

# Caliban: the monster?

Literature, William Shakespeare



The concept of monstrosity, at an explicit representational level, has followed a set pattern in literature, but it has been politically deployed and modified differently in different contexts. Etymologically, the word “monster” is derived from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning “that which reveals” — a warning or a portent. It is often used to refer to misshapen or deformed creatures. In Elizabethan England, with the various voyages, discoveries, and travel narratives of the time — such as *The Wonders of the East*, the *Liber Monstrorum*, or the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* — the connotations of the term extended to the other races. In fact, representing another culture as monstrous often served to justify its displacement, or even its extermination. William Shakespeare’s work boasts of richly crafted characters such as Iago (from *Othello*), Macbeth, and Edmund (from *King Lear*) who are often deemed monstrous due to their moral degeneracy and malignancy. Nicholas Royle asserts, “Shakespeare is relentlessly concerned with making up monsters, with what is ‘unacceptable,’ ‘intolerable,’ and ‘incomprehensible’ in characters,” often associating ontological differences (for instance, dark skin in the case of Aaron, the Moor [from *Titus Andronicus*]) or deformity (the hunchbacked Richard III) with moral depravity. However, it is only in *The Tempest* (1611) that Shakespeare creates a literal monster in Caliban. Although he dwells on the idea of human bestiality in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when the character of Nick Bottom is transformed into a being with the head of an ass, that monstrosity is treated in the comic mode, and upon Bottom’s transformation back to his normal state, the very idea is relegated to the status of a dream, thereby denigrating its subversive potential. It is only in *The Tempest* that there is a

profound investigation of the concept of monstrosity in human nature, especially — but not exclusively — in the figure of Caliban. In fact, the play is remarkably open to complex and even contradictory interpretations of the nature of monstrosity, which can be thoroughly explored on the basis of the text. The primary focus of this paper is on Caliban, but an attempt is to link the portrayal of that character to the larger question of what constitutes the notion of monstrosity itself, as well as its changing connotations within the context of changing Anglo-American attitudes, and finally to locate the subversive possibility of the interchangeability of the human and the monster by exposing the fragile boundaries that separate them. The implicit threat from the monster's body arises from its amorphousness and its propensity to change. Because of its fluid nature, the monster's body presents a disturbing hybridity, which defies the classificatory system of signification. The monster thus becomes an ideal deconstructive symbol, disrupting “ the totalizing conceptions of nature and destroying taxonomic logics, at once defining and challenging the limits of the natural” (Milburn). Derrida writes that, “ A monster is always alive... Monsters are living beings... A monster is a species for which we do not yet have a name... it frightens precisely because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure.” Throughout the text of *The Tempest*, the precise nature of Caliban's monstrosity is nebulous. In the 1623 folio, Caliban is described in the cast of characters as a “ savage and deformed slave”; since then he has been variously identified as a drunken beast, a perverted form of Montaigne's noble savage, a Darwinian “ missing link,” a “ fish man,” and an “ ape man,” among others. He comes closest to what David Williams' taxonomical

characterization regards as “ Nature Monstrous”: deformed figures of nature that are products of human and animal components combined, or combinations of parts of animals of different species. Conversely, the vague but persistent references to his deformity make it difficult to oust him from the category of what Williams calls the “ body monstrous,” which includes the deformation of the body in terms of size, head, or unusual construction or in terms of the use of various body parts. The “ freckled whelp,” for example, is the product of the illicit intermingling between the Algerian witch Sycorax and the Devil himself; his ruling deity is Setebos, who was worshipped by the Patagonian natives. He is referred to as “ earth,” “ hag-seed,” “ fish,” “ monster,” “ a thing of darkness,” “ puppy-headed,” “ tortoise,” “ misshapen,” and “ moon-calf” on different occasions in the text. However, none of these terms give a clear idea of either his exact deformity or the precise nature of his monstrosity. Moreover, despite regarding Caliban belonging to a “ vile race,” Miranda does recognize that, even with his grotesque features, his form is essentially human; her reference to Ferdinand as “ the third man that e’er I saw” inevitably precludes the possibility of the first two being anyone other than Prospero and Caliban. This classification is reaffirmed in Prospero’s implied comparison of Ferdinand, the handsome young prince (“ a thing divine”), and Caliban when he states: “ to the most of man this is a Caliban.” Jeffrey J. Cohen suggests that “ the monster signifies something other than itself; it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.” The monster functions as a dialectical other who is created to maintain the difference in the world of its creators. In fact,

it is always a construction, a projection of the fears and anxieties which demonize the subject in the first place. The criterion itself is arbitrary. Any kind of disparity — whether racial, cultural, sexual, or political — can be projected onto the monstrous body. Apart from his physical monstrosity, Caliban is Prospero's and Miranda's racial other as well. Even in twentieth-century performances of *The Tempest*, Caliban's grotesque physical features were often toned down, but in most cases it was still a black actor (or one adorned with black face paint) chosen to perform the role of the monster. The exaggeration or even distortion of the racial other as a monstrous aberration is a trope found from the classical period onward. In this context, Prospero's fear for the honor of his daughter can be seen as a fear of the contamination of the purity of the race as well as a fear of miscegenation. It is Caliban's attempted violation of Miranda's honor that earns him the wrath of Prospero and for which he is punished. This anxiety is, however, not uncommon; in a patriarchal social formation, the feminine and cultural others are anyways relegated to the margins. Their intermingling therefore is not merely a challenge to the homosocial order of patriarchy: the " unholy" alliance can also lead to a loss of identity. Caliban himself is the product of such a union between the witch Sycorax and the Devil himself. On the other hand, Caliban's response to the charge of rape associates him with a separate order of existence; as a being that exists in the state of nature, the desire for sexual union without a cultural bond is not unnatural to him, and racial difference does not prefigure as a hindrance to it. Cohen states that the monsters can claim an independent identity only after they are assembled as such through a process of fragmentation and reconfiguration.

However, since the difference itself is arbitrary, the monster challenges the system itself — that is, the world of its creators who created the difference in the first place. Observed in this light, Caliban's attempt to procreate with Miranda — to people “ the isle with Calibans” — is not just a manifestation of his raw sexuality, nature taking over nurture. Rather, it is also aimed at removing the difference that has been arbitrarily written on his body. Moreover, Caliban's plan to assassinate Prospero can be seen as a continuation of this project, as the latter is the cultural apparatus that has produced the meaning in the first place and consequently marginalized him. It is Prospero who brings the cultural norms of his Milanese society to the “ uninhabited” island and imposes them. His adherence to those sociocultural norms is evident later in the Ferdinand-Miranda scenes, too; he is constantly on guard despite his own plan to unite the two. In fact, Prospero's paternalism does not allow any scope for the exercise of any kind of agency in the case of either Caliban or Miranda. Caliban is Prospero's monster-slave. However, it is not because of the latter's superiority or the inherent inferiority of the “ vile races.” Rather, it is through magic that Prospero keeps Caliban confined to his rock and makes him perform all of his menial tasks. Caliban himself is acutely aware of this. He knows that it is necessary to separate Prospero from his books of sorcery if his plan to kill Prospero is to succeed: “ remember / first to possess his books; for without them he's but a sot as I am, nor hath not / one spirit to command — they all do hate him / as rootedly as I” (Tempest). Although Caliban does not know about the specific presence of Ariel, his observation is not untrue. Prospero might have freed Ariel from the cloven pine where Sycorax had imprisoned him, but he himself

is no different. Upon hearing Ariel's demand for freedom, Prospero calls him "malignant thing" and threatens him: "I will rend an oak / and peg thee in his knotty entrails till / thou has howled away twelve winters" (Tempest). Moreover, from Ariel's list of activities performed for Prospero, it becomes clear that the latter has used Ariel to indulge his whims and fancies on many an occasion. From this perspective, there is not much difference between Antonio, who usurped Prospero's kingdom, and Prospero himself. Moreover, by endowing Prospero with supernatural powers and not Caliban, despite his unnatural origins, Shakespeare inverts the hierarchical power relation between the man and the monster. As a consequence of this inversion, not only is Caliban placed in a position of subjugation, but he is also not feared by anyone despite his horrific appearance; in contrast, the human Prospero is dreaded by all. Prospero's attempts to civilize Caliban can be seen as metaphorically destroying the racial-cultural other — destroying the monster by bringing him under his own influence. His inability to do so on the one hand leads him to an acknowledgement of his own failure: "this thing of darkness I acknowledge my own" (Tempest); but on the other hand, it leads him to vilify the unsynthesizable: "a devil, a born devil, on whose nature / nurture cannot stick; on whom my pains, / humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost; / and as with age his body uglier grows... I will plague them all" (Tempest). The teaching of language to Caliban by both father and daughter takes on a new meaning in this cultural context. Language becomes an essential tool in establishing power over an environment and its inhabitants — what Stephen Greenblatt calls "linguistic colonialism." They take it for granted that they have introduced language to one who "wouldst gabble

like / a thing most brutish"; that Caliban might already have his own language is not even considered as a possibility by the former, an oversight that Caliban points out: " you taught me language... I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / for learning me your (my emphasis) language" (Tempest). Contemporary linguistic theories too prove that the first language is acquired unconsciously; it is only a second language that has to be learned consciously. Moreover, there is disparity between how other people perceive Caliban and what his own thoughts and actions reveal. He is shown as having emotions — in fact, he is almost poetically sensitive to nature — and although gullible, he is intelligent enough to have learned another language, and then further to use that language for resistance rather than servitude. Besides, he has an acute awareness of being used and then displaced, at least in the feudal sense, by Prospero, who for him is a usurper: " the island's mine by Sycorax my mother, / which thou tak'st from me." In fact, Caliban's plan with Trinculo and Stephano to assassinate Prospero, gruesome as it is, is the product of natural grievances. In contrast, Antonio and Sebastian's plan to kill the latter's brother (Alonso, the king of Naples) is the consequence of lust for power. Unlike Caliban, they are neither displaced nor do they have any legitimate grievance; they aren't even inebriated. By drawing a parallel between the two scenes, Shakespeare demands a closer investigation of the nature of monstrosity itself while questioning the values and benefits of Jacobean civilization. The physically deformed creature may be mentally depraved, but the well-formed and well-placed characters have an equally dwarfed conscience. For example, Antonio states: " ay, sir [Sebastian], where lies that [conscience]? ... I feel not this deity in my



bosom” (Tempest). As Jan Kott argues, in the Shakespearean world there is “no distinguishable difference between good kings and tyrants or kings and clowns. ... Terror and struggle for power is not a privilege of princes, it is a law of the world.” The influence of the French thinker Michel de Montaigne is palpable in Shakespeare. In his essay “Of the cannibals,” he compares the brutality and fanaticism of the Christians against each other in the French civil wars to cannibalism: “I think there is more barbarism in eating men alive than to feed upon them being dead, to mangle by tortures and torments a body full of lively sense.” Montaigne also states that the cannibals may be called barbarians “in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity.” Thus, the relative extent of “barbarity” is not merely associated with a culture or a particular point of view, but also with degrees. Shakespeare performs a similar task in pointing out the relative nature of barbarity or even monstrosity. The honest old counselor Gonzalo’s speech is almost a paraphrase of Montaigne: “if I should say I saw such islanders / ... though they are of monstrous shape, yet note, / their manners are more gentle, kind, than of / our human generation you shall find” (Tempest). This relativism can also be found in Prospero’s comments about Ferdinand when he is chiding Miranda for her attraction to the former: “to th’ most of men this is a Caliban, / and they to him are angels” (Tempest). Although the character of Prospero is only play-acting in order to raise the worth of his daughter “lest too light winning / make the prize light” (Tempest), the playwright subtly questions the basis for claims to humanity and denial of monstrosity. Shakespeare’s text seems to suggest that monstrosity is

something inherent in human beings; civilization can be the guard that suppresses or better still represses it, but it is impossible to completely eliminate it. It is therefore of little surprise that the psychoanalytic school of criticism has often seen Prospero and Caliban as the self and the repressed “other,” respectively. In fact, the monster bears greater similarities to what Julia Kristeva calls the “Abject”; while the Repressed, although it presents a continual possibility of return, disappears entirely from consciousness, the Abject is always at the periphery of consciousness. The threat in this sense from the monster’s body to the self is both conscious and unconscious. To bring some semblance of order and restore stability, it is necessary that the monster be exiled or destroyed. Even Derrida, despite his celebration of monstrosity (material as well as semiotic) as a deconstructive icon and its capacity to violate the “natural” order of things, recognizes that it has an awful side as well. He notes that monsters, “because of their violences, must be continually subjected to deconstruction by their own monstrosities.”

Toward the end of the play, Caliban is ousted from the purview of the geographical locus because, despite having already been subdued, the monster remains a potential threat: it can never be fully integrated or assimilated. Yet, conceptually, the monster can never be exterminated: by being the perpetual other, the Abject, the monster validates the category of the self, and in its absence, the binary itself will break down.

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