

Shakespeare review: the tempest, joseph story and cannibalism

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



James Hoyle theorizes that the main sources for *The Tempest* revolves around the Bible story of Joseph and his Brothers in which the spirit of envy and consequent, reconciliation and pardon predominates. This storyline markedly contrasts with the spirit of revenge as related by Michel de Montaigne's *On Cannibals* (1580). A possible source of inspiration for Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is the news of shipwreck and settlement by British colonizers during the period of American Exploration and Colonialism. There is a sore lack of a specific authoritative Shakespearean sources for *The Tempest* however, three forwarded suggestions are the Italian *commedia dell' arte*, *Die Schone Sidea* and *Jason and Medea*.

Although there are commonalities such as shipwreck and the love of a princess for a shipwrecked prince, they do not correspond to the main motifs of *The Tempest* which include sibling rivalry, forced separation, experience in a new land, providential aid, coincidental reunion with enemy-brother, the test of conscience and the ultimate triumph of the spirit of pardon and reconciliation. These motifs harmonize perfectly with the Biblical story in *Genesis* of Joseph and His Brothers and therefore can be established as an authoritative source for *The Tempest*. Modern scholarship often dismisses Biblical influence in literature however, there does not exist any other solid sources in Classic mythology, nor Renaissance literature to support Shakespeare's inspiration for *The Tempest*.

Some parallelisms are evident in both the Bible story of Joseph and Prospero in *The Tempest*. They both are endowed with spiritual gifts: supernatural intelligence, clairvoyance and divination. Prospero also shares in common

the power of magical staves in the Biblical stories in Exodus of Moses and Aaron. Prospero and Joseph resemble each other because of their fortune and prosperity despite adversity. Prospero's name is derived from the Latin *prosperus* (favourable), *prosperare* (to render fortunate) and Hebrew *prosperitie* (peace and prosperity). Likewise, Joseph was a "man who prospered because God prospereth him" (Genesis 39: 2, 3) As a test to probe into the conscience of the rival brothers, both Joseph and Prospero accuse their brothers of being spies. In both cases the rival brothers express true guilt, experience a change of heart and repent. The apparent blight on the places of exile, Egypt on one hand and the Bermudas, does not impede the heroes, Joseph and Prospero respectively from thriving. In both situations with Prospero and Joseph, it is the undeniable hand of Providence that guides and preserves the innocent heroes. In both cases, Providence transforms misfortune to a greater good hence the theme of *felix culpa*. In a literary context, the term "*felix culpa*" can be used to describe how a series of miserable events will eventually lead to a happier outcome. In the end, the spirit of pardon and reconciliation prevails in both the story of Joseph and his Brothers and *The Tempest* even in the face of past wrongs and injustice.

The core idea of *The Tempest* is not about savage man as represented by Caliban, the Cannibal but focuses on the idea of pardon. Shakespeare reacts against Michel de Montaigne's classical work, *On Cannibals* (1580) for it goes against the principle of pardon, justifies and ennobles the spirit's insatiable hunger for revenge. Indeed, Montaigne's essay rejects pardon and advocates primitivism, retaliation, calculated reprisal. His teaching runs counter to the

Christian principle of surrendering vengeance to the hands of God. Both Prospero and Joseph forgive the former perversity of their brothers. The Bible and *The Tempest* utilize the imagery of slumber to represent evil, the loss of moral consciousness and insensitivity. Antonio's machinations are likened to the movements of one who is asleep. Another imagery shared by The Bible and *The Tempest* is that of the wicked banquet table. Joseph holds a banquet for his rival brothers and Prospero has a banquet for his enemy-brother.

Other key concepts emerging in both stories are bravery and grace. The biblical story of Joseph and his Brothers is the best source for *The Tempest* because it matches with the main motif which lauds kindness, forgiveness and reconciliation in the midst of sibling rivalry and adversity. These qualities are very familiar to the Shakespearean audience and are antithetical to Montaigne's cannibalistic doctrine - not only a physical eating of human flesh but a moral cannibalism. This type of cannibalism is supremely more destructive since when one feeds and all is consumed, one begins to prey on oneself and ultimately self-destructs.

Works Cited:

Hoyle, James. "The Tempest, the Joseph Story and the Cannibals".

Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. 28, No. 3. Summer, 1977, pp. 358 - 362.