CHAPTER 5

THE TEMPEST: A PHILOSOPHER-POET
EDUCATING CITIZENS

The Tempest is the only play of Shakespeare named after a natural phenomenon, but the phenomenon turns out to be not natural at all. Like most everything else in the play, from beginning to end, the tempest is brought about in accordance with a single character’s plan and deeds. In this the play most resembles the Platonic dialogues, though its central character, Prospero, who indeed spent a great deal of time studying “the liberal arts” instead of ruling Milan, does not engage in Socratic dialectic. His situation is such that his efforts are wholly bent on his and his daughter’s return to an Italy from which they have been exiled, and the securing of a promising marriage of his daughter to the heir apparent to Naples, whose king has, in league with Prospero’s brother, usurped Prospero’s rule of Milan. To achieve this end, Prospero must engage in the education of the many different characters in the play; the question of what is the best, and the best means to achieve, moral and political education is thus one of the two great themes of the play. The other is the related question of who should rule, which is posed loudly and clearly in the dramatic opening and informs every subsequent scene. The play’s magical quality is accounted for by powers that Prospero has by some accident acquired and which he renounces at the successful conclusion of what he calls his “project” (5.1.1; cf. Epilogue, 12). But whatever the source of those powers, his use of them is determined by his wisdom, which includes knowledge of the prerequisites and means of the moral education of human beings. That wisdom turns out to be incomplete, however, and finds its necessary complement through the observation of the actions of his (non-human) slave, Caliban. In the Epilogue, we are prompted to reflect on the relation between the “project” of the philosopher poet Prospero and that

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of Shakespeare himself, in his education of both citizens and potential philosophers.

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Act I

The play opens with a stunningly dramatic portrayal of the ancient metaphor of the ship of state. In the middle of a tempest, the ship’s master gives orders to the boatswain ("Speak to the mariners") to prepare them for the swift execution of oft-rehearsed routines, to which the boatswain then directs them. ("Take in the topsail. Tend to th’ / master’s whistle.") Knowledge—of winds, forces of resistance, ballast, and so on—is clearly needed to guide the ship through the storm. This knowledge, based on necessities, is genuine and so uncontroversial that it is conveyed not by speech but by the master’s whistle—by mere voice, technical and apolitical. The master’s whistle calls into action procedures of the sailors’ art based on this knowledge, directed through an accepted rank ordering ("Here master; what cheer?") and enjoined through appeal to the urgency of the moment ("Fall to ’t, / yarely, or we run ourselves around").

As the mariners’ procedures are being executed, two political rulers, Alonso the King of Naples and Antonio the Duke of Milan, appear on deck. In their fear of the storm they demand to learn from the boatswain the master’s whereabouts, and order the boatswain to urge his men to action. They aren’t obeyed; they aren’t even merely ignored. To their shock and anger, they are told to keep quiet and stay out of the way. The storm’s urgency has usurped their authority. "I pray now keep below;" the boatswain first tells the rulers, who do not even realize that the master is already whistling his commands ("Do you not hear him?"). With the persistence of Antonio’s entreaties, the boatswain grows more impatient. "You mar our labors...you do assist the storm" (1.1.11–14). The storm is the common, manifest enemy, and the ship’s salvation against it is in the hands of knowers; all others are an obstruction. Were the storm human, the boatswain’s words would amount to a charge of treason against the royal party. But Gonzalo, a member of Alonso’s council, orders the boatswain to be patient. "When the sea is," replies the boatswain harshly. "Hence! What cares these roarers for the name of king? To cabin! silence! trouble us not!" The forces of nature are indifferent to what, in their fiercest face, becomes a mere name, “king.” The boatswain is compelled to follow the storm in its indifference to that name, treating royalty like so many unruly youth.

Gonzalo’s final advice to the boatswain, “Good, yet remember whom thou hast aboard,” moves the boatswain to make the question of rule of the ship, and hence of what guides his own deeds, crystal clear:

None that I more love than myself. You are
a councillor; if you can command these elements