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## Achieving 'Wholeness' through Old Age: The Sage in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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**Abstract:** Shakespeare's last play "The Tempest" buttresses the spectrum of aging through the protagonist Prospero – the mouth-piece of the dramatist himself. Prospero – the former Duke of Milan – is the masculine, old and comic embodiment of wholeness. Prospero achieves 'wholeness' as a magician and as a wise old man. Having forgiven his foes, Prospero – a 'time-conscious master' (Smith) – decides to retire to Milan where every 'third thought' shall be his 'grave'. Prospero who is angst-ridden and is preoccupied with gerontological consciousness wants to ensure the future of his daughter Miranda. That is why he devises a means to bring his foe's son Ferdinand closer to her daughter so as to bind them in matrimony.

Prospero, the prosperous man, has achieved a 'metastance' to time and change. Realizing that change is the only unchanging thing in life, he teaches us that life is as insubstantial as the pageant, that our little life is but a sleep and a forgetting, that human beings are as shadowy as the elements of dreams. He acknowledges his advancing infirmity and dull decrepitude to Miranda and Ferdinand – "... Sir, I am vexed /Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled. / Be not disturbed with my infirmity" (Act IV, Sc I, 158-60). The dialectic between integrity and despair culminates in Prospero's wisdom. Ultimately Prospero achieves freedom in wholeness through his serene preparation for death and forgiveness and helps others to attain wholeness through repentance.

**keywords:** Gerontology, old, metastance, wholeness, wisdom

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Usually considered to be Shakespeare's last complete work, *The Tempest* belongs to the serene self-possession of the world famous dramatist. The play which is thought of as the last will and testament of Shakespeare treats man's life as illusory and flatulent. The play *The Tempest* which is regarded as one of the most perfect productions of Shakespeare buttresses the spectrum of aging through the protagonist Prospero who is taken to be the mouthpiece of the dramatist himself. In the play Prospero is, as Hallett Smith points out in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Tempest – A Collection of Critical Essays*, "an exacting and time conscious master" (4). He is well aware of the all consuming, all pervading and all conquering effect of time. Prospero who is angst-ridden and is preoccupied with gerontological consciousness frantically searches for some ways so as to stave off the merciless march of the monstrous time. Needless to say, it is in the dotage, old age that the prosperous brain of Prospero gains supreme knowledge about life and achieves wholeness. The present paper intends to highlight old age as a supreme stage in the life of the sage Prospero who attains completeness in his senescence.

### 2. BACKGROUND

Shakespeare confers a vivid dramatic fabric for the teaching of geriatrics by illuminating the happenings in the lives of the aged characters. A consummate artist that he is, he artistically represents the inconstancy of aging as a basic human fact. In the play Prospero, an old man, narrates his past to his daughter Miranda who does not know what their 'root' is. While delineating the 'route' to the original 'root', the father retorts that twelve years ago he was "the Duke of Milan, and / A prince of power" (53-54). A perceptive reader can easily understand the cry of anguish and the haplessness of the protagonist that he is neither the prince of power nor the Duke of Milan now. He then painfully unloads his past life. Being indifferent to worldly pursuits, Prospero neglects his loyal responsibilities so as to indulge in white magic, thereby handing over the reins of the government to his unfaithful brother Antonio. Subsequently, aided by Alonso, King of Naples, Prospero's brother dethrones Prospero letting the foes invade the duke in the dead of the night. He along with his infant daughter Miranda is set adrift on the tempestuous sea that fortunately brings them to a safe island inhabited by spirits. With the help of his powerful magic– the magus – the epitome of power subsequently establishes absolute rule over the entire island, forces his foes – Antonio, Alonso, Sebastian *et al* – to come to this deserted island by conjuring up a mighty

tempest and ultimately forgives his repentant foes. Towards the end of the play the magician decides to break his magic staff, drowns his book and relinquishes his magical feats. Thus, at the end Prospero achieves a balance between his so-called feminine and masculine traits, between forgiveness and autocracy. Murray pertinently observes about Prospero:

He is the quintessence of a quintessence of a quintessence. (qtd. in Casebook, 94)

### 3. SIGNS OF OLD AGE IN PROSPERO

Prospero achieves 'wholeness' first as a magician and next as a wise old man. If Cordelia in *King Lear* is the feminine, young and tragic embodiments of wholeness, Prospero – the prosperous man in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – is the masculine, old and comic impersonation of wholeness. Prospero experiences a kind of enlightenment through suffering. His aim is not only to get back his kingdom but also to ensure the future of his daughter. That is why he devises a means to bring his foe's son Ferdinand closer to her daughter so as to bind them in matrimony. A perceptive reader can realize that Prospero is probably propelled by some social beliefs of his time as to the marriage of his only daughter and therefore is in a hurry to settle the future of his daughter as he can anticipate his gradual loss of power and ensuing emasculation. Being wise, Prospero does not abandon 'rough magic' all of a sudden. He also suffers from the loss of memory as he fails to remember Caliban's revolt against him:

PRO. [aside.] I had forgot that foul conspiracy

Of the beast Caliban and his confederates (Act IV, Sc I, 139-40).

Ferdinand recognises a fit of strong emotion that disturbs Prospero's mental equilibrium and Miranda also notices the unusual unrest in his father:

MIRA. Never till this day

Saw I him touch'd with anger so distemperer'd. (Act IV, Sc.I, 144-45).

That Prospero is showing signs of old age are evident in his conversation with Ariel for when the master reminds his spirit Ariel to thwart the evil designs of Caliban, the spirit immediately tells that he actually intended to remind it during the enactment of the masque but hesitated lest he would be angry. Prospero, the epitome of power, acknowledges his advancing infirmity and dull decrepitude to Miranda and Ferdinand:

PRO. ... Sir, I am vexed

Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled.

Be not disturbed with my infirmity (Act IV, Sc I, 158-60).

For the first time we get a direct reference to Prospero's old age, that he is getting emaciated, that he is tossed and troubled by time's millioned accidents. Once a potent man, Prospero earnestly apologises for his debility, infirmity and valetudinarianism.

### 4. GERONTOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN PROSPERO

"Gerontology is the study of old age and ageing" (1), comments Ian Stuart-Hamilton in *An Introduction to Gerontology*. Ageing could be described as the process of growing older. The mortal beings are all ageing from the moment of conception. Stuart-Hamilton further states –

"Younger people may develop a dementia, experience a bereavement or chronic illness, live in an institution, or face the realization that life is slipping away". (195)

'Age' and 'ageing' are thus cultural concepts. Cultural gerontology destabilizes the traditional and chronological concepts of age. Old age may not be strictly chronological. It is somewhat psychological. As Deats illustrates in *Aging and Identity – A Humanities Perspective*:

...we must marvel less at Shakespeare's ability to portray the phenomenon of aging in a way that conforms to the discoveries of modern-day scientific analysis, and more at his capability to teach us about the process of aging four hundred years after he wrote. In *The Tempest*, he shows us that it is possible to age well ... As a playwright, Shakespeare not only understands the complexities of aging and knows how to depict them accurately on stage, he

also exhibits his customary artistic mastery when applying that knowledge to achieve breathtaking dramatic effect.(44)

The entire play – from the storm at the beginning to the final command to Ariel – is Prospero’s production. He is the *dues ex machine* that controls the action in the play. He is wise and omniscient. Like his creator, Prospero has foreknowledge and finds that his fortune is dependent on an ‘auspicious star’ and if he does not avail of this golden opportunity his fortunes ‘will ever after droop’ (Act I, Sc II, 184). A perceptive reader can very easily conjecture that Prospero is acutely aware of swift running of Time’s chariot, that his impatience is nothing but a result of gerontological consciousness.

## **5. ATTAINING WISDOM AND WHOLENESS**

Old age is the supreme stage in one’s life and it is in this old age that the sage Prospero has achieved a “metastance” to time and change. Therefore, unlike Ferdinand he is not terrified at the sudden disappearance of the pageant. James P. Driscoll notes in *The Shakespearean “Metastance”*:

...the pageant’s disappearance provides Prospero with a simile to illumine the transience of man’s life, the fragility of identity, and the universality of dissolution (qtd. in Bloom, 89).

Realizing that change is the only unchanging thing in life, he teaches us that life is as insubstantial as the pageant, that our little life is but a sleep and a forgetting, that human beings are as shadowy as the elements of dreams. By rejecting his former identity and accepting the higher identity of a magician Prospero has gained wholeness. Prospero has rectified himself to attain psychic wholeness. That is why he knows how to purify both Alonso and Ferdinand in order to achieve completeness and wisdom. When Prospero states that “Our revels are ended...” (Act IV, Sc I, 148), he means to say that the carnival is over. Actually, Prospero’s heydays of enchantment are over as Shakespeare’s glorious career is about to end. Thus the magician’s art is equated with the Shakespearean art and Prospero, the Shakespearean superman, is typical of the creator of the Shakespearean world.

## **6. PROSPERO’S FAREWELL TO MAGIC IS SHAKESPEARE’S FAREWELL TO ART**

*The Tempest* is, as Smith declares, Shakespeare’s ‘personal farewell to his art’ (9). Prospero’s valediction to magic is Shakespeare’s own farewell to the stage. At the end the powerful magician comes to the realization that his own power minus the magical charms is, after all, feeble and deplorable. Realizing that he is in the penultimate phase of his life and art, he decides to break off his magic staff and requests the audience to ‘release’ him from all bonds and bondages, to set him ‘free’ so that he can take rest into his ‘poor cell’. Once Miranda’s future is settled, he has no other interest in life. He wishes to ‘retire’ to Milan “where/ Every third thought shall be my grave” (Act V, Sc I, 310-11). Unlike Lear, Prospero learns the lessons taught by age as he transforms a tragedy into a comedy. Unlike Lear, Prospero is enlightened by his old age. Old age is a state of becoming and being, not merely an ending. Old age is actually the opening of a new chapter of the book of life. It is the stepping stone to a bigger world. Old age is associated with wisdom and sagacity. Driscoll makes a pertinent observation: “...he achieves freedom in its highest manifestation – wholeness – through accepting man’s uttermost limit, ineluctable death” (qtd. in Bloom, 97). The moment Prospero forgives his foes, acknowledges Caliban as his own and frees Ariel, he frees himself from any type of reliance and depends on his own. This self dependence causes wholeness.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Thus, through the character of Prospero, Shakespeare dramatically delineates the variability of aging as a basic human fact. Like his creator, Prospero is a supreme artist controlling and manipulating the entire island not only through his powerful magical feats but also through his necromantic books. Prospero’s quest for wholeness has reached its final stage only when he serenely and silently prepares for his death. At the end of the play “the forgiveness of Prospero is an embodiment of impartial wisdom and loving justice” (Dowden, 413). The dialectic between integrity and despair culminates in Prospero’s wisdom. Ultimately Prospero achieves freedom in wholeness through his serene preparation for death and forgiveness and helps others to attain wholeness through repentance. In his old age, he becomes a sage – a sagacious and a judicious superman. In his old age Prospero is ripened and sharpened by maturity and wisdom. Needless to say, it is the negotiation between cultural belief of the society and his own gerontological consciousness that makes him a sage for paragons of aeons to look up to. To conclude with the pertinent observation of Deats:

Prospero thus provides one of the most positive images of seniority in all of literature, epitomizing the vital, creative aging documented by contemporary gerontologists. (32)

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