

# The tempest: in search of prospero's identity in caliban and ariel

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



In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero exerts wrathful influence over the island and his servants Caliban and Ariel cannot help but cower in humble obedience. Ariel is indebted to Prospero for freeing him from the dreadful darkness of the "cloven pine" (I. ii. 277) to which he was banished by the witch Sycorax. For Caliban, servitude is natural, for he was born devoid of self-control and consequently must fall under the authority of another. By examining the master-slave interactions in *The Tempest*, the reader can understand what Caliban and Ariel represent in the play. Some critics have suggested that Prospero's dominion over the island is a gesture of colonial appropriation over the two natives of the island (Parker), yet Prospero's remarkable metamorphosis from an abusive to a merciful master in the last scene complicates the relationship between Prospero and his two servants. Prospero's acts of forgiving Caliban and freeing Ariel can be seen as a surrender of the qualities that made him a cruel and vengeful demi-god. Ariel and Caliban are perhaps manifestations of Prospero's character flaws that he has failed to admit. Shakespeare attempts to unify the roles of Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel by defining their relationship within the "great chain of being" as well as ironically portraying them as the Holy Trinity. This unifying effect presents Prospero with the difficulty of separating himself from Caliban's and Ariel's flaws. Prospero ultimately succeeds, however, in recognizing these flawed qualities as he restores himself to his original human state. Prospero and Caliban exhibit the same "darkness" or flaw, indicating that Caliban is perhaps an embodiment of Prospero's concealed defects. When Caliban joins the gathering in the last act of the play, Prospero says: "This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (V. i. 276-277),

admitting he believes Caliban is his slave. A colonial interpretation of the line might suggest that Caliban represents the subjugated native who is conquered by Prospero, a foreigner who espouses a haughty Eurocentric attitude (Riggs). More significantly, however, the lines reveal the role that Caliban plays in the development of Prospero's character. By confessing to his ownership of Caliban, who is beget of the witch Sycorax, Prospero admits to his own "darkness" as he prepares to consummate his plan of reconciliation, to purge himself as well as those who have sinned against him. Prospero often exhibits Caliban-like qualities, lending credibility to the claim that Caliban is a physical manifestation of Prospero's desires. Caliban, who sought to "violate / The honor of [Prospero's] child" (I. ii. 346-347), is the personification of appetite and negligence for the law. Similarly, while he was still the Duke of Milan, Prospero had an uncontrollable appetite for "the liberal arts" (73) and was constantly "rapt in secret studies" (77), which turns out to be the hamartia that caused him to neglect his political responsibilities and enable Antonio to overthrow him (Holland). Caliban's treasonous murder plot, furthermore, is metaphorically linked to Prospero's insolence and disregard for authority. Just as Caliban plots to subvert the authority of Prospero through a "foul conspiracy" (IV. i. 139), so Prospero displays a patronizing attitude toward the king. Upon sight of the "The wrongéd Duke of Milan, Prospero," (V. i. 107), King Alonso regrets having banished him and pleads to Prospero, "[I] do entreat / Thou pardon me my wrongs" (118-19). Yet Prospero ignores the king and instead greets Gonzalo: "First, noble friend, / Let me embrace thine age, whose honor cannot / Be measured or confined" (121-23). Instead of addressing the king in humble

respect, Prospero flagrantly disregards the monarch who has just deigned himself in apology. Prospero's subsequent lines, however, contradict his seemingly unforgiving demeanor; he embraces everyone with "Welcome, my friends all" (125). By juxtaposing Caliban's disownment of his master with Prospero's refusal to pay proper homage to his king, Shakespeare reveals the characteristic sameness between Prospero and Caliban as if to show that they were one single entity. Both commit a crime punishable by death and both escape punishment. The king takes no heed of Prospero's offence; Prospero likewise forgives Caliban, bidding him, "As you look / To have my pardon, trim it handsomely" (293-94). This display of unsubstantiated reconciliation underscores the complexity of Prospero's intentions in the play. Shakespeare, however, sheds light on this complexity by paralleling Prospero and Caliban. Through his coarse language, Caliban represents Prospero's frustrations. Although Caliban appears to be nothing more than a vile slave, his complexity of language is comparable to that of Prospero. Caliban directs his accusations toward Prospero, claiming, "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (I. ii. 363-365). Caliban, who has acquired Prospero's tongue, lashes out his frustrations in poetic verse. Caliban's mouth has become a channel through which Prospero vents his frustrations for the injustices and pains he has endured. Caliban complains that he was his "own king" until Prospero "[stied him] / In this hard rock" and denied him "the rest o' th' island" (342-344). Prospero, who was denied access to his dukedom, could very well have used Caliban's rhetoric in protest. Yet Prospero who purports to be "A prince of power" (54)

would rather disguise his inner vulnerability. He tells Miranda, “[Antonio] whom next thyself / Of all the world I loved” (68-69). Prospero’s calloused appearance belies his true sensitivity and affliction from being betrayed by his brother, whom he loved dearly. Caliban’s irate language is therefore a representation of the discontentment that Prospero cannot express himself. He serves as the incarnation of Prospero’s own hatred and “darkness” within. The other native of the island, Ariel, exemplifies speediness and stamina that symbolize Prospero’s unflagging motivation to carry out the intricate scheme that will eventually culminate in the forgiveness his enemies. As with Caliban, Prospero assumes possession of Ariel when he addresses him “my brave spirit” (I. ii. 206) or “my brave fairy.” The word “spirit,” however, could also connote “the mind and will” (OED). Ariel is a fairy spirit who desires freedom and justice, which Prospero likewise yearns for since his banishment. Consequently, Prospero expects restitution for the injustice he received from his foul brother Antonio. Paradoxically, he also seeks freedom from anger, an emotion that has imprisoned him in solitary bitterness on the island. In this respect, Ariel represents Prospero’s “will” or “drive” to pursue his vision of achieving reconciliation. Throughout the play, Ariel carries out Prospero’s fastidious requests so perfectly that it appears as though Prospero were carrying them out himself. For the time being, Ariel is inseparable from Prospero’s existence because he personifies Prospero’s “will,” acting as an indentured servant who caters to his master’s every whim. As Prospero’s goals come to completion in the last act, his “will” dies away and Ariel “drink[s] the air before [him]” (V. i. 102) and dissipates into the mist. Ariel, the personification of Prospero’s aspirations for the spiritual

purity of forgiveness, no longer serves a purpose after the completion of Prospero's plan and must therefore vanish. The roles of Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel are closely interwoven into the plot of the play. To gain a better understanding of how Shakespeare interweaves the roles of the characters, one could read *The Tempest* within the schema of Empedocles' theory of elements, which assumed that the world consisted of four mystical elements — fire, earth, air, and water (IEP). Prospero is clearly the "fire" in the play since he directs his anger toward Antonio, who was "so perfidious" (I. ii. 68) that he betrayed his own brother. Caliban represents the "earth" element of the play for his mind and body are as dull and unmoving as the earth itself. In fact, Prospero summons Caliban with "Thou earth, thou! Speak!" (313). Caliban's baseness and immorality as a creature of the earth is representative of mankind's intrinsic "darkness." This "darkness" is the inner vice that Prospero finally acknowledges at the end of the play. Ariel obviously serves as the "air" element of the play. He lacks any form of autonomy, and his existence appears almost dependent on the tasks assigned to him by Prospero. At the literal level, the tempest that Ariel summons at the beginning of the play illustrates the "water" element of the play. More importantly, water suggests a catharsis or cleansing action, which serves to heal the emotional wounds from a tragic occurrence (Janko). As Prospero "abjures" his "airy charm" (V. i. 51-54) and admits to his "darkness" (276), his eyes shed "fellowly drops" (64), forming the very tears that complete the cleansing action. Prospero's forgiving of Caliban, Alonso, and Antonio and his freeing of Ariel serve to purge any resentment as well as to quell Prospero's anger. Prospero's island has become a witch's brew that

blends the elements of Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel and concocts a plot that culminates in a cathartic conclusion. The three characters almost appear to be one inseparable entity, each complementing the other in the workings of the plot. The natural hierarchy and order of the world is disrupted as Prospero incorporates elements of both Ariel and Caliban into his character. Lovejoy claims that Elizabethans pictured the order of the universe as a “great chain of being” that places Gods and kings at the top while relegating lowborn humans and inanimate objects to the bottom of the hierarchy (King). Shakespeare makes it evident in the first lines of the play that the natural order of the world has been disrupted. As the tempest unrelentingly tosses and heaves the ship, the passengers fall into havoc as the boatswain cries out, “What care these roarers for the name of the king? To the cabin! Silence! Trouble us not!” (I. i. 16-18). The social hierarchy here is reversed because the kings and nobles are receiving orders from the seamen. This disorder is the consequence of Prospero’s use of magic. Because Ariel’s magical actions are Prospero’s own bidding, Prospero assumes a God-like role, a position far beyond the scope of human faculty. After he casts off his magical robes and “drown[s] his book” (V. i. 57), the order of the universe is restored. Prospero regains his humanity and takes his rightful place as Duke of Milan. While Prospero’s use of Ariel may be considered white magic, Prospero also makes use of a darker kind of magic. By absorbing the magic of Sycorax, the former keeper of the island, he was able assume complete dominion over the island. Prospero uses this black magic to imprison Ariel as well as to torture Caliban, sending spirits to “mow and chatter at [him], / And after bite [him]” (II. ii. 9-10). Prospero stole this black magic, which is

associated with the island, from Caliban, the son of Sycorax, preventing him from taking control of the island, which is rightfully his. Regardless of whether he uses white or dark magic, Prospero causes a disruption of natural order by wielding power not suited for humans. He “steals” Ariel’s and Caliban’s magic and by doing so, sucks away their essence and vitality. By absorbing the magical elements of Ariel and Caliban, he assumes their shape and character and thus disrupts “the great chain of being.” Shakespeare has already made an effort to unify Caliban and Ariel with the character of Prospero, but he takes an extra step to create an ironic portrayal of Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel as the Holy Trinity. Prospero, taking on the role of God, gives grace and forgives the sinners Alonso and Antonio. Caliban, who was born of the devil through a witch, is a sharp ironic contrast to Christ who was born of God through a virgin mother. Caliban’s cry of pain “Do not torment me!” (II. ii. 55) echoes Christ’s cry on the cross: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani” (Matthew 27: 46), which means “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (USCCB). Ariel clearly represents the Holy Spirit. Prospero calls Ariel “My brave spirit” (I. ii. 206), so Ariel is the spirit of Prospero just as the Holy Spirit is the spirit of God. In contrast to the Holy Spirit who represents wisdom, understanding, right judgment, and courage, Ariel is merely a one-dimensional entity desiring nothing but freedom. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare creates a false Trinity, one that is wicked and inharmonious. The severance of this unholy triumvirate when Prospero, Caliban, and Ariel go their separate ways correlates with Prospero’s dismissal of all of Caliban’s and Ariel’s characteristics that he has previously adopted. How then could Prospero possibly embody both Caliban and Ariel, who are



blatant foils of each other? In the play, Prospero often exhibits a contradictory nature, suggesting that Prospero could perhaps exhibit qualities of Caliban and Ariel simultaneously. At the beginning of the play, the cruel Prospero castigates the faithful Ariel who wants to be freed early: “Before the time be out? No more!” (I. ii. 246). The audience then witnesses Prospero’s transmogrification from an abusive and fiendish master to a benevolent and compassionate one. He asks Ariel to perform a few other tasks and “after two days / [he] will discharge [Ariel]” (299-300). It makes little sense for Prospero to chastise Ariel with over fifty lines only to end with an expression of benevolence requires of Ariel only two more days of servitude. In search of his identity, Prospero navigates between the characters of Caliban and Ariel but ultimately finds freedom by reverting to his human self: “Now my charms are all o’erthrown, / And what strength I have’s mine own, / Which is most faint” (Epilogue, 1-2). At the end of the play, Prospero surrenders his power and no longer identifies with either Caliban or Ariel. The bond between Prospero and the two native inhabitants of the island begins to fade away as Prospero speaks the epilogue, humbling himself before the audience and admitting his own vulnerability. Now that he has removed his magical garments and stripped himself of any attachment to island, his humanity stands in full nakedness before the audience. He no longer chooses to cloak his weaknesses through his associations with Caliban and Ariel, but instead entreats the audience for clemency so that he may be freed from his faults. Works Cited“ Empedocles.” The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Ed. James Fieser. 2001 < <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/e/empedocl.htm#top> > Janko, Richard. “Catharis.”

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