Masters and Servants: An Important Part of The Tempest

How would you feel if your servant tried (and maybe succeeded) to overthrow you? Or if your master abused his power over you? Shakespeare uses this idea in The Tempest to portray his main theme: power. He disturbs the master and servant relationships and shows the effects of it. In Shakespeare’s The Tempest, the relationships between masters and servants are a major contribution to the plot of the play.

Shakespeare uses disturbed master and servant relationships to illustrate power. In Act 1, scene 1, the Boatswain, a man whose passengers are all nobility, orders his passengers below decks while the storm is blowing buffeting waves up against the ship. Because the men are used to being on the giving end of the orders, and not the receiving end, they don’t take kindly to the orders. By not doing what the
Boatswain asks they put themselves in jeopardy, and lead to the ship’s sinking.

Another example is that Caliban was the master of the island until Prospero and Miranda arrived. Prospero took over the island and Caliban became a servant.

Also, Stephano was a servant, but Caliban made him a master. The relationships between master and servant are constantly being disturbed in The Tempest. Masters become servants, and servants become masters.

To portray power, one of the main themes of The Tempest, Shakespeare uses the abuse of power. An example of power abusive master is Prospero. He is malevolent towards Caliban, and has no compassion for him, treating him as something less than human. He also abuses his power over Ariel, promising to free him, but only after this “one more” task. Prospero always has another job for Ariel. Prospero also has a power abusive relationship with his daughter. When she says that she loves Ferdinand, he chastises her, and tries to convince her that he’s only the third man she’s ever seen, so she can’t possibly love him. He is essentially making the two play “hard to get” with each other and uses them for his own personal gain.

Caliban and Ariel are two of Prospero’s servants (or slaves). They each have a different relationship with Prospero. Caliban is the brawn; Prospero is
the brain. If Prospero didn’t have his magic, the brawn could take down the brains. Prospero uses Caliban for all his manual labors. He uses Ariel for the magical labors. Ariel was a slave to Sycorax the witch. Now he is a slave to Prospero. Prospero holds Ariel’s freedom above his head. Prospero promises to free Ariel, but always has “one more” task for him. Prospero needs Ariel to keep Caliban under control. Prospero sends Ariel to do his bidding. Prospero may have lost his title of the Duke of Milan, but he keeps his reign over the island pretty well.

Although masters and servants are a main idea in *The Tempest*, you have to keep in mind the differences between slavery and servitude. Caliban and Ariel are more slaves than servants. They do not want to be Prospero’s work force. But, when Prospero puts Ferdinand to work, Ferdinand doesn’t mind. He does it out of his love for Miranda. Nothing is forcing him to work for Prospero. Gonzalo is another example of a willing servant, though he is treated like a slave. He offers advice to the nobles, but they *deride* him for it. He is their counsellor, but they treat him with disrespect and contempt.

There are many prominent master and servant relationships throughout *The Tempest*. Shakespeare disrupts the standard relationships,
making the master the servant and the servant the master. The prominent relationships between masters and servants beautifully illustrates power, a main theme throughout the play.
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