

The Divine Right of Caliban

The Implicit Warning in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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Human beings have always been interested in creating ideal societies. Even the concept of society, as theorised by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704), and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) shows man's need to eke out a way of life which would not only be utilitarian but would also facilitate harmonious co-existence. Hence, these thinkers also theorised the manner in which a ruler or sovereign ought to be. While Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651) says that men are governed by selfish and self-centred desires and created societies to put an end to "war of all against all" (p. 64) that resulted from such behaviour; Locke suggests in his *Two Treatises on Government* (1689) that societies were created as men by nature were reasonable and figured out that societies were beneficial (59); Rousseau, on the other hand, suggests in *The Social Contract* (1762) that societies were formed to accomplish more than is possible in the absence of the same (64).

Irrespective of the believability or otherwise of these social theories, it is undeniable that from the time that societies have come into existence, philosophers and thinkers have grappled with the idea of an ideal society. Plato's (c. 428 BC- 348 BC) Republic, Thomas More's (1478-1535) Utopia, James Hilton's (1900-1954) Shangri-La, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1860-1935) Herland, though the products of different centuries and cultures, are such creations which show these writers' attempts at conceptualising such worlds. However, most of these are utopias; and hence, self-evidently non-existent. Of course, these fictitious lands are varied: Plato visualises a philosopher-king in a communist world; More, an apparently democratic republic; Hilton, a peaceful and apparently ageless existence; and Gilman, a world without men. But despite such differences, there is a commonality: all these writers dream of a world which is not ruled by an autocratic or hereditary monarch. The reasons for this, while diverse, stem from a single root cause: they do not believe in the concept that people's DNA decides whether they are competent enough to govern or not. In other words, they do not believe that the ability to lead is based on one's birth, or that God has ordained that a few are born to rule by virtue of being genetically associated with an established monarch.

However, contrary to these notions of utopia, England, when William Shakespeare (1564-1616) wrote *The Tempest* (1611), was governed by a king who believed that he had a God given mandate to rule: King James I (1566-1625).

James was the king of Scotland, and became the king of England due to Queen Elizabeth (1533-1603) dying a virgin. His accession to the throne, though unchallenged, was not without more than its fair share of drama behind the scenes. James certainly had a right to the English throne; but it was not a straight-forward accession. His claim was based on the fact that his great grandmother was the oldest sister of King Henry VIII (1491-1547). However, even that would not have sufficed if he had not convinced Queen Elizabeth that he was loyal to her in her lifetime

during the Spanish Armada crisis. Moreover, the Queen's chief minister Sir Robert Cecil (1563-1612) corresponded surreptitiously with James during her last illness, and cooked up a mutually beneficial deal. (Lockyer 161-62, Wilson 154-155) The upshot of it was that James was declared the king on the very day of her death, and Sir Robert Cecil managed to retain his position and power. (Croft 49, Wilson 58)

Despite the seemingly seamless transition of kingship, James faced opposition from certain quarters. A major reason for this is his belief in absolutist governance by the monarchy. He set out his theory in *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1597-98). The theory, known as the Divine Right of Kings, states that kings have a God given right to govern their kingdom. Furthermore, according to James' theory, kings are above the general public, and have the powers to frame laws. Such a philosophy is against the notions of an ideal society, which is based on the concept of equality.

However, this was not the only reason for complaint against James. He was notoriously luxurious, spending sinful amounts on pleasure, thereby burdening the nation with unwanted expenses at a time when the country was reeling under heavy debts. Moreover, his penchant for delegating responsibility, his favouritism, and even religious bigotry (although he curbed it in his later years) resulted in a section of the population being extremely dissatisfied with him and his reign. This, as explained by Sir Andrew Weldon in *The Court and Character of King James*, led to major dissatisfaction among his subjects. This resulted in no less than three major revolts during his time on the English throne.

Shakespeare, with his keen sense of public pulse, noticed this general unrest, and used *The Tempest* to warn James. Performed apparently before the royalty on the occasion of the king of Bohemia Frederick I (1610-1623) and James I's daughter Elizabeth's (1596-1662) marriage, (Chambers 343) Shakespeare in his swansong added the enchanting elements of fantasy and romance to an engrossing tale of vengeance plotted by a wronged king. The warning for King James appears as a subtext in the play, as Shakespeare used the play to set forth his notions of an ideal kingdom – which is a republic.

In the play, Prospero, the Duke of Milan, delegates the responsibility of everyday kingly duties to his brother, Antonio, and spends his time in the pursuit of his hobby — necromancy. He himself confesses to his neglect of his duties to his daughter Miranda when he tells her his sad story:

“[...] Prospero the prime duke, being so reputed'/In dignity, and for the liberal arts/Without a parallel; those being all my study,/The government I cast upon my brother/And to my state grew stranger, being transported/And rapt in secret studies. (Act I Scene II 72-77).

Due to this, Antonio becomes a king in every right, except in name, and Prospero says that Antonio had ambitiously decided to take over the kingdom completely by killing him: “To have no screen between this part he play'd/ And him he play'd it for, he needs will be/ Absolute Milan”. (Act I Scene II 107-109). However, Prospero survives, thanks to his loyal counsellor Gonzalo, and escapes with his daughter Miranda to an island infested with magical beings. There, he comes across Caliban, the son of the evil witch Sycorax. Caliban believes that he has a God given right to reign over the island, as his mother used to rule it: “This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,/ Which thou takest from me”. (Act I Scene II 331-332). This misguided belief of Caliban can be termed as the Divine Right to Rule.

Prospero, of course, at first befriends Caliban and tries to civilize him. But Caliban's boorish nature forces Prospero to subdue him, and use him as a servant. Prospero, due to his experience with Caliban, learns the fallacy of thinking that people are entitled to rule by virtue of their birth. Caliban's divine right to rule, in other words, convinces Prospero that a king has to be a responsible person and be mindful of his duties.

Prospero uses the island as a training ground for learning the art of kingship. He frees the airy spirit Ariel, but keeps it under his control. He also takes on the job of bringing up Miranda in a civilised manner: "Here in this island we arrived; and here / Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit / Than other princesses can that have more time for vainer hours and tutors not so careful". (Act I Scene II 171-174). Such behaviour on his part shows that he has figured out how a ruler ought to be, and has moulded himself into being a thoughtful and dutiful ruler.

Fate gives Prospero a chance to regain his dukedom, and wreak vengeance on his ill-wishers. He commands Ariel to raise a tempest, and wreck the ship on which his enemies are sailing. Ariel does that and brings the sailors to the island, and thereby gives Prospero a chance to have his revenge.

Prospero, though he teases and tortures his enemies, forgives everyone, including his ambition-blinded brother, and proves to be not only a just ruler but also a merciful one. A reason for his forgiving his brother is that he realises that it was his own irresponsible prioritisation that led to his brother's lust for absolute power:

"I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated/
To closeness and the bettering of my
mind/
With that which, but by being so retired,
O'er-prized all popular rate, in my false
brother/
Awaked an evil nature; and my trust,
Like a good parent, did beget of him/
A
falsehood in its contrary as great/
As my trust was; which had indeed no limit,
A
confidence sans bound. He being thus lorded,
Not only with what my revenue yielded,
But what my power might else exact, like one/
Who having into truth, by telling of it,
Made such a sinner of his memory,
To credit his own lie, he did believe/
He was indeed
the duke; [. . .]." (Act I Scene II 89-103)

Prospero shows at the end of the play that he has learnt that his pleasure in magic or learning should not come in the way of his execution of kingly responsibilities. This he does by destroying his magic wand, and drowning his books, before leaving the island to once again take over the responsibility of ruling his dukedom:

"But this rough magic/ I here abjure, and, when I have requir'd/
Some heavenly music,
which even now I do,
To work mine end upon their senses that/
This airy charm is for, I'll
break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet
sound/
I'll drown my book". (Act V Scene I 50-57).

This symbolic as well as empirical destruction of the magic wand shows that Shakespeare believed that the supernatural has no place in a kingdom which is governed properly. As James believed in the existence of witches and even organised and promoted witch hunts, (Croft 26) Shakespeare thus indirectly asked James to forego such fanciful indulgences.

Along with this message, Shakespeare also tried to bring to James' notice the kind of sovereign that the public desired. This he does through Gonzalo's conversation with Sebastian and Antonio:

GONZALO: Had I plantation of this isle, my lord,—

ANTONIO : He'ld sow't with nettle-seed.

SEBASTIAN: Or docks, or mallows.

GONZALO: And were the king on't, what would I do?

SEBASTIAN: 'Scape being drunk for want of wine.

GONZALO: I' the commonwealth I would by contraries/ Execute all things; for no kind of traffic/ Would I admit; no name of magistrate;/ Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,/ And use of service, none; contract, succession,/ Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;/ No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;/ No occupation; all men idle, all;/And women too, but innocent and pure;/ No sovereignty;—

SEBASTIAN: Yet he would be king on't.

ANTONIO: The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.

GONZALO: All things in common nature should produce/ Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,/ Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,/ Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,/ Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,/ To feed my innocent people.

SEBASTIAN: No marrying 'mong his subjects?

ANTONIO: None, man; all idle: whores and knaves.

GONZALO: I would with such perfection govern, sir,/ To excel the golden age. (Act II Scene I 144-168).

Gonzalo dreams of a republic, and hopes that they would come true. Although Gonzalo is ridiculed in the play, his concept of a republic should not be considered as foolish or silly.

Shakespeare couches this idea in an apparently comic scene, but in fact suggests that the idea of a republic as voiced by Gonzalo should be taken seriously. The reason for this is that Gonzalo is depicted in the play as a wise and considerate person. Moreover, the people who mock Gonzalo's concept of republic are shown to be villainous. Hence, the notion of a republic is shown to be worthy, and one that James ought to follow.

Shakespeare thus subtly warned James I that unless he changed his way of governance and became more responsible, he would face dire consequences. By comparing James' divine right of kings with Caliban's misguided belief that he had inherited the island, Shakespeare pointed out how laughable such a concept is. Prospero learns from the foolishness of Caliban, and Shakespeare hoped that James too would similarly learn and emulate Prospero.

However, James I either did not understand the warning or chose to ignore it. Although he managed to escape retribution for his follies, his son Charles had to face the wrath of the public as he continued in the same vein as his father. (McClelland 224) Charles not only lost his kingdom, but also his life in the English Civil War – which resulted in the public represented by the parliament becoming more powerful than before or elsewhere.

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