

Exploring the theme of enslavement in the tempest essay



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Shakespeare wrote most of his tragedies in the early seventeenth century. The Tempest was written around the year of 1611 when drama was beginning to become more political. It is said that this was the last play Shakespeare wrote and for this reason many critics believe the theme and plot of the play have an underlying, hidden meaning. I wish to explore is the theme of enslavement tied to the relationship between Prospero and Caliban within The Tempest and explore the link with colonialism.

The theme of colonialism is prominent in the play, particularly in relationship between Prospero, the Coloniser and Caliban, the Colonised. Shakespeare uses a lot of dramatic methods to bring this theme to life. The slavery industry was closely linked to colonialism and understanding of this contemporary topic is crucial in the way one reads the play. There was a notable visit to London by the black-skinned ambassador of the King of Barbary in 1600-1601. It caused quite a stir in society and a lot of critics claim, provided considerable material for the writing of 'Othello'.

It is possible this furthermore provided Shakespeare with ideas for the tempest. A writer at the time who may have influenced Shakespeare is Montaigne who writes about foreign natives, portraying them as "noble savages". Caliban speaks in evocative and beautiful verse: this is epitomised by the terrifyingly eloquent curses he directs at Prospero. Also, by his encounters with the more bawdy and abrasive characters of Stephano and Trinculo bring out the poetry in his language and superior intellect. "Caliban in some respects a noble being: the poet has raised him far above contempt.

..” – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1811. At the time of writing *The Tempest*, only a few hardened seafarers got to travel to the likes of places that the play is set in. ‘ Foreign’ people were unknown to the people of Britain; the very mention of ‘ foreign’ people sparked a fear and curiosity in the British masses.

Trinculo notes in Act 2 Scene 2; that at the time of *The Tempest*, the people of England “ will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar” but “ will lay out ten to see a dead Indian”. It is safe to assume the Jacobean audience would have been fascinated with a tale set on a mystical island inhabited by natives. In the first few pages, Prospero uses the word “ litter” in reference to Caliban and goes on to describe him as “ A freckled whelp, hag-born – not honoured with ..

. A human shape”. This dramatic language is used to present Caliban as animalistic. Prospero also refers to him as being a “ tortoise”, a metaphor which creates an image of Caliban being reluctant to serve Prospero. The animalistic imagery is extended with use of the word “ dam” in relation to Caliban’s mother, the witch Sycorax.

The character of Caliban (an anagram of cannibal) is extremely important in relation to the recent discovery of ‘ The New World.’ Christopher Columbus made his first journey to the Americas in 1492 and English colonies were established soon afterwards. Europeans thought they had cultural superiority over the indigenous, even the colour of their skin was considered to be a mark of their less than human status (“ this thing of darkness” as Prospero describes Caliban), often led to them being enslaved by the Europeans. One

can see the link here with how Prospero and Miranda treat Caliban: is Caliban in fact an ungrateful beneficiary of Prospero's ways or an oppressed native who has been forced to obey foreign aggressors? What is most interesting is Prospero's reference to Caliban as the one " Whom now I keep in service". This would suggest that their relationship has not always been this harsh and brutal.

This ' brutal' relationship is portrayed by the fact that Caliban's first words in the play are curses aimed at Prospero. Caliban curses " As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed ... With raven's feather from unwholesome fen ..

. Drop you both!" encourage a reaction from Prospero; he uses his magic to inflict " Side-stitches". As we know, Caliban was born by Sycorax when she arrived on the island and that Ariel was imprisoned by her for 12 years until Prospero came and broke her spell. It is now 12 years since Prospero's arrival, so Caliban is probably 24 years old.

In Act 1 Scene 2, there is textual evidence of a strong past relationship between Caliban and Prospero; Caliban remembers how the magician " strok'st me, and made much of me" when he first arrived. However, a dramatic contrast is shown by the fact that their initial relationship has deteriorated as Prospero, in a tone of frustration, speaks of how he gave " humane care" for Caliban, but Caliban " thanked" him by attempting to violate his daughter. The relationship of Prospero and Caliban can also be judged in scenes which they are not present together. For example, Act 2 Scene 2 begins with Caliban cursing Prospero. The dramatic method of

soliloquy is used in Caliban's opening words, " All the infections that the Sun sucks up ..

. From bogs, fens, flat, on Prosper fall, and make him ... by inch-meal disease", which show us the strong resentment Caliban has towards Prospero and this may be due to the fact Prospero has colonised Caliban's inherited land.

Some critics argue that teaching Caliban the ways of human beings was itself an act of cruelty, Prospero and Miranda turned natural instincts into shameful and corrupt acts, much as Adam and Eve's innocence turned to lasciviousness when they tasted the apple of knowledge in Eden. On the other hand, Caliban can be interpreted as an agent of evil who repaid the charity he received with betrayal of the worst kind. It's significant that his principal crime (the attempted rape of Miranda) is one of lust; the familiar stereotype at the time of black men as virile and lascivious is also played on heavily in ' Othello'. Throughout the play we see glimpses of Prospero bullying both Caliban and Ariel. However, I wish to focus on the relationship between Prospero and Caliban. His dominance over his slaves would appear to be held in place by threats, the exercise of his magic and continual vigilance.

Prospero goes as far to say that Caliban is genetically (rather than ethnically) ' inferior', inherently incapable of civilized behaviour. In Act 4, Scene 1, Prospero calls Caliban " A devil, a born devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick." This condemnation is merged with the frustration of the teacher who has failed with a difficult pupil, " on whom my pains, humanely taken,

all, all lost, quite lost,” (4: 1: 189-190). Prospero keeps Caliban under with “ pinchings”, “ old cramps”, “ aches” and so-on.

Caliban is clearly afraid of him and seeks to rebel. The lines, “ Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake, or cut his wezand with thy knife...” illustrate through dramatic use of language, Caliban’s sheer hatred for Prospero. Prospero’s monologue beginning “ A devil, a born devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick; on whom my pains .

.. humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost; ..

. And, as with age his body uglier grows ... So his mind cankers” dramatically shows Prospero’s frustration with how he could never succeed with educating Caliban. The repetition of “ All, all lost, quite lost” is particularly effective.

Proper here is the coloniser with a strong sense that it is his moral responsibility to civilise the beast. “ Caliban ...

is another challenge to the humanists’ naïve belief that the gift of speech is inherently civilising...” – Brian Vickers, 1993. In conclusion I feel that the relationship between Prospero and Caliban will never be the same as it once was, a mixture of disloyalty on Caliban’s behalf and Prospero’s colonializing the island has led to a serious lack of trust between the two characters.

Shakespeare seems to have intended to play to end happily, with an aura of reconciliation.

But despite this, Prospero remains in complete power. And even in the last scene, Caliban is still only recognised as a way of making money, as Antonio
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keeps expressing an interest in the “ marketable” value of him. However, I’ve already spoken about the fact that Caliban may well be an ungrateful beneficiary of Prospero’s teachings and I myself agree with this. Some may argue that colonialism is wrong, but the human race would not be what it is today if colonialism hadn’t taken place. I would argue that the only thing Prospero was guilty of was trying to enhance Caliban’s life by enabling him to communicate properly with other beings.

And again, without communication, our world today would not be as we know it. I believe colonialism was a necessary step that the human race needed in order to develop as a species and one which has had a great effect on people everywhere. In my opinion, as long as we continue to try to educate each other, there is no limit as to what mankind can achieve. “..

. in the Tempest Period, man is master of the universe. And – what is here essential – this masterhood of Nature is accompanied by a supreme moral goodness to fellow-man.” – Sidney Lanier, 1880.