

## The Discourse of Power in *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare

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### Abstract

*Shakespeare is widely known for his tragedies such as Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra, and of course the well-known Romeo and Juliette. In his plays, there is the presence of a tragic hero who suffers from a continuous web of struggles, conflicts, and sufferings. The main events of his plays are built upon main events such as revenge and justice. However, Shakespeare's tragedies are also dominated by power and domination that his tragic heroes enjoy to manipulate and control others, the fact that constructs a new definition for tragedy. Accordingly, his plays are known for the power of discourse that tragic heroes enjoy. A constant theme in Shakespeare's plays is the strength and flexibility of language. Words are used to communicate ideas but can also be used to distort or conceal the truth and manipulate people to achieve power. In this article, the focus is on how Shakespearean plays, Hamlet and The Tempest, are formed in line with the discourse of power. Furthermore, the research question that is to be explored throughout the article is how the discourse of power can construct stereotypes of otherness.*

**Keywords:** Discourse of power, colonial discourse, 'Otherness'.

## I-Introduction

Poststructuralists stress the absence of any center of meaning or reference and the loss of any stable structure or fixed boundaries. Meanings are not inscribed in fixed signified; they are scattered and shattered. Accordingly, the focus in this part of the paper is built on the tradition of Foucault in seeing beyond the mere linguistic approaches in discourse to include the broader context and the institutional practices where discourses are produced. According to Foucault, language is not merely an abstract system: a system of signs. Once a language is used by people or communities, it becomes a discourse. It differs from one community to another. Therefore, language no longer functions as a neutral semiotic system (Leventhal 2). In this way, “literature leads language back from grammar to the naked power of speech, and there it encounters the untamed, impervious being of words...” (Leventhal 3). Thus, through Foucault’s deconstructuralism, one can notice the shift in literature from the term language to discourse. Foucault defines discourse as:

A group of statement which provides a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment....Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But...since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect. (qtd in Hall 72)

Stuart Hall points out, it is important to remember that Foucault offers a very different definition of discourse than that ordinarily used by linguists, in the sense that Foucault’s definition is as much about ways of thinking and practices as it is about language (72). Accordingly, the concept of discourse is not purely a linguistic concept. It is about language and practice. Discourse is the use of language to express thoughts, intentions, values, and alternative courses of action. Indeed, discourse is used by certain people to achieve certain goals. It is a way of constituting knowledge and social practices. It is a form of subjectivity and power. Foucault defines power in *The History of Sexuality* as:

as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them...and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formation of law, in the various social hegemonies. (100)

The quote above gives a clear definition of power. Foucault argues that power is achieved through discourse. Discourse has a dialectic relationship with power; the most powerful discourse establishes the truth; it leads to power, and it represents power. The operation of meaning-making (discourse) is always associated with the

relationship of power. In other words, “discourse and power are so thoroughly interrelated that they constitute a virtual compound: discourse/ power. One must operate about the other”(Jeff25). Indeed, for Foucault, the truth is not given; the truth is made by powerful discourses. In this way, discourse leads to power and power gives more power to discourse. Foucault argues that discourse is generated by the power to gain more power. Any powerful discourse becomes a means of fabricating the truth. Thus, discourse and power are tightly linked. Power operates through discourse and discourse should lead to having more power. As such, Foucault locates power firmly in language, and language is the business of literary studies (Bertens156).

## II-Analysis of the Plays

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare represents the story of the prince’s quest to wreck avenger his father’s death. Claudius is the most obvious case in which power is clearly manifested. Claudius manipulates people through the power of his discourse. He has the perfect politician rhetoric; in other words, the eloquence in his speeches allows him to make anything look nice. His long speech (1.2.21) to the court touches on all the right political bases. He manipulates the royal court into believing that his brother dies of natural causes. In using his eloquence in speech, he covers up his tracks with marriage to Gertrude. Claudius uses the pronoun “our”(1.2) connecting himself with his court and his kingdom, an aspect of manipulation he uses to put up a manipulative mask to avoid suspicion of his part in the former king’s death and to gain control of the kingdom. Claudius addresses the people, telling them that although his brother’s death is “green” (1.2.21) or fresh in their minds, it is time for them to celebrate his royal marriage to Queen Gertrude. By referring to his brother’s death as “green”, Claudius notes that his death is recent in the minds of the people, but he does not fail to push them that they should move on, as he states: “With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage, / In equal scale weighing delight and dole” (1.2.21). He attempts to put forth the concept that the death of King Hamlet and the marriage between Gertrude and himself are equally important. In addition to his statements to the people, Claudius turns to Hamlet and states “how is it that the Clouds still hang on you”(1.2.23)? Clearly, Claudius uses his skills of manipulation to coerce Hamlet to get over his father’s death. He does not want to pursue or dwell upon the late king’s death. He manipulates language to unveil the truth. He attempts to establish authority over Hamlet by speaking not only as his king but also as his father. Claudius’s statement “But now, my cousin Hamlet and my son” (1.2.23) shows his concern about Hamlet’s apparent grieving. Similarly, in public, he stresses to the court that Hamlet is now his son, and throughout the discussion makes references to himself as being the father. He adopts a friendly tone in order to eliminate memories of the former king. Indeed, his clever use of language is also shown in his remark to Gertrude. Claudius makes strategic use of the royal “our” and “we” to convey to her his personal love for Hamlet. Thus, language is used to manipulate the other.

The next concept involved in this article is Orientalism. Drawing on Edward Said’s theoretical framework, *Orientalism* is one of the popular concepts that mirror the

dichotomous distinction between different cultures based on the opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them; the West and the East; the Occident and the Orient. As Edward Said explains: “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but problems to be solved or confined” (40). *The Tempest* produces the discourse of the colonizer over the colonized, thus constructing stereotypes of otherness through the discourse of colonialism: “It shows that political power is bound up with representational practice. Prospero must reform the role of the monarch ... while Caliban must accept the language in which performance takes place”(Colebrook 209). The discourse of colonialism operates in two main areas: masterlessness and savagism. (Kaltenbacher32) Masterlessness refers to the dichotomy between “the mastered who is the submissive, observed, supervised, differential and the masterful who is powerful, observing, supervising” (Kaltenbacher 32). Prospero is the usurping invader; nervous about the legitimacy of his role, and Caliban is the representative of the subjugated race. His power is achieved through the game of language. He adopts a discourse of difference in order to maintain his power. Caliban is presented by Prospero as being a slave. Accordingly, there is a case to be made for the assertion that the idea of race exists almost entirely in language to maintain power. As Prospero’s terms of address to Caliban: “hag-seed”, “ lying slave “, “ vile race “, “ freckled whelp “, “ tortoise “ indicate the language of authority and discrimination, which underlies the language of race. . The power of language finds expression in racial discourse. Caliban is demonized by the white culture. His representation displays deviations from human traits and exhibits traits marked by monstrosity and animal imagery.

Thus, Prospero’s language is a medium of slavery because it enables him to give orders. The usage of discourse produces a form of knowledge of great benefit for the ruler – it (re) constructs and concedes authority of what is different. Though Caliban asserts his natural authority saying “This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,” (1.2.43). Prospero’s usurpation of Caliban’s power is negated by his portrayal as savage seeking a new master. Caliban, as a native is seen throughout the play as a “monster”. Thus, this privileging of language as a crucial form of Prospero’s control over the native is used as a means to achieve power. Indeed, Prospero points out that Caliban’s mother, Sycorax, is a witch who comes from Africa and tries to get Ariell to perform certain “earthy and abhorred commands,” (1.2.41). In order to keep Ariel enslaved, Prospero must remind this spirit of the horrified nature of Caliban’s mother: “Refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee, / By help of her more potent ministers, / And in her most unmitigable rage, / Into a cloven pine: within which rift” (1.2.41). In this way, Prospero, as a colonist, enhances power, which is white and male, and constructs Sycorax as the black witch in order to legitimate his power. To further intensify the negative image of black women, the colonial past comes to haunt the present through Prospero’s words that anticipate their otherness and social difference. The discourse of power serves to represent the Other, the different, the unfamiliar. The Other appears as ghosts and witches. The earliest forms of supernatural elements such as ghosts are used to represent racial Otherness. The imagery concerning the Orient is closely associated with inferiority, based on colonial imageries. Accordingly, the female body is dehumanized as an inferior other.

Furthermore, the sexual division is very common in colonial discourse. Miranda is the virgin who must be protected from the evil and rapist native – the attitude of power of the colonizer is vindicated, and the relationship of Prospero and Caliban is developed into hatred, torture, and enslavement. In this way, Prospero manipulates language in order to legitimate his power by marrying his daughter to a civil lover, Ferdinand. This is part of Prospero’s plan of regulating sexuality, and it allows him to use the attempted rape to legitimize his power. This discourse operates by producing a threatening “other” that can be used by colonial discourse to achieve power. It is one of the ways that Prospero uses to justify his enslavement of Caliban. Thus, “Slavery is ...rationalized in this hysterical structure because of the need for civilization to control all forms of sexual excess” (Samuels 63) Therefore, colonial discourse justifies authority overland through a discourse of difference—the stereotype of the uncivilized.

### Conclusion

A constant theme in Shakespeare’s plays is the strength and flexibility of language. Words are used to communicate ideas but can also be used to distort or conceal the truth and manipulate people to achieve power. This paper explores how the discourse of power is represented in Shakespeare’s literary works through a study of a section of two plays, namely *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. It focuses on the notion of ‘Otherness,’ based on issues of class and race. Drawing on the notion of the ‘Other’ as part of the colonial discourse, it sets out to demonstrate that, in his plays, Shakespeare depends on various sources to represent the marginalized Other.

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