developing a relationship as "business," implying that, to him, it is a form of trade or transaction in which his daughter is the compensation. Similarly, when Prospero finally consents to the marriage between Miranda and Ferdinand, he states, "Here, afore heaven, I ratify this my rich gift" (4. 1. 7-8). In this speech, the "gift" he is

referring to is his daughter, proving that she is solely a form of compensation. Despite there being a multitude of evidence from Stephen Orgel and Prospero's own words for this being a political marriage that Prospero has arranged solely for his benefit, one of the most powerful indicators of this comes in the final scene of the play. In this scene, Alonso is fretting over the supposed loss of his son when " Prospero discovers Ferdinand and Miranda playing at chess" (5. 1). Out of context, it seems odd that a romantically involved couple would be playing chess when given alone time. However, with Prospero's power play in mind, it becomes apparent that these two are playing a game of strategy, much like the entire backbone of their political marriage.

Despite these daughters being used as tools for power for their fathers, there is a massive threat constantly looming that could hinder these fathers from gaining this power. This threat is a violation in the daughters' virginites. The readers can assume that Claribel was married off still with her virginity; however, Prospero is constantly worrying about the state of his own daughter. The first possible violation of Miranda's virginity that Prospero must prevent is Caliban, an indigenous man of the island. When introducing Caliban for the first time, Prospero states: Thou most lying slave, Whom stripes may move, not kindness, I have used thee- Filth as thou art- with human care, and lodged thee In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate The honour of my child. (1. 2. 344-348) Here, Prospero is scolding Caliban for trying to rape Miranda after all he has done to care for him. However, Prospero's love for his daughter is not the only driving force of his anger

concerning this attempted rape. It could be argued that he is mainly concerned with this act due to the fact that it would violate Miranda's virginity, therefore making her more difficult to marry off, especially to someone in a place of power. Caliban replies to this by saying, "Would't had been done!/ Thou didst prevent me- I had peopled else/ This isle with Calibans" (1. 2. 348-350). By this, Caliban means that he would have gone through with his plan to rape Miranda and populate the island with their children if he had not been caught. This is especially terrifying to Prospero if he is using Miranda as a tool for power, seeing as not only would her virginity be violated, but she would not be able to be married off elsewhere, giving Prospero power only over the island, which he already has.

However, Caliban is not the only threat to Miranda's virginity. Throughout the play, there are constant allusions to similarities between Caliban and Ferdinand. Orgel writes, "[Prospero's] ambivalence towards Ferdinand is expressed, too, in the tasks Prospero sets for him, which are, explicitly, Caliban's tasks" (29). Here, Orgel is referencing the fact that Prospero makes both Caliban and Ferdinand carry logs for him. In the beginning of Act Two, Scene Two, Caliban enters the stage with "a burden of wood" after Prospero tells him to "Fetch us fuel" (1. 2. 365). Additionally, in the beginning of Act Three, Scene I, Ferdinand enters the stage "bearing a log." However, these tasks are not all that equate Caliban and Ferdinand in Prospero's eyes; he sees both of these men as threats to his daughter's virginity. After giving Ferdinand permission to marry Miranda, Prospero states: If thou dost break her virgin-knot before All sanctimonious ceremonies may With full and holy

rite be ministered, No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall To make this contract grow; but barren hate, Sour-eyed disdain, and discord shall bestrew The union of your bed with weeds so loathly That you shall hate it both. (4. 1. 15-22) Here, he is warning Ferdinand not to take Miranda's virginity before they are actually married or their marriage will not be blessed but cursed with strife. However, Orgel writes, " Prospero's repeated warnings to Ferdinand against pre-marital sex are not prompted by anything we see of Ferdinand's behaviour" (28). Because Prospero has no evidence that Ferdinand would take Miranda's virginity before they were married, readers can infer that Propsero is warning him against this action for his own benefit. He wants to ensure that Miranda stays a virgin until the marriage is final to make sure that she can still be of use as a means to power if anything were to happen.

Many read Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to be a play about fatherly love; however, upon further inspection, this play also concerns itself with fathers using their daughters as means for expand their power. This is first seen in the reason for the shipwreck that starts the play, or Alonso's marrying off of his daughter, Claribel, to the Prince of Tunis so that he can have control of the Mediterranean Sea. Additionally, this theme can be seen in Prospero's marrying off of his daughter, Miranda, to Ferdinand, the Prince of Naples, so that when he escapes the island he still has some form of power. However, Prospero constantly lives in a state of anxiety due to the possibility that Miranda's virginity could be threatened, which would, in turn, cause Prospero to lose his only remaining means to power, his daughter. However, since she

is able to keep her virginity until marriage, as Prospero has ensured, she is still a powerful asset to him and can be used, as daughters were, to expand his power.