

God as the quiet in  
"caliban upon  
setebos"



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The nature of God has been a controversial subject for writers throughout the centuries. In the poem "Caliban upon Setebos," Robert Browning explores the relationship between deities and their subjects through the voice of Caliban, a brutish monster-servant adopted from Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Though the cruel and capricious Setebos is the main subject of Caliban's musings, a higher deity named the Quiet is briefly addressed. The importance, or even necessity, of the Quiet in this poem is not immediately evident. Caliban projects his own experiences and character onto his conceptions of deities, which leads him to falsely construct a theological hierarchy in which power is inversely related to compassion. This view is embodied in Caliban's descriptions of the Quiet, which also reveal the tension between Caliban's beliefs and Browning's implied assertion that these beliefs are mistaken. Thus, the already complex subject of God is further complicated by the radical nature of Caliban's views, and the way in which Browning shapes Caliban to be an unreliable theologian.

As the introductory biblical passage to this poem "Though thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself" denotes, Caliban imagines other beings, from animals to gods, to be like himself (1296). The peculiarities of Caliban's personality and living situation lead him to picture a hierarchical structure of the divine. As a slave, Caliban is directly under the control of his master Prospero, who keeps Caliban trapped in a dank cave (163-167) When the Quiet is first being introduced, Caliban mirrors Setebos's condition with his own: "But wherefore rough, why cold and ill at ease?" (127). The word choice here, "rough" and "cold" especially, is more apt to describe a monster in a cave than a god. Caliban has no reason to assume Setebos is in

such unhappy conditions, if not for the trend he sees in his own life: Caliban has power over the crabs that enter his cave, just as Prospero has power over him, just as Setebos must have power over both of them, . . . leading Caliban to the conclusion that " There may be something quiet o'er His [Setebos's] head" (132). This may lead the reader to question why there is no god above the Quiet; Caliban imagines the chain of power such that one may always be under the rule of some higher, more powerful deity. This is a possibility, and one of many theological implications that are specific to Browning's poem. However, I will argue in the next paragraph that the Quiet represents Caliban's ultimate version of a deity, such that no higher god is necessary. Caliban explicitly makes assumptions about the Quiet by analyzing his own experiences. The Quiet ". . . that feels nor joy nor grief/ . . . I joy because quails come; would not joy/ Could I bring the quails here," (133, 135-136). Caliban's religious beliefs thus derive from analysis of his own experiences rather than feelings of reverence and spiritual elation, as is common in religion. The gap between liking to eat quails and the entire emotional disposition of the Quiet is exceedingly large. Caliban's assumption that deities have feelings and conditions like those of earthly beings is unusual, even presumptuous depending on one's religious views. If the reader accepts that Caliban is amiss in his beliefs, this self-projection is the root cause of his mistake. Browning's lesson for readers would then be quite chastising: people must not assume gods have the same emotions and inclinations as earthly beings, lest they conclude that the faults of humans are also manifest in the gods. It is this pessimistic view of human nature that leads to Caliban's rigid theological hierarchy, in which the gods - as I will address in the following paragraph - are exceedingly cruel and apathetic.

One objection to this assertion may address a disconnect between the half-monster Caliban on his mythical island and the fully human, earthling readers of the poem. Though Browning does not explicitly call his poem a critique on contemporary religion, to find great significance in the poem one must relate the relationship to gods that Caliban and humans, in a basic sense, share.

Caliban's conception of theology is even more radical in the inverse relationship between power and compassion, resulting in an all-powerful, completely apathetic Quiet. His rigid hierarchy of species follows the classic Great Chain of Being blueprint, but pure power, rather than spirituality, increases with each ring in the chain. Along with power comes a lack of compassion, which in higher concentration manifests as arbitrary cruelty, and finally complete apathy. Needless to say, this is a very bleak view of divinity. Caliban is pointlessly cruel to the bugs and crabs around him (105, 260), but is also capable of a peculiar kind of empathy. His inclination to project upon other beings leads him to imagine the feelings of a fish (33-43) and feather (122-125). Prospero is certainly more powerful than Caliban, and arguably crueler in his inhumane treatment of Caliban and Miranda (157-167). Then there is the main subject of the poem, Setebos, who Caliban imagines acts arbitrarily with his mercy and cruelty. Setebos does seem to have emotions and some reasoning behind his actions, though Caliban states he is "Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord," (99). This line clearly shows that status as a God is derived from power, not holiness or spirituality. Browning needs the Quiet to completely realize Caliban's unique view. The Quiet is "Out of His [Setebos's] reach, that feels nor joy nor grief/ Since both

derive from weakness in some way/ . . . This Quiet, all it hath mind to, doth," (132-133, 137). Caliban arrives at an enigmatic, almost deistic view of the ultimate god: the Quiet has the power to do anything he wishes, but his capacity for empathy and emotion is so reduced that the Quiet is completely apathetic, and has no will to do anything. Accordingly, Caliban feels no need to fear the Quiet, as he does Setebos (139).

Caliban also expects Setebos's wrath to stop with an age-induced "doze, as good as die" rather than any move on the Quiet's part (281-283). The very name of "the Quiet" embodies the chilling lack of emotion, involvement, or any connection to humans. "Caliban upon Setebos" presents a removed god, and implies that if the Quiet were to actively rule over earth, he would act more as a compassionless demon than an angel.

Naturally, the reader may wonder what Browning thinks of all these radical religious views. By utilizing stylistic clues from the text and analyzing Caliban's suitability as a theologian, the reader may ascertain that Browning does not advocate Caliban's religious views. The dramatic monologue style of this poem makes it exceedingly difficult to reach this conclusion. The reader is presented with only Caliban's direct speech - excepting brief descriptions of action at the introduction and conclusion of the poem - but there is a second layer to the narration. The dramatic monologue form effectively cloaks the deeper narrative layer, that of the author, with the overwhelmingly evident views of the fictional narrator. The key point is that Caliban is a fictional character, and so the views expressed in this poem must in some fashion be attributed to Browning. However, the reader would

be wrong to preemptively assume Browning is a proponent of Caliban's views; I will proceed to argue just the opposite.

A curious tension between wanting to believe Caliban and sensing that he is not adequately suited to reach theological conclusions may perplex that reader as they work through the poem. Caliban is a slave resigned to inhumane living conditions; it seems only natural that he imagines the gods to be as cruel as his own master. A sympathetic reader may follow his train of thought, which is quite complex and analytically sophisticated, and conclude that Caliban is correct in the conclusions he derives. Unfortunately, this method of "natural theology" is the root cause of Caliban's misconceptions. Once again, take the example of the Quiet: "that feels nor joy nor grief/ Since both derive from weakness in some way. / I joy because the quails come; would not joy/ Could I bring the quails here when I have a mind;" (133-135). Temporarily granting that human emotions are also applicable on a godly scale, Caliban's reasoning is still questionable. He assumes that not having control over the quails is a type of weakness, and more importantly, that he could not enjoy the quails if he did have the power to call them. In this way, the Quiet cannot enjoy, or detest, all the life that he has created. Readers might wonder why a god characterized by such indifference would bother to create life at all. Readers might also exempt humans from the false reasoning that misguides Caliban. Caliban is a monstrous slave with questionable self-awareness who often speaks in the third person; he is cruel to animals and easily jumps to farfetched conclusions. He is an exaggerated representation of a worshipper who is hindered by their earthly faults in trying to conceptualize the divine.

Browning gives voice to radical religious beliefs through inadequate Caliban so that the reader may thoughtfully reject them.

Nuances in Caliban's speech denote that the Quiet is an imagined deity, one that Caliban shapes in his mind just as the poem is being narrated. Though the idea of a god over Setebos was first introduced to Caliban by his mother, he does not agree with her on how the Quiet functions as a god (170-171). Instead, he uses "natural theology" to shape his ideas about the Quiet while in the time frame of the poem. The idea that "There may be something quiet o'er His head" inspires the personified name "This Quiet" a few lines later (132, 137). Caliban expresses an uncertainty about the existence of the Quiet in the phrase "may be" (132). Notably, the idea of the Quiet is introduced in relation to Setebos. The Quiet is a necessary part of Caliban's hierarchical structure of the divine, and unlike most gods the Quiet is not presented as intrinsically relevant nor definitively real. Browning faces the reader with yet another radical idea: that gods are contrived. Caliban's "natural theology", a sort of rational projecting onto the gods, leads to misguided conclusions and unavoidable uncertainty. Browning does not present an alternative, correct way to be religiously informed. He may believe that people can know the gods through spiritual elation, tradition, or rational thought; but he chooses to present a world in which the nature and existence of deities is distressingly uncertain.

The overall effect of "Caliban upon Setebos" is to show how easily a person can be led astray in trying to formulate a picture of God based on their own image or natural theology. Robert Browning presents a comprehensive, radical set of theological views through the voice of Caliban.

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The dramatic monologue form allows Browning to delicately balance between a set of explicit, convincing religious beliefs and silent condemnation of those same beliefs. Caliban's view, as manifest in passages on the Quiet, is exceedingly complex: a hierarchical religious order exists in which power is inversely related to emotion. At this level of analysis, "Caliban upon Setebos" is significant in its new theological thinking and complexity of narrative form. Taken a step further, by relating Caliban's relationship to the Quiet with humans' relationship to God, the poem becomes a cautionary critique of its readers. Humans must not presume to think the gods are like themselves, lest they end up like Caliban at the closing of the poem - running from a coincidental wind storm in blind terror and unfounded repentance, fearful of a merciless, wrathful god.