

The discourse of colonialism in the tempest essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



The *Tempest* is a play of such ambiguity that it becomes difficult to discuss the subject of a colonialist discourse in isolation. It becomes inextricably linked with not only power and authority, but also with illusion and reality, with redemption and regeneration. It is through the use of language, relationships and events that the discourse unfolds, and the purpose of this essay is to set out and discuss those aspects of the play that contribute to the making of this discourse.

A colonialist discourse will of necessity involve an awareness of power and authority versus slavery and subjugation, of conquest and domination over a deliberately constructed inferior 'other'¹. It is this inferior other that is an essential part of the colonialist discourse, that component that exists in the relationship between colonizer and colonized, that ensures the superiority of the invading force.

This superiority can only be achieved and maintained if the discourse 'voices a demand both for order and disorder, producing a disruptive other'². So the other has to be seen as both inferior and disruptive, characteristics that are only too apparent in the play in the shape of Caliban. Indeed it is the relationship between Prospero and Caliban that lies at the centre of the colonialist discourse, for while Prospero demands obedience from all his 'subjects' on the island, it is Caliban who becomes the true victim of colonialism.

Caliban is presented to us as the embodiment of all that is primitive and savage, the epitome of degenerate man. He is the indigenous inhabitant of the island on which the play is enacted; this island is his birthright, a legacy

from his mother Sycorax, and a fact that Prospero chooses to ignore as he assumes control of this alien land.

The relationship between the two is at first amicable and Caliban appears to have welcomed Prospero and his appearance of care and concern; ‘ When thou cam’st first | Thou strok’st me and made much of me’³. This so-called savage recalls how “ then I loved thee | And showed thee all the qualities o’th ‘ isle” ⁴

It is only after his attempted rape of Miranda that the relationship breaks down, resulting in his enslavement and consequent disruptive behaviour, as he plots with Stephano and Trincolo to kill his master. He has now become ‘ A devil, a born devil’⁵ in Prospero’s eyes, but a devil ‘ on whose nature | Nurture can never stick’⁶. Prospero has attempted to tame and civilize his native but has been unable to impose his European values onto an alien culture.

Caliban is now at the mercy of his master’s wishes, exploited and controlled, while at the same time arousing in Prospero fear and distrust. This distrust is the hallmark of Western imperialism that has always regarded anything foreign as odd and threatening. Terry Eagleton sees this attitude as the self-loathing of the West projected on to the foreign other, those feelings of cruelty, sensuality, laziness and decadence that we deny in ourselves but choose to acknowledge in others.

It is here that we have to question Prospero’s desire to punish: does he punish because he is able to; is he imposing order on disorder, or is he

learning to discipline those darker parts of himself which he recognises in Caliban? It also raises a further question concerning the dilemma of colonialism; do we civilize for the good of the other, the bringing of 'light' to civilization, or for our own purposes of exploitation and self-satisfaction? It is worth remembering that initially Prospero's chief motive for colonizing the island was to restore order and harmony to his own disordered society, to regain his dukedom. It is only as events unfold, and Prospero finds himself unable to come to terms with Caliban's behaviour towards his daughter, that a benign visitation turns into something more threatening.

This element of distrust towards Caliban is mirrored in the attitudes of other characters in the play. To Miranda he is nothing more than an 'Abhorred slave'⁷, incapable of absorbing virtue, of being moulded to her design. Stephano and Trincolo treat him as an 'ignorant monster'⁸ an oddity fit only for the purposes of exhibiting, a freak and as such a fitting gift for an emperor.

Throughout these discourses Caliban responds to his adversaries with a mixture of aggression and subjugation, his language being by turns abusive and acquiescent. He is given some of the most beautiful poetry in the play and at times his words possess a simple lyricism, the beauty of which seems to be at odds with his savage persona. We hear him telling Stephano that:

The isle is full of noises,

Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not,

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments

Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices

That if I then had waked after long sleep,

Will make me sleep again; 9

The use of blank verse here is indicative of language in elevated form, and raises questions concerning the nature of Caliban and of Shakespeare's sympathies towards him. The beauty and simplicity of these lines become just a part of the enigma of Caliban, lacking sophistication, but possessing a degree of sensitivity that is denied him in the eyes of his enemies, who are intent only on emphasizing his moral depravity. In the words of Montaigne 'there is nothing in that nation, that is barbarous or savage, unless men call that barbarism which is not common to them'¹⁰. This enigma is a part of the sense of illusion that pervades the play: all is not as it seems and we can take nothing for granted.

The use of language in play becomes an integral part of the colonialist discourse. The name Caliban has generally been accepted as being an anagram of the word cannibal. The word did not enter the English language until the mid sixteenth century when it became associated with the reputedly human flesh-eating natives of the New World. To the European mind of that time the words savage and cannibal became synonymous and the association of these two words with the word slave and the concept of

slavery, became the justification for the prevailing attitudes of the time towards the subject of slaves in general.

The language of slavery and subjugation became the language of colonialism, and the means whereby Europeans were able to emphasize the moral depravity of the indigenous people, thereby providing themselves with a suitable excuse for the colonization of the inferior other; the colonialist discourse was born.

In the play Prospero asserts his superiority through a verbal discourse which reflects the dehumanized thinking of an imperialist power. The language revolves around the binary oppositions of conquest and servitude, slavery and freedom, civilized and savage, nature and nurture. This is reflected in the relationships with his 'subjects' on the island; while all are subjugated to his power, it is Caliban as the savage and deformed slave who represents the subjugated, the colonized, while Ferdinand and Ariel serve out their terms of bondage for a period of what proves to be spiritual and moral testing for redemption.

Ariel claims his freedom as his right, having, in his eyes, served out his term, but Prospero reminds him that this freedom can only be achieved through further servitude, that he has already been freed from a more stringent and stultifying form of imprisonment under the auspices of Sycorax.

Ferdinand sees his bondage, his 'wooden slavery' 11, as an occupation fit for a prince, only too willing to serve out his term in order to claim his rights

to Miranda. He pledges himself to her ' with a heart as willing/Ass bondage e'er of freedom'. 12

This freedom is a luxury that is not afforded Caliban who remains the ' lying slave' 13 until such time as Prospero chooses to leave the island; his is an unwilling slavery. He merely moves from being the ' beast' 14, the ' Hag-seed' 15, the property of Prospero, to the ' foot-licker' 16 of Stephano, one master exchanged for another in his subjugation. This reflects a degree of dependency on the part of Caliban, a trait that is often manifested on the part of the colonized, and becomes an integral part of the relationship that exists between the colonizer and the colonial other.

The leaving of the island becomes part of the element of erosion of the colonialist discourse, raising questions concerning responsibility on the part of the colonizer towards the inferior other. In the play this is a question which is never resolved; the problem of Caliban's future is not addressed; both he and the reader are left in limbo regarding this particular issue.

By adopting the European language Caliban has further subjugated himself, has lost any true identity that he must once have owned, but the exercise has back-fired on his adversaries, they are now at the mercy of his verbal abuse, ' 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'17. The old world has become contaminated by the new, the colonizer becoming morally implicated through the actions of colonizing.

It is the language of Caliban that invests the island with reality. In contrast to the speeches of Prospero and Miranda his words express a unique understanding of the natural world which is manifested in his descriptions of his beloved isle, in which he talks of fishing, wood-gathering, berry-picking, of the sound of storms and the music of the wind, of 'The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile'¹⁸; a realism all his own.

The idealism we see reflected in the words of Miranda, 'O brave new world | That hath such people in't'¹⁹. The idealism is counterbalanced in Prospero's rejoinder " 'Tis new to thee'²⁰. These lines represent differing perceptions of the same situation, the paradox of human experience.

The naivete of Miranda's words is further explored in the speech of Gonzalo in which he sets out his ideas of the 'ideal commonwealth, a classless society with rule vested in the community, in which he would 'by contraries | Execute all things, for no kind of traffic | Would I admit; no name of magistrate; Letters should not be known...'²¹ In fact he renounces everything that a European would normally consider to be of paramount importance in the establishing of a colony, claiming that 'nature should bring faith | Of its own kind all foison, all abundance'²².

In this passage Shakespeare has borrowed heavily from Montaigne's essay on 'Of the Caniballes', and it is interesting to note that while Montaigne idealized the life and habits of his cannibals, Shakespeare did not. The passage is heavy with irony and maybe satirical comment on Montaigne's view that a society natural and uncorrupted would of necessity be a happy

one. The idealism of Gonzalo is counterpoint to the cynicism of Antonio and Sebastian who reject his dream as laughable.

This utopian society represents the paradox to the island constitution of Prospero in which authoritarian rule is imposed in order to achieve regeneration through the re-establishing of order. The marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda exists in order to restore the status-quo, to restore to the imperialist mind the ideal of all that is pure and uncorrupt, unsullied by any association with the inferior other, an association which we see represented in the marriage of Claribel to a native of North Africa.

Throughout the discourse Shakespeare is at pains to point up the moral vacuity of Antonio and Sebastian who became the paradigm of civilized but corrupt man. Caliban becomes the example of nature without nurture, whose function is to illuminate the contrast between base, primitive nature and so-called civilized nurture. This raises the question as to how much base can civilized but corrupt man be than the bestiality of the savage, an issue that Montaigne addresses in his essay.

The play throws up many questions concerning the ethics and morality of colonialism, of power and authority, that belong to the past and the present, to the legacy of history and the nature of mankind.

If we embrace the colonialist discourse as existing as an integral part of the play, then we cannot out of hand dismiss Caliban as being purely primitive and savage. He becomes on the one hand the symbol of the darker side of mankind, on the other, while remaining unredeemed, of the potential for

hope and redemption; he acknowledges his mistake, he will ' seek for grace'23.

This seeking for grace becomes just a part of the mystification of the colonialist discourse, in that it is Caliban as base, natural man who will ask for redemption. In so doing it could be argued that the necessary sense of threat that he has posed to Prospero as the disruptive other is to some extent removed; the action of seeking for grace negates that sense of threat that is needed to uphold the validity of the colonialist discourse, which is as a result undermined; new levels of meaning are thus introduced.

At the same time the introduction of the word ' grace' becomes a justification of colonialism, the necessary tool in the redemptive process that, it could be argued, redeems not only those involved in the process of regeneration, but the play itself, lifting it from the purely magical and secular to the level of the divine. The word now becomes the focus around which the whole play has been enacted, throwing into confusion any preconceived ideas that we may have had concerning the issues raised.

At the end of the play we witness Prospero coming to self-knowledge, embracing and taking responsibility for those darker parts of himself which he recognises in Caliban; ' This thing of darkness | I acknowledge mine'24. Nature and nurture come together briefly in acknowledgment of sins, but ' The play's ' ending' in renunciation and restoration is only the final ambivalence, being at once the apotheosis, mystification and potential erosion of the colonialist discourse'25.