Usurpation and then Peace – Honors Shakespeare

History has proven that both monarchs and other prominent political figures at times struggled to retain their power, and sometimes lost it. Charles I lost the throne to Oliver Cromwell and the Commonwealth, and Louis XVI lost both his throne and his head. Going back further in history, Julius Caesar was murdered as he was gaining power. In other words, there are times where monarchs and individuals with great political positions and power were usurped. The Oxford English dictionary defines usurpation as a “claim or assertion that is unwarranted or unauthorized; unjustified assumption, arrogation, or pretension,” and also “the action of usurping, illegally seizing, or wrongfully occupying some place or property belonging to a person or persons; unlawful encroachment upon or intrusion into the office, right, etc., of another or others; unjust or illegal possession.” William Shakespeare often included usurpation in his plays, using it as both a powerful plot device as well as a relevant observation of the political landscape of Europe around that time. What proves intriguing is that Shakespeare writes about usurpation in some of his comedies, histories, and tragedies. In Henry IV Part One, King Henry feels some remorse for usurping the throne from Richard. In Coriolanus there are usurpations of sorts, with Coriolanus, in a position of power, ousted from Rome, and then Coriolanus in turn taking over the Volscian army from Tullus Aufidius. As You Like It features usurpation in the backstory, with Duke Frederick usurping and exiling his brother Duke Senior. Macbeth kills Duncan so that he can be king and then Banquo out of fear of being found out and of a prophecy of the witches. Two plays with usurpation that provide an interesting comparison are the comedy The Tempest and the tragedy of Hamlet. They both feature the aftermath of usurpation by a brother, but each play features both similar and different themes of usurpation, seen through characters’ motivations and actions, their reactions, and the ultimate results.
One way that the theme of usurpation differs in *Hamlet* than in *The Tempest* is the fact that the usurpation is viler, and the usurper more lethal and guiltless. The tragedy of *Hamlet* begins with a supernatural encounter of the apparent ghost of King Hamlet, Hamlet’s deceased father. He was recently murdered by Claudius, his brother. “O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven./It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t—/A brother's murder.” – (III.iii.36-38)

Claudius usurped not only the throne from King Hamlet, but he also takes his own life and his wife. This is a more atrocious form of usurpation, with Claudius simply erasing his brother and taking his place. He is not able to ask for forgiveness from God because he is still happy with everything that he acquired from his actions.

> “O, what form of prayer
> Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
> That cannot be, since I am still possessed
> Of those effects for which I did the murder—
> My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
> May one be pardoned and retain th'offence?” (III.iii.51-56)

He does not really feel remorse, but instead favors his gains over his brother’s life. Here Shakespeare depicts a cold usurpation, making a powerful statement about the deception and betrayal that could occur over positions of power. It is a much darker look at usurpation, particularly given the fact that Claudius marries his sister-in-law. The method that Claudius uses to kill King Hamlet, poison, suggests a cowardly and fearful, yet effective usurpation. This seems to fit with Shakespeare’s attitude of usurpation as well, in that usurpation is typically depicted as a cowardly and sneaky act. Even in history, with the usurpations of Charles I, Caesar, and Louis XVI, the deeds were done through a mob mentality, conspiracy. Plots hatched and executed in the shadows, with not much cover up needed as a result, seem to be common throughout Shakespeare. However, Claudius’ usurpation in *Hamlet* is more intense and vile than Antonio’s in *The Tempest*. 
The Tempest features usurpations with much less disturbing consequences, yet at the same time, the number of usurpations and potential usurpations is greater than in Hamlet. In the back story of the play, Antonio has usurped Prospero as the Duke of Milan and meant to have him killed, but Prospero was warned and sent to sea.

Should presently extirpate me and mine
Out of the dukedom, and confer fair Milan,
With all the honours, on my brother; whereon,
A treacherous army levied, one midnight
Fated to th’ purpose did Antonio open
The gates of Milan, and i’th dead of darkness
The ministers for th’ purpose hurried thence
Me and thy crying self. (I.ii.125-132).

Like Claudius, Antonio has betrayed his own brother, again giving an illustration of the deception and betrayal that is behind many usurpations. However, he is also different from Claudius in important ways. For one, he does not murder Prospero, he indirectly exiles him. While exile is probably just about murder in Antonio’s eyes as far as its desired effect, it is still more merciful and less savage than Claudius’ usurpation. Also, Antonio simply wants Prospero’s position as Duke of Milan, not his entire life. During the play, Antonio is on the brink of instigating a second usurpation with Sebastian.

And yet methinks I see it in thy face,
What thou shouldst be. Th’ occasion speaks thee, and
My strong imagination sees a crown
Dropping upon thy head. (II.i.204-207).

Antonio calms Sebastian by noting that his usurping Prospero was the best move he made. This is similar to Claudius’ prayer in Hamlet, in that both cast aside guilt in favor of their greed and enjoyment of their newfound power. Here Shakespeare seems to further develop the idea of usurpation being a cold and selfish act. It is also interesting to note that Antonio is the one who pushes Sebastian to usurp Alonso. This implies that Antonio either wanted someone
else to share in his guilt, or perhaps he had intentions of usurping the less qualified Sebastian from the throne. In addition, Antonio could have feared Alonso would somehow catch wind of his deeds. Interestingly, Antonio also wants to kill Gonzalo, which suggests fear of being accused and undone.

The ambiguous and conspiratorial ambitions and motivations of Antonio are matched by Claudius in some capacities in *Hamlet*. Claudius has the country in lockdown after taking over the throne, evidenced by the many guards that he has station around the country. He is paranoid, not wanting to lose his throne. This moves him to subtly manipulate Laertes into wanting to kill Hamlet.

Not that I think you did not love your father,
But that I know love is begun by time,
And that I see, in passages of proof,
Time qualifies the spark and fire of it.
Hamlet comes back. What would you undertake
To show yourself your father's son in deed
More than in words? (IV.vii.96-101).

Both Antonio and Claudius are not confident in retaining their usurped positions of power and are extremely wary of any hint of a threat. This paranoia and fear is another theme that Shakespeare includes with his usurpation. In *Macbeth*, Macbeth is haunted by Banquo’s ghost. And while a bit different, in *Coriolanus* Rome, and in particular Brutus and Sicicinius, are terrified of the vengeful return of the man they exiled.

*The Tempest* features more usurpation than just Antonio and Prospero and Antonio/Sebastian and Alonso. Prospero has usurped Caliban in the back story. Caliban lived on the island by himself, but according to him, when Prospero came to the island, Caliban was deceived.

When thou cam'st first,
Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light and how the less,
That burn by day and night; and then I loved thee,
And showed thee all the qualities o' th' isle,
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile— (I.ii.332-338).

Prospero’s usurpation, though different from Antonio and Claudius’ usurpations, still is a good example of usurpation in Shakespeare. And with this element, Shakespeare brings up a timely usurpation topic – that of colonization. Europe was at the time very taken with colonizing Africa and the Americas and imposing their superior technology and strength to subjugate the local peoples. Prospero here symbolizes the countries, usurping Caliban, the local inhabitant of the island. Caliban responds to Prospero’s usurpation of him by urging Stephano to usurp Prospero. “I say by sorcery he got this isle;/From me he got it. If thy greatness will/Revenge it on him—for I know thou dar'st./But this thing dare not” (III.ii.51-54).

It is interesting that Caliban, unlike someone like Prospero, who sets himself on regaining his former position, subjugates himself to a new master and seeks for him to be master of the island instead of desiring to reclaim it himself. Regardless, there is, like with Antonio and Sebastian, conspiracy for usurpation. Both Hamlet and The Tempest feature the theme of usurpation. Both plays are similar in some of the motivations and situations surrounding usurpation, but they also differ in their tone and intensity.

Reactions to usurpation are both similar and different in The Tempest and Hamlet. In Hamlet, Hamlet reacts to his father’s murder, after prompting by his father’s ghost form, by desiring to have his revenge on Claudius. “And so am I revenged. That would be scanned./A villain kills my father; and for that/I, his sole son, do this same villain send/To heaven” (III.iii.75-78). This reaction is, ultimately, to usurp Claudius right back. This desire for revenge grows within Hamlet as the play progresses. Similarly, in The Tempest, Caliban desires to usurp
Prospero via Stephano and Prospero seeks to usurp Antonio. All three of these situations are matters of revenge. Caliban was usurped by Prospero, Prospero was usurped by Antonio, and Hamlet’s father was usurped by Claudius. Out of the three, however, Prospero’s usurpation of Antonio stands out differently. This is because he forgives Antonio for his deeds and spares him from punishment.

> For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother
> Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive
> Thy rankest fault—all of them—and require
> My dukedom of thee, which perforce I know
> Thou must restore (V.i.130-134).

Prospero seems to realize that doing harm to Antonio would likely continue the cycle of usurpation/revenge that was commonly written about in Ancient Grecian works. It is notably commented on by Aeschylus in his *Orestia*, where a chain of vengeance and death continues throughout the entire trilogy and ultimately ends in the final installment, where a judicial system is established, with Athena stressing mercy over harshness for the people moving forward. Shakespeare seems to be suggesting a similar theme through Prospero, who has been harboring ill feelings for twelve years yet spares Antonio.

On the other hand, Caliban and Hamlet both want to kill Prospero and Claudius, respectively. Caliban is easily thwarted thanks to Ariel, who ensures that Prospero is aware of the situation at all times. Hamlet succeeds in slaying Claudius, yet loses his own life in the process. Both vengeful usurpations ultimately fail, while the merciful one succeeded, which seems to be a suggestion from Shakespeare that fighting fire with fire will not improve anything. *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* are similar in terms of some of the reactions characters have to usurpation. However, Prospero’s reaction to Antonio’s usurpation goes in a different direction,
and with Prospero in many ways a characterization of Shakespeare in his final solo play, the reaction seems to be Shakespeare’s ultimate opinion on how one ought to respond to usurpation.

Lastly, *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* differ in their depiction of the ultimate results of usurpation in each conclusion. For *Hamlet*, the conclusion of the play features a duel between Laertes and Hamlet, which Claudius had encouraged Laertes to pursue in order to kill Hamlet. After all is said and done, Gertrude dies, Hamlet is dying of a poisonous wound, Laertes is slain, and Hamlet kills Claudius with his last strength. All of this bloodshed comes as a result of Claudius’ usurpation of King Hamlet, as well as Hamlet’s determination and growing fixation on having his revenge on Claudius. Fortinbras, the Norwegian prince, then comes and takes over Denmark. Shakespeare certainly seems to be depicting how usurpation fueled by fear and anger does not accomplish anything. By contrast, the results of usurpation in *The Tempest* are more positive. Everything works out for just about everyone. Prospero regains his Dukedom, Antonio is spared, Miranda and Ferdinand are married, Alonso’s assumed-dead son is alive, and Ariel is freed. The only character who does not seem to have things work out is Caliban, whose attempted usurpation, fueled by revenge, fails, though he does not suffer the same fate as Hamlet – he is spared by Prospero. It seems to be that Shakespeare is arguing that when wrongs done by usurpation or other conflicts are let go and forgiven, good things happen.

What is interesting to note about the usurpations in both *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* is that both plays feature simple usurpations of sorts at the end. Fortinbras takes over Denmark by virtue of the royal family having died. In *The Tempest*, however, as Prospero and the other Italians depart the island, Ariel is freed and it is implied that the island is left to him/her. “My Ariel, chick,/That is thy charge. Then to the elements/Be free, and fare thou well.—Please you draw near” (V.i.316-318). In both cases power is simply given. This seems to be an ultimate
message from Shakespeare: usurpation should not exist, and power should transition smoothly from one to another, without any struggle or conspiracy. Between the results and conclusions of *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*, Shakespeare makes multiple comments on the theme of usurpation.

Usurpation is a common theme, not only in Shakespeare, but in other works as well. The forced transfer of power intrigues people as much as it scares them, and Shakespeare certainly was not wary of giving his opinion on it. In looking at the different elements of usurpation present in *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*, it is clear that Shakespeare did not think highly of usurpers or those who sought vengeance on others. Instead, he seems to favor forgiveness, letting things go, and more peaceful solutions to conflict. *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* are different types of plays, but Shakespeare uses both to illustrate his peaceful and respectful opinions during a time when war, betrayal, and usurpation, particularly in colonies, were common. At the conclusion of *The Tempest* Prospero says:

> And my ending is despair  
> Unless I be relieved by prayer,  
> Which pierces so that it assaults  
> Mercy itself, and frees all faults.  
> As you from crimes would pardoned be,  
> Let your indulgence set me free (V.i.333-338)

Perhaps ultimately Shakespeare wanted to set the record straight and leave behind a good example for others, and, like Prospero, be forgiven for some of the darker ideas in his work.
Works Cited

