

“He hourly humanizes”: Transformations and Appropriations of Shakespeare’s Caliban¹

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The list of characters in *The Tempest* describes Caliban as “a sa(l)vage and deformed slave” and the text itself is full of conflicting evidence as to the shape of this bewildering creature that is referred to, among other epithets, as “fish”, “monster”, “beast”, “tortoise” and “devil”. The many pejorative names he is given in the course of the play have opened the way for multiple possibilities when envisioning his grotesque appearance. But the text also suggests at other points that he has a recognizable human form. For example, Prospero speaks of Caliban as the only human-shaped creature on the island when they first arrived, and when Miranda meets Ferdinand (I, ii) she refers to Caliban as the third man she has ever seen (although later in Act III, she speaks of Ferdinand as the *second* man she has ever known).

Caliban has indeed learned how to use the gift of human language that Prospero claims to have given him, and although Caliban insists that language only serves him to curse his master, to him belong some of the most beautiful lines in the play. In a sense, however, we could say that this gift of language has not allowed Caliban to speak for himself. We hear about his past in the play mainly through Prospero and Miranda, and throughout the years readers have felt that they had to speak for Caliban in a great variety of ways, telling his story and discussing his condition. Thus, “each age has appropriated and reshaped him to suit its needs and assumptions, for Caliban’s image has been incredibly flexible, ranging from an aquatic beast to a noble savage, with innumerable intermediate manifestations” (Vaughan & Vaughan, ix). It is not surprising that Caliban should have led to such a variety of different readings, for he is one of Shakespeare’s most enigmatic creations, and he belongs to a play that has also been read in a variety of ways. As has been pointed out, more than other plays *The Tempest* has changed shape in time: “What it ‘means’ seems to be continually on the move [and] has always been a challenge” (Daniells, 11). The same is true for Caliban: he has remained through the ages a puzzling figure for readers, who have variously interpreted both his outer and his inner nature.

Clearly “part of our difficulty in absorbing Caliban is his originality, even in Shakespeare’s cosmos of characters” (Bloom, 2). It is difficult to establish a definite source for Caliban, who seems to be an original composite image of many previous literary and cultural traditions. The general assumption is that “Shakespeare drew on a variety of existing historical and literary models and his own perspicacity to form a wholly new character” (Vaughan / Vaughan, 25). There are some elements in Caliban of the wild man figure present in literature and folklore since the early Middle Ages, the famous green man of English popular festivities which was incorporated into Tudor and Elizabethan pageantry as a symbol of the controlled forces of nature.² Shakespeare

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² “During the establishment of Tudor rule, the traditional wodehouse had been appropriated for ideological purposes in royal entertainments. Wild men shot fireworks on the Thames during Anne Boleyn’s 1533 coronation and frequently appeared in entertainments for Queen Elizabeth. In spectacles designed to celebrate the monarch’s

was also probably influenced by a long tradition of monsters present in poetry, story-telling, travel accounts and so on. He surely had access to Pliny's *Historie of the world*, a widely read book in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in which he surely found references to wonders in ancient Greece. Among other possible literary sources for Caliban we find Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, antimasque figures in early 17th-century masques, and maybe some characters from the tradition of the originally Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Caliban partakes of features of all of them and shows exclusive and definite allegiance to none of them.

The same is true for non-literary sources. It is impossible to ascertain for sure the exact contribution of the historical context to the shaping of Caliban. In general, Caliban has been connected with America much more than with Africa, even though his mother Sycorax is described in the play as having Algerian ancestry and the island is close to the Tunisian coast. Shakespeare was in all probability influenced by papers of the Virginia Company describing a shipwreck off the Bermudas in 1609. The importance of the so-called Bermuda pamphlets in *The Tempest* was noticed as early as 1808, and it is generally acknowledged today that travel literature connected with the New World was one of the major influences on the play. The accounts of the shipwreck of the *Sea Venture* and its miraculous salvation, "much in the news in the year just preceding *The Tempest*, have long been seen as a relevant context for the play by all but a few very critics" (Skura, 43).¹ The name "Caliban" has been taken as a sign that Shakespeare wanted to suggest the native of the New World, "Caliban" being an anagram of the word "cannibal" or, alternatively, of the word "Carib". If this is the case then, Shakespeare presented an image of the American native that is a far cry from the ideal noble savage. This is a point that we will return to later, as it is a controversial issue in recent criticism. Caliban as the native aboriginal is a widely accepted interpretation today, although there are some dissenting voices that insist that if Shakespeare intended Caliban as a portrait of the native American, he certainly failed, since "from the Restoration until the late 1890s, Caliban appeared on stage and in criticism as almost everything but an Indian" (Vaughan 1988, 138).

In briefly considering how each age has in turn shaped Caliban to suit its assumptions, we must remember that Restoration and 18th-century readings of *The Tempest* were determined by Dryden and Davenant's version, entitled *The Tempest, or the Enchanted Island. A Comedy*, first performed in 1667 and published in 1670. This adaptation remained extremely popular well into the 18th century. The authors keep only about one third of the original Shakespearean text, and they "try to restore what they think of as classical balance by giving Caliban a sister called Sycorax, Miranda a sister called Dorinda, and Ariel a fiancée" (Daniell, 31). We could say that they are taking to its extreme a pattern of pairings and oppositions already present in the play. They also introduce a young man called Hippolito. He is Prospero's foster son and indirectly defines Caliban by offering a foil to him. Hippolito represents humanity in a state of nature, but he is able to learn courtly arts and manners; he is, unlike Caliban, perfectible. In fact, the cast list for *The Enchanted Island* does not use the description for Caliban in the original *Tempest* ("A salvage and deformed slave"); it refers to Caliban and his new sister as "Two monsters of the Isle", and the text of the play describes them as "half-fish". Dryden and Davenant severely reduced in their version Caliban's speeches, including the beautiful lines in which he expresses his love for the island, its magic sounds and airs, and the result is that he is, unlike Shakespeare's, a fully insensitive monster. Given that their changes of the play were influential both on theatrical performances and on critical responses to *The Tempest* for a long time, in general we can say that in the Restoration and 18th century the role of Caliban on the stage was relatively minor and he usually appeared as a monster with grotesque qualities.

The Restoration *Tempest* dominated the stage for the most part until 1838, when the original text by Shakespeare was again revived in a production by William Charles Macready. Now Caliban becomes a more important character and his portrayal reflects the more sympathetic

power, wisdom, and beauty, the wild man represented the natural forces she controlled." (Vaughan & Vaughan, 65-66).

¹ Skura mentions two exceptions: E. E. Stoll and Northrop Frye.

conception of the Romantic critics. We see it in the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Hazlitt, although for Coleridge Caliban still is not fully human, since he lacks the moral sense that (even more than intellectual powers) distinguishes man from the animals. In response to Coleridge, Hazlitt takes a more political stance on Caliban's situation and argues that Caliban and not Prospero was legitimately entitled to ruling the island. For the first time it is suggested that Caliban is the victim of oppression, which implies a first implicit criticism of the Prospero figure. In the different performances of *The Tempest* on both sides of the Atlantic in the mid-19th century Caliban retains some elements of the 18th-century monster but he also begins to suggest features of the 19th-century rebel. Although Caliban is still fairly bestial in his attributes, he is more than a monster: he begins to be "the focus of pity and human understanding" (Vaughan & Vaughan, 105).

As the 19th century advanced and Darwinism became an important intellectual force, Caliban was seen in a new light as the amphibian ancestor of our own race. Caliban's supposed fishlike appearance in the play was interpreted within the Darwinian framework, and seen as perfectly consistent with the claim that human beings originally developed from some type of aquatic creature. A good example of this Darwinian Caliban is the protagonist of Robert Browning's 1864 poem "Caliban Upon Setebos", an amphibian Caliban who reflects upon his creator (the subtitle of the poem is "Or Natural Theology in the Island") and who describes himself as a "lumpish" "sea-beast" with split toe-nails. The growing scholarly interest in Darwinian theories of evolution did not reach stage productions until late in the 19th century, when Caliban was cast as a creature half way between an animal and a human being, with definite physical features which suggested at times his amphibian origins, but more likely his connection with apes. This Darwinian Caliban persisted well into the 20th century, and Darwinian conceptions of Caliban were important on the stage until the 1960s, when initially among Third World thinkers and literary critics and later in the Anglo-American academic world, colonial interpretations of *The Tempest* began to appear.¹

In fact, colonial readings of *The Tempest* have become predominant in recent years. Thus, in a 1992 collection of articles on the character of Caliban, its editor Harold Bloom indicates that "the politically correct article on Shakespeare these days is likely to be called 'Caliban and the Discourse of Colonialism'" (Bloom, 1). This is part of a general interest in colonial readings, which are still a "hot" issue in the 1990s. Thus, the January 1995 issue of the PMLA was devoted to the special topic "Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition", and the editor indicates that the six essays in the issue had to be selected out of 117 submissions, which he describes as "a record number".

The issue of colonialism in *The Tempest* had of course been perceived by earlier critics. The first Shakespearean critic to insist that Caliban was Shakespeare's rendering of the American native, although there had been scattered references in earlier texts, was Sidney Lee at the end of the 19th century. He initially spoke of Bermuda as Prospero's island in 1898, and later, in a 1913 article entitled "Caliban's Visits to England", he argued that Shakespeare attempted "in Caliban a full-length portrait of the aboriginal inhabitant of the New World" (quoted in Bloom, 20). For Lee, Shakespeare's view of American natives is clearly presented through this character in *The Tempest*:

To Shakespeare the western native was a human being endowed with live senses and appetites, with aptitudes for mechanical labour, with some veneration, knowledge and command of the resources of nature, but lacking moral sense, moral control, and ratiocination (quoted in Bloom, 21).

Lee is the early representative of those critics who think that in Caliban Shakespeare was presenting the contemporary negative conception of American Indians as shrew, rebellious and intoxicated. Within colonial readings of *The Tempest*, however, the predominant vision today is that of Caliban as the dispossessed victim, a noble native who is initially generous to the invaders

¹ Caliban was frequently envisioned as the colonial victim in the 1960s and 1970s; in the 1980s Caliban came to represent other marginalized groups, not necessarily in a colonial context.

of his island only to be betrayed and enslaved. Thus Shakespeare is seen as implicitly criticizing colonialism by critics such as Stephen Greenblatt. In Greenblatt's view:

[Shakespeare's] imaginative mobility enables him to display cracks in the glacial front of princely power and to record a voice, the voice of the displaced and oppressed, that is heard scarcely anywhere else in his own time (Greenblatt, 575).

The colonial readings of critics such as Greenblatt clearly go against the positive view of Prospero as the great educator in earlier critics, who interpreted colonial facts in a complacent way, and basically shared G. Wilson Knight praise of Prospero as representing England's "colonizing, especially her will to raise savage peoples from superstition and blood-sacrifice, taboos and witchcraft and the attendant fears and slaveries, to a more enlightened exercise" (Knight, 255).

As we can see, the fictional facts in *The Tempest* have been variously interpreted and the figure of Caliban has changed accordingly. Readers and criticism have "generally seen much more in Caliban than Prospero does" (Orgel 25), and this is the idea that the title of my paper refers to. The sentence "He hourly humanizes" is said by Miranda in a 1797 very free adaptation of *The Tempest*, when she tries to convince her father to take Caliban with them to Milan, arguing that his nature has quickly improved and that "by commixture with so many men, /He hourly humanizes". Even this extremely brief and necessarily superficial overview of some of Caliban's transformations from the seventeenth-century monster to the politically correct native of the 1990s can show how we have "humanized" him differently in accordance with our own shifting concerns. The different readings of the character of Caliban confirm Alan Sinfield's words in this same forum back in 1993: "There is no disinterested reading; Shakespeare is deployed in diverse ways as part of an ongoing cultural contest" (Sinfield, 238). What Sinfield says about Shakespeare in general can be applied to the character of Caliban. The various interpretations of his ambiguous nature show that we have shaped him in accordance with our intellectual and cultural needs at different points in history. Indeed, in him we readers have tried to find "a cultural space in which [we] may recognize [our]selves" (Sinfield, 237).

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