



William Shakespeare as an Imperialist: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Tempest*

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Abstract

The paper interprets Shakespeare's play as an apology for imperialism. It examines the work, particularly the figure of Caliban, in three different standpoints to facilitate a postcolonial reading of the text. The first section, "Is Caliban a Human Being?", explores how the play lends evidence to the widespread idea in the heyday of European imperialism that Blacks were non-humans. The second part, "Caliban's Lot: Perpetual Slavery", reveals how Shakespeare's play contributes to the spread of the racist idea that the white race was the race of masters. The third stage, Caliban, Symbol of The Dispossessed Colonized underscores the paper's claim that Shakespeare agreed with the idea of colonizing the peoples who did not enjoy the technical advances that Europe had attained in the years of its world imperialism.

Keywords: Colonialism, Imperialism, Racism, and Slavery.

Introduction

There is no doubt about it, William Shakespeare was a rare genius and his fame is well-established. However, the great playwright could not escape his condition of being a racist European who, with hindsight, can be considered alongside some of the well-known European humanists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially when one analyses his play, *The Tempest*.

According to Trevor R. Griffiths, before the nineteenth century little attention was given to the colonial elements of *The Tempest*. Caliban used to be perceived as "a comic wotwo, whose strong rebellious streak was a medium for the adapter's anti-democratic sentiments" (Griffiths 1983:159).

However, by the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries critics' views on the play changed to focus more on its colonial themes. The major concerns of such approaches remained the relationship between Prospero and Caliban, the colonizer and the colonized, the ruler and the ruled, the white and the black, the aristocrat and the democrat (Griffiths1983).

The present paper does not view Caliban as a comic voodoo, nor does it consider Prospero merely as a colonizer, nor as a ruler, nor as a white, nor as an aristocrat, but rather as an unscrupulous imperialist in line with those who contributed to the flourishing of the slavery economy in Africa and the Americas. Anne Barton's interpretation of Prospero: "Prospero stands through much of the play, as a successful substitute for heaven. As a judge for good and evil, handing out reward for the one and punishment for the other, he is accurate and scrupulously fair. This is the way gods should act." (Barton1968:44). This paper will show that not only the character of Prospero, but also his view of him underlines the imperialist notions not only contained within the play but also shared by many of its readers.

There are three parts to the analysis. The first, "Is Caliban a Human Being?" discusses the playwright's depiction of the character as sub-human and argues that he can be understood to be a Black person. The main evidence stems from an analysis of how Prospero relates to Caliban. The second part, "Caliban's Lot: Perpetual Slavery", relies largely on the type of duties that the character has to perform throughout the play. These duties for the most part needed only brute force for their accomplishment and are argued to be reminiscent of the slaves' conditions in the Americas. The last part,

“Caliban, Symbol of The Dispossessed Colonized” interprets the character of Prospero as the discoverer of an African territory with the declared intention of bringing light to its people, but who instead ended up dispossessing them thanks to the complicity of some of the natives.

Is Caliban a Human Being?

In *The Tempest* Caliban is not considered by Prospero to be a human being. There are not enough indications in the play to attest to the character’s humanity. The first time that Prospero addresses him recalls the way animals are handled. He calls his name, then makes a sound with his voice as if to attract his attention. Just as if he were addressing an animal ...What ho, slave, Caliban! /Thou earth, thou, speak! (1.2.375-376).

This impression that Caliban is not a human being is further reinforced by the terms in which Prospero introduces him to the audience:

Prospero: This blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child A here was left by th’ sailors..... Then was this island (Save for the son that [she] did litter here, A freckled whelp, hag-born) not honored with A human shape:(1.2.322-324; 334-337).

Prospero calls Caliban’s mother a hag, which can mean a female demon, and Caliban himself a hag-born meaning that he is the child of a demon, and he is from a litter, born like an animal. To crown his “thingification”, Caliban is “not honored with/ A human shape”. The following statement from Daniel Wilson corroborates this point:

In Caliban Shakespeare has anticipated the missing link in the Darwinian evolutionary chain: The not wholly irrational brute, the animal approximating in form and attributes as nearly to man as the lower animal may be supposed to do while still remaining a brute, has actually been conceived for us ... in one of the most original creations of Shakespearean drama (Griffiths1983:165).

The final evidence that Caliban is not a human being is provided when Prospero admonishes Caliban for having attempted to rape his daughter. If Caliban were to be portrayed in the play as human, when he is reminded of his act, he would express some form regret or emotion. Instead, he seems to be boasting that he was prevented from having many children from the girl.

Under normal human circumstances, having children is a matter of mutual agreement between a man and a woman. Caliban’s attitude here more reminds us of how male animals mate with any female animals when they are in heat. This episode can be compared with a scene from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* where Mr. Norton (one of the trustees of the Black College) faints when confronted with the issue of incestuous relationship when Trueblood (from the isolated black family) told Norton that he had children with his own daughter, Norton’s shock at the idea that a man could have children with his own daughter is in direct opposition to Caliban’s desire for Miranda which is almost incestuous since at the time they were on good terms and were living under the same roof. Indeed, we learn in the play that it was as a result of this act that Caliban’s treatment-and position in Prospero’s family- deteriorated from pet to beast of burden.

Conclusively, Caliban, as portrayed here, is not far from an animal. When he felt the need, he jumped on the only available female, just like it is done in the animal world. Indeed, the image of Blacks as over-sensuous creatures was spread by the imperialist West, and Shakespeare can be said to be a participant to that Western and imperialist view. The following quotation from Frantz Fanon’s “Concerning Violence” is illuminating:

The colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically, that is to say with the help of the army and the police force, the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil...The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense, he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that come near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality...(Fanon1967:144).

Caliban’s Lot: Perpetual Slavery

Reducing Caliban to perpetual slavery is symptomatic of the Western view of the time that the black race was the race of laborers. At the end of the play Prospero forgives everyone (human) who acted against him: his brother Antonio who took the dukedom away from him and attempted to send him to his death on a boat that was to capsize after she set sail; Alonso, the King of Naples who helped Antonio in deposing Prospero; Trinculo and Stephano, Alonso’s two servants who plotted with Caliban to assassinate Prospero. He also gives Ariel his freedom as he promised him. Caliban is the only character that does not benefit from Prospero’s generosity.

Another story with an ending where a black servant is demeaned is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*’s. Here’s Friday, the runaway slave and faithful and everyday helper of Robinson Crusoe is turned in to the police together with the

criminals by Crusoe himself. Such a betrayal from Crusoe might have shocked more than one reader, as of course Crusoe could not have survived on the island without the valuable assistance of Friday.

The attitudes of both Shakespeare and Defoe could be more easily understood if we take into account the belief that slavery is the natural condition of Blacks because they are from the lineage of Ham. In the Bible, Ham was cursed by his father to be slave to his brothers. Ideas like these were widespread when slavery flourished and were used in order to justify the bad treatment suffered by Blacks under slavery. Aimé Césaire in “Discourse on Colonialism” chose to quote Joseph Ernest Renan (whom Césaire labelled a Western humanist, the “idealist” philosopher) with the following words:

The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races by the superior races is part of the providential order of things for humanity...a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race. Reduce this noble race to working in the *ergastulum* like Negroes and Chinese and they rebel (Césaire quoting Renan 1871:224).

By these rules Prospero, by his virtue of being white, ought to be master, even in a foreign island where there probably was already another ruler. Sycorax, Caliban’s mother, used to rule over the island before she died. Her only successor was Caliban who ought to have become the new lord of the island. Instead, Prospero used his powers to subdue him and Ariel, the two inhabitants of the island, and turn them into his slaves. Caliban is entrusted with the duties that only required brute force to get accomplished. He is to fall trees, make firewood, and carry them for Prospero and his daughter Miranda to keep warm; these are the kind of duties that were given to Blacks under slavery. When it comes to duties that require intelligence, Prospero turns to Ariel. The following conversation between Ariel and Prospero shows the diligence required and expected for his work:

Prospero: of the King’s ship
The mariners say how thou hast disposed,
And all the rest o’ th’ fleet.
Ariel: Safely in harbor
Is the King’s ship. In the deep nook, where once
Thou called’st me up at midnight to fetch dew
From the still vexed Bermoothes, there she’s hid;
The mariners all under hatches stowed,
Who, with a charm joined to their suffered labor,
I have left asleep. And for the rest o’ th’ fleet,
Which I dispersed, they all have met again
And are upon the Mediterranean float,
Bound sadly home for Naples,
Supposing that they saw the King’s ship wracked
And his great person perish
Prospero: Ariel, that charge Exactly is performed. But there’s more work.
What is the time o’ th’ day? (1.2.266-283)

This compartmentalization of duties is reminiscent of the situation of Blacks under the system of slavery, and later under colonization. The following quotation from Toni Morrison’s “The Site of Memory” contains some of the fallacies which explain why black slaves were not trusted with duties that necessitate intellectual exercise:

David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Jefferson to mention only a few, had documented their conclusions that blacks were incapable of intelligence...Jefferson said in “Notes on The State of Virginia” “never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration, never see even an elementary trait of painting for sculptures”...Hegel in 1813, had said that Africans had no “history” and couldn’t write in modern languages. Kant disregarded a perceptive observation by a black man by saying: “This fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid”.

As a general rule under slavery, the Blacks who served in the big houses were usually lighter skin complexion, and these mulattoes or lighter-skinned Blacks were often the fruits of miscegenation. In most cases some slaveholders would sexually abuse their female slaves. It is probably out of some affection that they then made their lot, and that of their offspring, a little easier.

Frederick Douglass, for instance, according to his *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* would have stood no chance of learning any trade if he had had a darker skin. And it is definitely that trade which allowed him to be hired out and ultimately to successfully escape. The slaves of darker skin complexion were mostly used for farming. As such they were made to work harder and for longer hours under the sun without rest and treated almost like beasts of burden.

In *The Tempest*, when Prospero tells his daughter that he needs to talk to Caliban, she replies that she hates to look at him. In order to convince his daughter about the necessity of meeting him, he declares that they both need him because of his chores, that is, the burdensome work that keeps them comfortable.

Amílcar Cabral in his article, “National Liberation and Culture” observed that a close look at the colonization phenomenon reveals that in an endeavor to make exploitation permanent, colonization took two major steps. The first was to construct a mechanism that erased the cultural life of the colonized. The second was to encourage and create the cultural alienation of a portion of the colonized population through the seeming assimilation of some natives, or through the social gap between the educated class and the popular masses.

We can see this in action in *The Tempest* when Prospero disregards everything Caliban taught him concerning the island (or at least he does not offer any defense when the latter repeatedly reminds him of this). Instead, Prospero is bent on teaching Caliban his own language. Prospero also manages to create division among the only two inhabitants of the island. Ariel is his friend and the privileged one, “Approach, my Ariel. Come.” (1.2.223) while Caliban is the bad slave, “Dull thing, I say so; he, that Caliban” (1.2.339). These are the terms in which Prospero refers to Caliban in the presence of Ariel. Of course, Ariel and Caliban, who are both slaves, stand no chance of reaching agreement in order to fight the common foe who is the enslaver Prospero despite the fact that both thirst for their freedom.

In a comment about Césaire’s *Une Tempête*, Georges Ngál opined that:

L’intention de Césaire est donc visible: le cri de Caliban contre Prospero est celui du Nègre dressé contre l’Occident. Prospero c’est l’Occident, Caliban le Nègre. Mais derrière celui-ci se profile l’immense cortège de tous les sous développés du Tiers Monde placés face à ce même Occident. (Ngál1970:171).

(Césaire’s purpose was thus obvious Caliban’s cry against Prospero was that of a rebellious Negro against the West. Prospero stood for the West, Caliban for the Negro. But behind him facing this same West the huge cortege of all the developing peoples of the Third World is represented.)

Caliban: Symbol of a Dispossessed Colonized

Caliban should be the actual ruler of the island because he was heir to Sycorax his mother who used to rule the island. When Prospero and his daughter landed there after their boat capsized, Prospero, instead of keeping his status as foreigner in the land, uses his power, which he derives from his books and Caliban’s knowledge of the island, to subdue Caliban and Ariel of and turn them into slaves. Thus, he passes from the status of foreigner on the island to that of owner. This move can be compared with the story of colonization, especially the colonization of Africa. Césaire observed in “Discourse on Colonialism” that:

I find that hypocrisy is from a recent date; that neither Cortez discovering Mexico from the top of the great Teocalli, nor Pizzaro before Cuzco (much less Marco Polo before Cambaluc), claims that he is the harbinger of a superior order; that they kill; that they plunder; that they have helmets, lances, cupidity; that the slaving apologists came later; that the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations Christianity=Civilization, paganism=savagery, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians, the yellow peoples, and the Negroes. (Césaire 2004:223)

Prospero can be termed to be a colonialist and a racist because he behaved as if his culture were superior and that there was no life on the island before he got there. Cortez (cited just above) discovered Mexico, but he did not act as if there was nothing in Mexico before he got there. Césaire referred to “the great Teocalli” (A temple of the Aztecs) to show that Cortez reckoned with what was in Mexico before he went there. Prospero by contrast ignored what he was taught about the island, for he was more powerful and as such had something better to offer: “...I have used thee, /Filth as thou art, with human care” (1.2.413-415). That is how Prospero replied to Caliban when the latter reminded him that he showed him all the riches of the island and he was then his friend, now that he had known about them, he had become his slave, but once Prospero had that knowledge, he enslaved Caliban. Yet Prospero maintains he had treated Caliban with “human care” although he considers him “filthy”. Being filth most probably means that he lacked something that would make him a human being, and that in my reading is the civilization referred to by Césaire. This becomes even more evident when one reads Miranda’s comment to Caliban to remind that he has reasons to be grateful to her and her father:

Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like

A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
 With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
 Though thou didst learn, had that in 't which good natures
 Could not abide to be with. Therefore, west thou
 Deservedly confined into this rock,
 Who hadst deserved more than a prison (1.2.422-436)

If we interpret Caliban as the colonized race, then in Miranda's opinion the people belonging to this race, the Black race, are brute and with no language. If the inhabitants of the island had no language, how would they communicate among themselves? The text itself seems to hint at the idea that the inhabitants of the island have a language: "When thou didst not, savage, /Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like/A thing most brutish,". Miranda and Prospero made no attempt to learn Caliban's language or even recognize it as a language, instead they expect him to learn theirs and treat him with derision.

It follows that Caliban's rape attempt could be interpreted as due to language difference, he could not express his feelings to Miranda. Yet if we also apply Césaire's writings here, neither Prospero nor Miranda could have considered these alternatives because like any other imperialist they believed or pretended that Blacks did not have a civilization and thus could not have a language. Consequently, Prospero thought he was in a better position to manage the island than Caliban. Andrew Lang in a comment about *The Tempest* declared that:

He [Caliban] was introduced to the benefits of civilization. He was instructed. The resources of the island were developed. He was like the red men in America, the blacks in Australia, the tribes of Hispaniola. Then he committed an offence, but one that Caliban was fated to commit. Then he was punished. Do we not "punish the natives" all over the world, all we civilized powers? All this appears to be as inevitable as it is odious, and all these occurred on Caliban's Island (Lang1892:660).

The fact that Prospero at the end of the play decides not to go back to Europe, is further evidence, that he is an embodiment of Césaire's colonialist. He decides to stay on the island where he usurped everything, including the ownership of the island and where he had possession of two slaves, Ariel and Caliban. Even though he granted Ariel his freedom, Ariel can do nothing without his former master's consent. As long as Prospero remains on the island, Ariel cannot be totally free from him. After Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 which freed Blacks from slavery, the situation of Blacks did not get better, in fact things became worse. They had nowhere to go, they had no jobs. And so, they had to return to their former masters who were even harder on them than before. Louis R. Harlan noted in his work "Booker T. Washington and the White Man's Burden" that:

The Negroes' position in American society at the turn of the twentieth century was, after all, roughly analogous to that of Negroes in the African colonies. Both groups were politically disfranchised, socially subordinated, and economically exploited. Negro Americans were engaged largely in raw material production in the South, that underdeveloped part of the American Land Empire that closely resembled a colony. The Darwinist mode of social thought supported both European colonialism and proscriptive American racial practices. (Harlan 1966:441)

It is no exaggeration to state that throughout the play, *The Tempest* advocates European imperialism. First, the play lends evidence to the widespread imperialist idea that Blacks were non-humans. Caliban in the play is portrayed as such a creature, "A freckled whelp, hag born/ Not honored with a human shape." (1.2.336-337). Caliban is also painted like an animal in the sequence of the play where Prospero reminds him of his rape attempt, where instead of feeling any emotion for his act, Caliban takes pride in his potential inter-racial fecundity.

In addition, the play contributes to the spreading of the racist idea that the white race is the race of masters. After Prospero landed on the island, he did not behave like a foreigner. He quickly used his power to dominate the inhabitants and turned them into his slaves. In this way, the play is in line with the idea of colonizing peoples who did not enjoy the technical advances that Europe had attained. Prospero in the play purposely does not accept that Caliban was heir to Sycorax who ruled the island. As long as Caliban was not able to defeat him, he could stay master of the land. Russell West rightly observes that: "Several studies have shown how much the triangle of Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero has been entangled with the development and maintenance of European imperialism throughout a four-century long history." (West2007:4).

Césaire probably aimed at refuting some of Shakespeare's prejudices when he wrote *Une Tempête*, which he labels as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for a Negro theater. In Césaire's play, for instance, Caliban is not described as having no language. When Prospero called him "Caliban" he answered "Uhuru", which is the Swahili word for freedom. Also, Caliban is portrayed in Césaire's play as a rebellious slave (rather than a dull fellow who trusted drunkards to assassinate Prospero), while Ariel is a mulatto. This is a closer reflection of Caribbean realities where the colonialists

managed to create division among the populations. There, the mulattoes represented the class of the learned which abhorred the values of the popular masses and was favored by the colonialists. The Blacker Caribbean populations were, like Césaire the abhorred under-privileged subjects of the colonialists. As a result, they proved more rebellious to foreign domination.

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