

The tempest and colonialism

[Government](#), [Colonialism](#)



There is much in the topical dressing of *The Tempest* which relates it to the colonial adventure of the plantation of Virginia and with the exotic Bermuda. Critical opinion has varied as to whether *The Tempest* is closely related to colonialism as undertaken in the Jacobean period; E. E. Stool wrote in 1927 that 'There is not a word in *The Tempest* about America... Nothing but the Bermuda, once barely mentioned as faraway places. On Stool's side we can say that the action takes place somewhere between Tunis and Naples, presumably therefore in the Mediterranean, and that the harassers who are shipwrecked are returning from Tunis after a wedding, not in the least intending to set foot upon, let alone settle or conquer, uncivilized lands. Against this, we must say that *The Tempest* participates in a contemporary cultural excitement about the voyages to that Americas and the exotic riches of remote places.

There are traces in *The Tempest* of a number of colonial and Bermuda voyage narratives, such as Sylvester Sojourn's 'Discovery of the Bermuda' (1610)¹, The Council of Virginians 'True Declaration of the state of the Colonic in Virginia' (1610), a utter by William Strachey which circulated under the title 'True Repertory of the Wrack, but was not published until 1625, and stories collected by Samuel Purchase in Purchase his Pilgrimage (1613). Scallion's god Settees is reported from Magellan voyage as being a Patagonian deity.

There is little doubt that the extraordinary shipwreck of some would-be Virginian colonists on the Bermuda flavors Shakespearean *The Tempest*. Shakespearean patrons the Earls of Southampton and Pembroke were investors in the Virginia Company. The Essex group at court supported a

Protestant-expansionist foreign logic which did not suit King James, who was anxious not to antagonize Spain. Relations with Spain were one of the main reasons that James executed the Elizabethan imperial hero Sir Walter Raleigh, who championed the settlement of Guiana.

If the general romance of the sea voyage enters into *The Tempest*, as it does in *Pericles*, this alone does not permit a view of the play as 'about' colonialism. The chief focus of a post-colonial investigation of *The Tempest* is through the character of Caliban, seen not as the 'deformed slave' of the dramatist personae but as a native of the island over whom Prospero has imposed a form of colonial domination. Caliban's second speech states this case as clearly as could be wished.

On being summoned from his 'sty' by Prospero he responds with curses and proceeds to give his view of their interaction: island's mine, by Accord my mother, I must eat my dinner. This Which thou tasks from me. When thou cam'st first Thou strokes me, and made much of me; wouldst give me Water with berries unit; and teach me how The Tempest and Colonialism By chauffeurs To name the bigger light, and now the less, That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee And showed thee all the qualities o' thistle's, The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile: Curd's be I that that did so!

All the charms Of Accords, toads, beetles, bats, light on you! For I am all the subjects that you have, Which first was mine own King: and here you sty me In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me The rest dissonant. We have already seen Prospero bullying his other servant, the spirit Ariel, into compliance with his wishes (1: 2: 240-300). Prospero's dominance seems

here on the edge of collapse, held in place by threats and the exercise of continual vigilance. He mess a man set uneasily at the apex of mutinous and unstable forces.

As the Boatswain has already made clear (although he does not know that Prosper has created the storm) the bases of authority are under question in *The Tempest*: What cares these roasters for the name of King? (1 Scallion's narrative of Prospered conquest of the Island seems self-sufficient, and if Shakespeare were a cultural relativist this might stand as the position of Clinical within the play, but there is a crucial incident which seems to have turned the relationship between Prosper and Clinical sour, and this Clinical does not mention.

Prosper regards Clinical as genetically (rather than culturally) 'inferior', inherently incapable of civilized behavior: A devil, a born devil, on whose nature Nurture can never stick; This condemnation is mingled with the frustration of the teacher who has failed with a difficult pupil: Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost, On whom my pains, We have already seen throughout 1 : 2 that Prosper is fussy and disciplinarian in his tutelage.

Miranda shares her father's dislike of Clinical for the same reason: Clinical has attempted her rape, an event which he at least recollects with some satisfaction: Thou didst seek to violate The honor of my child Cal: Oho, Oho! wouldst had been done! Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else This isle with Sicilians. Prosper keeps Clinical in order with 'pinching' 'old cramps' 'acnes' and so-on. Clinical is clearly afraid of him, and seeks to rebel.

Scallion's plot with Stephan and Trillion is futile, as he comes to realize; he has fallen in with fools, who, in common with many Europeans have used alcohol to gain influence over the natives. Scallion's plot forces the abandonment of Prospered magical/ritual masque, the moral authority of which is directed towards Miranda and Ferdinand chastity, a mint which Prosper repeatedly stresses. His fear for Marinara's chastity demonstrates his anxiety to impose 'civilized' behavior on the island, and his fear that it may not hold; it is part of his power complex.

Paul Brown's thoughtful article 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine'³ seeks to 'reputation' The Tempest in order to examine its relationship to colonialist discourse. He discusses the lamina figure of Clinical, who combines the discourses of 'masterfulness' and 'savaging' (as well as the 'salvage' or wild man), 'masterfulness' having been a continual fear of authority, as expressed in the parish poor laws, and savages' relating directly to the 'uncivil' who inhabit the areas at the edges of the dominant culture.

Brown states that 'Prospered island is ambiguously placed between American and European discourse' (p. 57). The discourse of the Americas is of course colonialist, but Prospered island is located in the Mediterranean. Clinical is seen as the victim of the language he has been taught: Whatever Clinical does with this gift announces his capture by it. ' (p. 61). Nevertheless, Clinical has the ability to represent his powerlessness and express his resentment. You taught me language; and my profit onto Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you For learning me your language.

He can use this language for his own ends, however, as his arguments with Prosper show. When Stephan and Trillion discover him Clinical repeats the attitudes and behaviors he regretted in his relationship with Prosper. I'll show thee every fertile inch dissonant; and I will kiss thy foot: I prettier, be my god. While Brown reads *The Tempest* as a colonialist text, he cannot claim it as an unequivocal praise of or encouragement to the colonial enterprise. In a good discussion of the significance of the disruption of the masque scene, he states that

Prosper 'has insisted that his narrative be taken as real and powerful-now it is collapsed, along with everything else, into the 'stuff of dreams. The forging of colonialist narrative is, momentarily, revealed as a forgery. ' (p. 67).

Though he claims Prospered narrative as 'colonialist', I would relate it to more general questions of authority Prosper himself will return to Milan to contemplate death: the Island has not been the scene of a colonial settlement, but the arena in which Prosper addresses the wrongs of his European past in order to establish a European future.

As with other ate plays by Shakespeare it is for the new generation to enact a reconciliation which was unavailable to Romeo and Juliet, for example.

Miranda, Prospered daughter, and Ferdinand, the King of Naples' son are to be married, and their optimism balances Prospered more Jaundiced view.

Mir. How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has such people unit! Pros. 'Tis new to thee. (3. 1: 183-184) Although Prosper succeeds in promoting this marriage, in punishing his betrayers, his brother Antonio, and

Alonso, King of Naples, and bringing most of them to repentance, he confesses troubled.

Sir I am vexed Bear with my weakness; my old brain is (4: 1 : 158-159) At the end of the masque, and once the larger, island-wide performance has been enacted, he renounces his magical power and prepares to return home, no longer the divine controller of the island's drama, but a mortal like other mortals. The Tempest has been insistently been read as Shakespearean farewell to the theatre, and the island functions well as an analogue for the stage (especially in view of Shakespearean adherence to the classical unities of time and place in this play), Just as Prosper can stand for the writer/director.

Neither the discourse of colonialism nor an auto-biographical interpretation can contain and exhaust the latencies of this subtle and beautifully constructed text. The Tempest remains a wonderfully written, highly atmospheric and fairly mysterious text. Shakespearean greatest strength is his ability to bring into his texts a complex nexus of views and debates which continue to resonate, and to defy resolution, for generations of play-goers and scholars. Despite Brown's commitment to reading The Tempest as an 'intervention' in the colonialist debate, he concludes that it is 'a site of radical ambivalence. ' (p. 68).