

“Most of the characters in this play are from a civilised world, although certainly not all of them are civilised.” Discuss the presentation of civilisation and the court in *The Tempest*.

*The Tempest* occupies the liminal space between civilisation and barbarism: most of its characters comprise a court that traditionally exemplifies the civilised world, yet its events take place on a magical isle far away from civilisation. Against this backdrop, the play peels off the court's veneer of authority and respectability, exposing its powerlessness vis-a-vis natural and supernatural forces and its composition of uncivilised men. Ultimately, Shakespeare ultimately highlights our inability to fully eradicate these ills of civilisation and the court — we can only hope to check them with appropriate supervision and authority.

From the beginning, the play disrupts traditional notions of courtly power amidst the chaos and disorder of the titular tempest: the court and its authority are presented as unimportant and ineffectual in the face of elemental forces. Upon the court's entry in Act 1 Scene 1, the Boatswain directly challenges courtly protocol: while the court speaks in order of descending rank from Alonso (the King) to Antonio (the Duke of Milan) to Gonzalo (a councillor), they are consistently interrupted by the Boatswain in violation of courtly rules. The Boatswain instructs Alonso and Antonio to “keep below”, tells Antonio bluntly that “you mar our labour” and “you do assist the storm”, and even brusquely commands Gonzalo to go away (“Hence!”) and shut up (“Silence!”). His constant use of imperatives, exclamations and the second-person pronoun to address his superiors creates a highly impudent tone, reflecting the irrelevance of courtly hierarchy in his eyes. However, the Boatswain's impertinence is justified by the peril of the tempest: he asks “what cares these roarers for the name of king?” The tempestuous elements (“roarers”) have no respect for courtly authority, which is a truth made self-evident not only by the use of the rhetorical question, but also by the reduction of kingship to a superficial title or “name” conferred by society. In this way, the court is rendered powerless outside of the civilisation over which it presides. This weakness is underscored by the Boatswain's subsequent promise to let Gonzalo take over “if [he] can command these elements to silence” using his position as “councillor”. This task is clearly impossible, as emphasised by the conditional “if” and the implausible personification of the “elements” as subjects subject to a councillor's “command”. This highlights the limits of the court's power: Gonzalo's political authority is meaningless when faced with natural forces, or Prospero's supernatural magic which commands those “elements”. In this way, the court's ‘civilised’ conceptions of courtesy, hierarchy and authority are immediately undermined from the start: they are societal constructs with little relevance in the natural or supernatural realm.

Shakespeare proceeds to unravel the court's appearance of civility and respectability: the uncivilised nature of those from civilisation is revealed through Antonio and Sebastian's respective plots to usurp their brothers. Prospero describes Antonio's treachery in Act 1 Scene 2: he calls him "so perfidious", "false" and a perpetrator of "foul play", with his accusatory diction consistently suggesting Antonio's betrayal and deceit. Prospero subsequently compares Antonio to a parasitic "ivy" that "hid his princely trunk and sucked [his] verdure out": not only has Antonio betrayed Prospero by advancing his own political ambitions at Prospero's expense, but he has also betrayed the body politic by undermining the stable foundation ("trunk") of authority on which Milan depends. Antonio's moral bankruptcy is made evident in the next scene, when he compares his "conscience" to the minor nuisance of a foot sore ("kibe") and swiftly brushes aside "twenty consciences... ere they molest". His trivialisation of moral principles highlights Antonio's debased and unrepentant nature: he is not only devoid of the honourability traditionally associated with civilisation and the court, but also perfidiously seeking to overturn courtly hierarchy and civilised order. Similarly, Sebastian's 'civilised' nature is quickly called into question in Act 2 Scene 1 as he openly censures Alonso for the presumed loss of his son: he spitefully tells Alonso that he can "thank [himself] for this great loss" and that "the fault's [his] own". His sardonic use of "thank" to assign responsibility rather than express gratitude, along with his addition of the reflexive "own" to emphasise Alonso's blame, mercilessly rubs salt into Alonso's wound, evincing his immense disrespect for courtly hierarchy. In the next scene, he bitterly calls his birth position "hereditary sloth" that forces him "to ebb": rather than respecting the order that this courtly system of patrilineal inheritance brings to civilisation, Sebastian considers these conventions merely as obstacles to his personal ambitions ("ebb", "sloth"). This irreverence escalates into a plot to kill Alonso, a depraved 'triple' crime of murder, fratricide and regicide. Hence, the fact that these courtiers come from the civilised world belies their wholly uncivilised nature: perfidious, immoral and Machiavellian.

This distinction between a civilised background and a civilised nature is further drawn through the false court set up by Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban. In Act 3 Scene 2, the courtier Stephano puts up a courtly appearance by appropriating the rituals and vocabulary of the court: he assumes kingly power by repeatedly calling Caliban his "servant monster" and "subject", getting Caliban to "kneel" in reverence while he "stand[s]", and decreeing that Caliban "shall not suffer indignity", using the modal "shall" as if he has the authority to issue this command. However, this courtly authority is clearly presented as a sham: Stephano's power is derived from his possession of alcohol, as Caliban "swear[s] upon that bottle" to be Stephano's subject as he believes "the liquor is not earthly". This ironic transmutation of the

“bottle” and its “liquor” — symbols of vice — into holy objects to be sworn upon parodies the real court they have been separated from: just as Stephano can amass control despite being drunken, debased and unfit to rule, Antonio and Sebastian can command authority without being courtly or civilised. The capacity for people from civilisation to be uncivilised is further emphasised through the foil of Caliban: even though he is a subhuman “savage” that comes from the “vile race” of the cruel witch Sycorax, he is often more civilised than the human courtiers from the civilised world. In Act 3 Scene 2, Caliban reveals his ability to appreciate the rarefied pleasure of music, calling Ariel’s tune in Act 3 Scene 2 “sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight”. His likening of music to “airs” points to auditory perception’s status as the most ethereal sense, with his enjoyment of music evincing some capacity for spiritual refinement. Further, he speaks in polished verse, highlighting his superior education and linguistic command. In contrast, Stephano and Trinculo not only speak in crude prose but also react to Ariel’s music with fear, as demonstrated by their panicked exclamations (“forgive me my sins!”, “I defy thee!”) and appeals for “forgive[ness]” and “mercy”. In this manner, the “savage” Caliban can be more civilised than the courtiers from civilisation itself, exposing the disjunct between the presumed respectability of the court and their true, debased natures.

In light of this bleak presentation of civilisation’s failings, Gonzalo and Prospero each suggest a potential remedy: in Act 2 Scene 1, Gonzalo offers a utopian vision of a “commonwealth” cleansed of the ills of civilisation. He provides a cumulative list of various elements of civilisation like trade (“traffic”), law (“magistrate”) and kingship (“sovereignty”) before rejecting each with a resounding negative (“no”, “none”), defining his new commonwealth “by contraries” through the purging of traditional features of civilisation. In this way, Gonzalo envisions that “nature should bring forth... all foison, all abundance”, with the deliberate tautology (“foison”, “abundance”) and repetition of the absolute “all” underscoring the complete perfection and prosperity of this Edenic paradise. However, Antonio and Sebastian’s derision of Gonzalo’s idealistic vision highlights its infeasibility: while Gonzalo calls his isle’s inhabitants “innocent people”, Antonio instead calls them “whores” and “knaves”. Not only does his comment remind audiences of the impossibility of returning to a prelapsarian world of “innocent people” now that Man has already fallen into sin (“whores”, “knaves”), Antonio and Sebastian’s constant, mocking interruptions such as “Save his majesty!” and “Long live Gonzalo!” also highlight the fact that disruptive elements like themselves will exist and need to be reined in. As such, Shakespeare ultimately presents the hope of eradicating the uncivilised as a foolishly optimistic one: civilisation and the court will always have the debased and depraved in their midsts.

Instead, Prospero demonstrates that civilisation and the court can and must be held together by the presence of an overarching authority that supervises its members and enforces its rules. In the past, it was Prospero's ducal negligence that allowed Antonio to overturn civilised and courtly order by usurping him: he had been "so retired" and "rapt in secret studies", "all dedicated to closeness" (Act 1 Scene 2). Prospero's diction of seclusion ("retired", "secret", "closeness") — complemented by the use of intensifiers ("so") and absolutes ("all") — highlights his egregious lack of oversight over his dukedom. It was this preoccupation with private pursuits that "awaked an evil nature" in Antonio; the use of the verb "awake" implicitly suggests that Antonio's depravity would have remained concealed and dormant had Prospero's neglect not given him the opportunity to usurp the dukedom. Antonio and Sebastian's regicidal plot similarly spawned when they were left unsupervised, as represented by the striking visual symbol of the court falling asleep in Act 2 Scene 1, alongside the absence of Ariel's surveillance after he momentarily exits the scene. In fact, Antonio tells Sebastian that "th'occasion speaks thee", with the opportunity itself personified and transformed into the agent doing the immediate persuading ("speaks"). In this manner, Shakespeare elucidates the way in which a lack of supervision can directly create barbaric temptations, emphasising the necessity of a higher authority to preserve the order of civilisation and the court. Prospero shows the audience how this can be achieved through his conscientious monitoring of the island's various sub-plots. His servant Ariel re-enters the scene in Act 2 Scene 1 just in time to foil Antonio and Sebastian's plot, saying that Prospero "through his art foresees the danger"; Prospero is thus presented as a prescient and prudent master of the isle that protects his subjects from harm. Similarly, in Act 4 Scene 1, Prospero — even when enjoying a splendid, fantastical masque — is able to remember Caliban's conspiracy in real life, as evinced by his "sudden" aside reminiscent of an abrupt realisation. In this way, the audience is made confident that Caliban's destructive plot will not succeed, underscoring the important role authority or kingship plays in protecting civilisation and the court from its most debased members.

Overall, by bringing men from the civilised world to a far-away isle, Shakespeare reveals that civilisation and the court are far more fragile than they appear: societal and courtly conventions are disregarded not only by natural and supernatural forces, but also by some of the very people that ought to be bound by them. While these inherent human weaknesses cannot be expunged from society, Shakespeare ultimately suggests that civilisation and the court can still be kept united under the watchful eye of a responsible and careful ruler.