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The Paradox of Imperialism

Gonzalo, the King of Naples’ old councilor in William Shakespeare’s retributive play *The Tempest*, is a symbol representing the 17th century imperialistic mindset harbored by upper-class citizens of elite European powers of the time. He serves to voice Shakespeare’s commentary on the ignorance that is necessary for colonial rule. The belief that European powers have not only the right but also the moral responsibility to civilize the inhabitants of the foreign lands protects the colonialists from staining their conscience when they impose power and dominance over others. The concept of imperialism has a dual nature because every imperialistic ideal is based on what an individual deems society should be like, but in implementing his ideal vision, he violates the very principles he regards with great respect. In expressing his ideal vision of a utopian kingdom at the “uninhabited” island, Gonzalo portrays the attitudes of his countrymen by both overlooking the paradoxical nature of colonization and underestimating the corruptive aspect of power.

Gonzalo’s sudden desire towards portraying their escape from the tempest as God’s role helps him justify their divine right. This opportunistic outlook and faith in destiny characterizes the mindset held by European explorers seeking to expand or establish their kingdoms. Gonzalo’s conclusion allows him to not be unscrupulous in his desires or actions. In his attempts to shine an optimistic light on the crisis, Gonzalo attributes their survival to God’s purpose by comparing their circumstance to those of a common man. He tries to comfort Alonso by assuring
him that “Our hint of woe is common... but for the miracle, I mean our preservation, few in millions can speak like us” (Shakespeare II.1.3-8). His employment of the word, “miracle,” (II.1.6) shows that being devoid of all harm has assured him that the king and the surviving courtiers are under the protective care of God. He is convinced that despite the dire circumstance, it was in their destiny to end up at the island and he justifies this luck to entail more than just survival. Gonzalo believes that the survivors deserve to be on this island and have been given the rights and privileges to play any role because only a select few are given such chances.

In addition to his preconceived notions over the role of God’s purposeful will in bringing them to the island, Gonzalo is also greatly motivated by the ideas of imperialism. This imperialistic mindset is not only retained by Gonzalo but is also shared amongst the group of survivors, representing the viability of the issue of imperialism as a topic of common discussion. Gonzalo rushes to deviate from the sorrowful conversation discussing Ferdinand’s current state by swiftly changing topics to bring about a more encouraging outlook: “It is foul weather in us all, good sire / when you are cloudy [...] Had I plantation of this isle, my lord-” (II.1.133-136). Gonzalo strives to make something worthwhile out of their fate of being alienated on an island by discussing a prevalent ideology common during Shakespeare’s time and of great interest to all privileged citizens of an European power. The writings of the 16th century French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, had also been popularized during this age of imperialism as they argued for nature as the “Light by which human action is guided” (Toole). Any human being in a remote area could live in perfect happiness if left unrestricted. Gonzalo is so deeply inspired by the prospect of having a role and responsibility on the island that he overlooks the ability of “[His] innocent people” (II.1.156) to self-govern and live in their own vision of a
Golden Age. Shakespeare uses Gonzalo’s mindset to portray an imperialist who does not show any consideration towards other people’s ability to exist as a proper civilization. The sentiments of greed and power along with the belief in a divine right convinces Gonzalo that he must propagate his own perception of the Golden Age. Gonzalo believes that dictating the people by his ideals would be the only means of ensuring an age without sorrow or labor: “I would with such perfection govern, sir, / T’ excel the Golden Age” (II.1.158-159). He is quick to implement his own ideals of proper religion, politics and economics as he is completely blinded to the point of view of “…All men […] and women” (II.1.147-148) that he oversees. This one-sided perspective permits Gonzalo and imperialists to live in complete ignorance of desires and wants of the people they suppress.

Shakespeare exposes the dual nature of imperialism by shining light on the colonists’ utopian viewpoints. Gonzalo is so inspired by the end goal of his optimal kingdom that he easily ignores the process by which he would achieve it. He describes the vision he has imbedded in his mind of a kingdom with “… No kind of traffic […] no name of magistrate… [No] riches, poverty / and use of service […] No occupation; all men idle, all; / And women too, but innocent and pure; / No sovereignty” (II.1. 142-149). The conviction of a better society at the end of the day warrants the usurpation of another person’s property and resources and does not affect the conscience of the imperialists. However, Gonzalo’s ambitious colony depicts a society governed by his ideals of equality and devoid of the social norms and evils that he opposes. This is the paradox of imperialism that Shakespeare uncovers as colonialists fail to comprehend that they are subjecting others to their own conceived ideas of a proper human civilization irrespective of whether those beliefs are shared by the constituents. Sebastian fully comprehends the control that authority has on the mind that Gonzalo and colonialists overlook when he sardonically mocks
Gonzalo’s desire of having no supreme authority in the ideal colony (“No sovereignty”) by stating that, “Yet he would be king on’t” (II.1.149). The amount of dominance and influence gained over the people in the process of establishing such a kingdom would bring out the human desire to maintain and exploit the power to its full extent.

By attributing their circumstances to the will of God, Gonzalo is able to advance on the path towards establishing an imperialistic regime governed by his standards of equality because he is assured that only his vision can bring about the otherwise unattainable Golden Age. Despite his desires for a better outcome at the end of the day, he ignores the process through which he would achieve his utopian ideals and overlooks the corruptive aspect of authority.

Works Cited

