

THE SELF-FASHIONING OF EUROPEAN COLONIAL IDENTITY AND THE THREATENING OTHER IN SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST*

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ABSTRACT

This article uses *The Tempest* to scrutinize the ways in which the political discourse of early modern England might have shaped Shakespeare's plays and informed textual meaning. Being the playwright and poet of his era most quoted for reflecting the spirit of the age and the culture of the time, Shakespeare is used, herein, to show how constructions of subjectivity are central to the literature, theatre and history of Western culture in general. Not only did theatrical performance of the time document the social forces that informed and constituted history and society but itself functioned as a powerful, cultural and political institution which played an indispensable role in the construction of self-awareness and the fashioning of European colonial identity. The task in this article is to trace in *The Tempest* the contours of the dialogue between Shakespeare and the colonial question by emphasizing the fact that the Shakespearean theatre, whatever its ideological complexities, is not somehow above the historical and political conditions of its production.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Colonization; Caliban; Prospero; Identity; Renaissance; Discourse; the tempest.

It is generally argued that it is difficult to determine Shakespeare's intentions behind his plays. Critics differ about whether Shakespeare endorses dominant attitudes to colonialism, race and imperial culture or militates against them. In fact, the association between Shakespeare's drama and the Western colonial enterprise is clearly traced from the way "Anglo-American scholarship, historiography, philosophy, literary studies" and contemporaneity's critical reception of Shakespeare's own plays have portrayed him as a "playwright and poet who quintessentially celebrated Western civilisation" (Lomba & Orkin, 12) and reinforced values of cultural power and racial superiority in the contexts of 16th century Elizabethan and Jacobean England. This is perhaps what Jan Kott meant in *The Theater of the Essence* when he observed that Shakespeare no longer names a person but now also names an ideological formation.

As a dominant Elizabethan public art form Shakespeare's theatre operated concomitantly with the golden age of British imperialism specifically in its early, tentative steps of development. *The Tempest* is one of such theatrical performances in which Shakespeare, whether self-consciously, or unself-consciously, provides a good model for the global fashioning of European colonial identity at the time of English mercantile ventures and adventures in overseas territories. There is in *The Tempest* abundance of textual evidence which suggests the presence of a playwright in control of his material.

Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* with reference to a real historical repository, which is the initial realism of the shipwreck scene. Where was the ship headed before the wreck and what brought the men on it there perhaps provides substantial context for claiming the visible and invisible link between the author of play and the play's wider historical and political signification.

The play explains how English politicians of the early fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were motivated by the romance of exploration and the lure of treasure in the New World and in the African continent. The Prospero-Caliban metaphor is at the heart of the system of representation and identity formation which serves the political purpose of making the inhabitants of the island fit into an artificial schema justifying colonialism. The plot framed in this tale tells the story of Prospero, the rightful duke of Milan, who has been stranded for twelve years on an island, after Prospero's jealous brother Antonio- helped by Alonso, the king of Naples- deposed him and set him adrift with his three-year-old daughter Miranda. Prospero and Miranda live in a cave on an isolated island which is also inhabited by Ariel, a sprite who carries out the bidding of Prospero and the ugly, half human Caliban.

The play opens as Prospero; having divined that his brother, Antonio, is on a ship passing close to the island (returning from the nuptials of Alonso's daughter Claribel with the king of Tunis), raises a storm (the tempest of the title) which causes Antonio's ship to run aground. Also on the ship are Antonio's friend and fellow conspirator, King Alonso, Alonso's brother Sebastien, Alonso's royal advisor Gonzalo, and Alonso's son Ferdinand. Prospero, by his spells, contrives to separate the survivors of the wreck into several groups.

As Alonso and Ferdinand are separated, they believe each other dead. Caliban, who deeply resents Prospero whom he sees the intruder and dispossessor of his own island, plots with some of king Alonso's company to murder Prospero. Miranda and Ferdinand fall deeply in love. Ariel rebukes King Alonso for his previous plotting against Prospero. More plots against Prospero are developed but fail thanks to his magic. The play ends with all offenders repenting, even Caliban. Prospero regains his dukedom and everyone but Caliban leaves the island. It is therefore possible to accept the implication of an Atlantic as well as Mediterranean setting for *The Tempest*, and to see the play as a work about colonization, about the relationship between discoverer and discovered, that was topic of great relevance in the seventeenth century as England joined other European nations in their quest to conquer, inhabit and reap the wealth of new lands across the sea.

The play's symbiotic relation to an inherent social and political English context provides a gloss on the universalistic appeal it seeks to promote in the period of early modern England. In fact, Shakespeare's relation to and identification with both culture and milieu provides a sound ground for claiming the visible and the invisible bonds between the play and Renaissance England. This gives vantage point for critics with interest in the Bard to mediate the close connection between the "then" and the "now" understandings of the cultural politics of *The Tempest*, especially because the play was written at a time when English politicians were lured by treasures in overseas territories. This gave a vantage point for critics with interest in the Bard to mediate the close connection between the "then" and the "now" understandings of the cultural politics of his plays, especially at a time when debates about the latter's uncompromising involvement in imperial ideologies and colonial psychologies have reached unprecedented levels.

The Tempest instead of passively reflecting Elizabethan society and its power relations, "it now often is seen as engulfed by colonial discourse" (Willis, 279), retaining little separate identity of its own. The character of Prospero who is critically associated "with his playwright-creator more often than any other Shakespearean figure" (Cartelli, 105) is reminiscent of European politicians and military leaders who brought their assumptions of racial superiority and cultural difference and imposed them on culturally dispossessed people.

This may be somewhat assuring when the play is read in light of Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* in which I seize upon Greenblatt's view that the "life" [that] "literary works seem to possess" lives long after both the death of the author and the death of the culture for which the author wrote, is the "historical consequence transformed and refashioned of the social energy" (1.1.3) initially encoded in those works. *The Tempest*, thus, bears a striking account of the universal "energy" Europe spent on the fashioning of its identity at the time of overseas territorial and mercantile ventures through encounters with non-European others.

And since such identity is clearly linked with colonial and imperial imperatives, *The Tempest* cannot in any way be free of colonial ideology; rather, it reflects Shakespeare's intervention in the ambivalent and contradictory colonial discourse of 16th century Renaissance England via the protagonist Prospero's view of the characters he seeks to bring under his command once marooned on Caliban's island by chance or sad fate.

It is through the complex and discursive character of Prospero, the male and white duke of Milan, that critics see Shakespeare as a formative producer and purveyor of paternalistic ideology basic to the material aims of Western imperialism. The literal resemblance between the *Tempest's* plot and certain events and attitudes in English colonial history casts the play in the circle of politically and discursively representative texts. The play's protagonist, Prospero, is akin to major British colonial figures such as Cecil Rhodes or Henry Stanley.

Upon his arrival on the island, Prospero tried diverse ways to dominate Caliban and to subjugate him under his control through giving him orders: 'chop wood, make fire' (1.1. 8) and teaching him language and astrology. The teaching of language to Caliban, apart from its avowedly instructive and enlightening meaning, is a means of power the aim of which is to assure that Caliban could understand Prospero's orders and carry them out. In Prospero's mind Caliban's role and importance on the island do not go beyond mere serviceability and instrumentality: a supplier of both food and labour. Prospero occupied both his mind and body and sought to invent artificial boundaries and hierarchies which he used to determine his relationship with the real inhabitants of the island. Prospero's colonial tactics involves legalizing the belief that discovered (also the colonized) is inferior, savage, brute, slave, and a devil in need of civilization.

The play, thus, provides a precedent for a politics of imperial domination premised on the intractability of the non-Western elements Prospero encounters on the island. The play's positioning of the European self, embodied in the deposed duke Prospero, at the center of the universe and at the heart of man's consciousness is foregrounded against the background of its corollary, the marginalization of the non-European self as a backward, primitive and uncivilized other. This stipulation, perhaps, permits a reading of *The Tempest* as a foundational paradigm in the European history of colonial ventures in the New World and on the African continent.

The character of Prospero reiterates the same colonialist discourse that dominated the Renaissance era. Such a discourse operates by both producing a threatening other that can be used to confirm the self and giving legitimacy for its being in the world. The first encounter between Prospero and Caliban is a good site from which one could derive a clear understanding of the psychological landscape of colonization and its project in the play.

The 'political unconscious' of Prospero is exposed. Prospero's patriarchal domination and his creation of a complex of superiority based on inequality between him and Caliban provides a good model for establishing racial hierarchies in the play. It further consolidates patriarchal domination. In *Political Shakespeare* Dollimore and Sinfield contend with increasing detail and sophistication that it is virtually impossible to seal off and insulate any meaningful interpretation of Shakespeare's plays from considerations of racial and cultural hierarchies and from the dynamics of colonialism.

The idea of Prospero's superiority versus Caliban's inferiority is but a colonial construct used to confirm, Césaire makes clear in *Une Tempête*, that a natural inequality exists between the two which gives justification for the former to dominate the latter and take control of him. When Prospero first set his feet on the island, Caliban perhaps out of a culturally inherent sense of hospitality or because overwhelmed by years of solitude and exclusion, trusted him, served him and guided him through the island: "and showed thee o' th' isle" (1.2. 337). He even loved him, "I loved thee" (1.2. 335). Contrariwise, Caliban's hospitality is returned with Prospero's hostility.

Suggesting that the self-fashioning of Prospero's identity on the island is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, backward and hostile, Renaissance aristocratic and upper classes, we read in Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*, also fashioned their identities against the images of the newly-discovered natives of the New World and the African continent. In a similar vein, Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley argue in their formulations about Western racist mythologies concerning 'otherness' that the development of Englishness depended on the negation of Irishness which was described as incivility, filth and backwardness.

Prospero's deprivileging of Caliban upon his arrival on the island, "a born devil, on whose nature/ nurture can never stick", (4. 1. 188-89) and his deterritorialization of the land is a stereotype which serves as a substantial part of a discursive strategy to fix Caliban, as a colonial other, in a position of inferiority. Caliban is also presented as a bad slave - one who did try to deflower Miranda's virginity- and who is now caught trying to falsify the past by occluding the act of rape and presenting himself as a victim of Prospero's cruelty. Contrariwise, Prospero maintains characteristics of goodness and virtue: he gave water with berries to Caliban and taught him his language and astrology.

It thus comes as no surprising that Prospero is superior to Caliban in so far as his benevolence and good conduct are returned with savagery and blindness. The supremacist role Prospero played on Caliban's island is critically implied in critic Paul Brown's well-known formulation about Shakespeare in *The Tempest and the Discourse of colonialism*. Caliban rebukes Prospero:

You didn't teach me a thing ! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders: chop wood, wash the dishes, fish for food, plant vegetables because you were too lazy to do it yourself. (17).

Prospero's goodness and Caliban's badness, it seems, are colonial rationalizations and justifications used to conquer the other and subjugate him under one's rule. Prospero's power is disguised in the civilizing mission he is on the island to accomplish: to raise savage people from superstition, blood-sacrifice and backwardness to a more enlightened existence. *The*

Tempest, thus, not only endorses colonialism but enacts it by justifying Prospero's power on Caliban and legitimizing his expropriation of his land.

The threatening other, therefore, plays an essential role in fashioning European identity and validating the imperial trope by displaying its own godliness and justifying the colonial project morally. Otherness, or alterity, is a necessity, a discourse, a site against which the colonial self is foregrounded. In this respect, taking Shakespeare's relation to power and the relation of the stage as a mode of performative expression to ideology, the identification we attribute between Shakespeare and his protagonist Prospero is one which also accounts for the playwright's intervention in the political discourse of his era and his playing part in Renaissance identity-fashioning.

Eventhough it is not Shakespeare who initiated ideologies of colonialism and histories of race, one observes that he provides in *The Tempest* a diction expressing cultural difference and uses metaphors sustaining colonial projects whether implicitly or explicitly. This argument works even more profoundly when read in light of New Historicist assumptions concerning the author's participation in fashioning the spirit of the nation.

Though such a fashioning of the European self is based entirely on acts of violence, falsified facts and fake principles: usurpation, annexation, deterritorialization, deprivation, erasure, cracks, conflicts and disarray, it is, nonetheless, important to speak of the relation of power to identity as an effective force which shapes identity formation. Power legitimates identity through acts of physical violence such as manipulation, dictation, enforcement and violent discursive acts like representation and misrepresentation.

As far as the interplay between *The Tempest* and *A Tempest* is concerned, it is Césaire's conviction that nothing was left of Shakespeare on his "ancestral African soil" (Zabus, 45) (in the 1930s) which informs his reproduction of the play. Césaire reproduces Shakespeare's *The Tempest* into *A Tempest* of his own invention rendering the five acts into three and portraying Caliban as a character who dares to talk back to Prospero revealing him as a liar who has come to the island not to lift him to civilization but to satisfy his capitalistic greed for gold and money.

The discursive relations which Césaire's play shares with Shakespeare's posit Shakespeare as a metaphorical figure, a window through which we peep into the deep abyss of colonial hegemonies and imperial ideologies on the African continent. Césaire uses *The Tempest* characters to revive the British colonial policy of the Elizabethan and Jacobean kings and queens, and the whole Renaissance, in the 1960s on an isolated island in the Caribbean region where chance and fate rather than careful arrangement brought kings and slaves together. One reads in Césaire that Shakespeare meant the characters of Prospero, Caliban and Ariel to "be located in a hierarchical power relationship" (Zabus, 22) in which Prospero is the master and Caliban and Ariel are slaves.

On Caliban's island like in colonized countries where British colonialism aggressively subjugated the land and its people, Césaire and his fellow Caribbeans identified with Caliban finding in him an expression of their long history of colonial oppression. At the start of decolonization movements from the late fifties onwards, they turned to *The Tempest* to unearth from it a suppressed narrative of their historical abuse. For them and other postcolonial critics *The Tempest* was not value-free, atemporal and transcendent masterpiece. Shakespeare, writes G. B. Shand, is "actually a predictive and essentialist conditioner of

textual signification” (Shand, 33). If this is really the case then Shakespeare could be approached both as a literary genius and a formidable source of discursive power.

In fact, The whole colonial question in *The Tempest* is embodied in its protagonist Prospero. Prospero’s relationship with Caliban and his treatment of him brings Shakespeare to colonialism by uncovering his parochial support for Elizabethan monarchy and patriarchy. The idea of Prospero’s superiority versus Caliban’s inferiority is but a colonial construct used to confirm, Césaire makes clear in his *Tempête*, that a natural inequality exists between the two which gives justification for the idea of domination and authority.

To Césaire, Lamming, Modisan and others who have interpreted *The Tempest* in this light, the play conveys the miseries of colonial rule and the atrocities of colonial oppression manifested in the repression of African people and the usurpation of their land. When Prospero first set his feet on the island, Caliban perhaps out of a culturally inherent sense of hospitality or because overwhelmed by years of solitude and exclusion, trusted him, served him and guided him through the island: “and showed thee o’ th’ isle” (1.2. 337). He even loved him, “I loved thee” (1.2. 335). Contrariwise, Caliban’s hospitality is returned with Prospero’s hostility and his friendliness with Prospero’s supremacy.

The supremacist role Prospero played on Caliban’s island is critically implied in critic Paul Brown’s well-known formulation about Shakespeare his essay "This Thing of Darkness I acknowledge Mine: *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism", and which Césaire exhaustively extends in his play through Caliban’s indictment of Prospero:

“You didn’t teach me a thing ! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders: chop wood, wash the dishes, fish for food, plant vegetables because you were too lazy to do it yourself.”(17).

Here Césaire discloses one of the strategies that basically characterizes colonialist discourse which is the gift of language. Language as a medium of power plays an important role in what Stephen Greenblatt called the process of self-fashioning. Prospero capitalizes on the motif of language to fashion his European self against the image of an ignorant, voiceless Caliban.

Here Césaire mocks Prospero’s ill-founded assumptions about Caliban, hinting at the fake characterization he conceives of him. Prospero’s image of Caliban is bound by the signs of fictionality and inventiveness; Prospero is, says Caliban, “an old hand at deception” because he “lied so much to [him]” (*Une Tempête*, 3.2. 61-62). Furthermore, by giving Caliban a voice through teaching him language and astrology, Prospero reveals discontinuities and paradoxes within the whole political system of colonialism.

Aimé Césaire uses the Prospero-Caliban relationship as an interpretive model through which he describes the historical logic implied within the colonialist discourse. Prospero’s a reminder of the monolithic entity which comes to shape the British subjective and political policy developed during the activities of overseas travel and cultural exchange from the late fourteenth century onwards. Thus, what Octave Mannouni calls the Caliban complex or the dependency complex is there to serve one major end: to give legitimacy and entitlement for Prospero to rule over Caliban and to take control of the island.

The case for colonialism is also evident in so far as Prospero is presented as a good character while Caliban is identified with bad attributes: dirty, savage, brute, backward, and so on. This paradoxical presentation of both characters serves as a rationalization and perhaps a legitimation for Prospero's domination of Caliban. This goes hand in glove with the colonial project of subjugating and containing the colonized other under the pretext of his inability to govern himself and his need for an authority which represents him.

Yet although Aimé Césaire, like Frantz Fanon, envisions in his play the clear bond between Prospero and Caliban to highlight the elements of interdependence and reciprocity on the island: Prospero gave Caliban water with berries and taught him Renaissance Knowledge (mainly astrology) and Caliban, in turn, showed him all the qualities of the fauna and flora, he eventually ends up shredding this bond by disrupting into smithereens the legitimacy and authority Prospero has established since he first set his feet on the island.

Prospero and Caliban become equal partners disputing the issue of territory and evoking a serious crisis over representation. Césaire even highlights Caliban's disruptive potential which led to the progressive erosion of Prospero's high self-esteem on the island. Faced with this new order of things the latter recurs to the powers of his magic and grapples with it in a bid to escape Caliban's threat.

If on the one hand Shakespeare presents a Prospero who flaunts the benevolent act of teaching language to Caliban, Césaire on the other hand endorses Caliban's claims, arguing that by seemingly pretending to civilize their "others" colonizers enslave them and fix them into perpetual otherness. This argument, It seems obvious, is foregrounded against a symmetry Césaire establishes between Prospero's education of Caliban by teaching him language and astrology and Shakespeare the playwright as symptomatic and symbolic, in Rob Nixon's words, "of the education of Africans and Caribbeans into passive, subservient relationship to dominant colonial culture" (Nixon, 3). Here, there is a strong sense of how historical discourse is related to the individual playwright which in retrospect shows him as a participant in that discourse.

In *Une Tempête* Césaire makes it obvious that Shakespeare forms his ideas about non-Western subjects by drawing upon a whole range of imagined ideas about Western people and uses them in the service of colonialism. Caliban defies Prospero, "you think I'm ugly... well I don't think you are so handsome yourself" (*Une Tempête* 1.2.17. *Translation, Richard Miller*). Caliban's pronouncement "you think I'm ugly" scandalizes the system of demarcations and classifications used by colonial powers to justify colonialism. The colonized other is colonized on the basis that he is ugly, backward, uncivilized, and, therefore, in need of colonization.

Caliban's subaltern position is but an artificial construct Prospero uses to legitimize his authority on the island. Besides, colonial authority requires that Prospero usurps and even erases Caliban's culture making him dependent for the most inherent of rights including even his freedom. Indeed, Prospero is "the crusher, the pulverizer" (*Une Tempête*, 2.1.27) whose despotism and omnipotence stem from the purpose of his colonial scheme after his occasional arrival to the island.

In act I scene II Caliban discloses Prospero's strategy reminding him of his first attempts at flattening him when he needed him: "In the beginning the gentleman was all sweet-talk: dear Caliban here, my little Caliban there". Only then did Caliban realize that Prospero is not the

collaborating type of leader Ariel thinks. Césaire identifies tripartite elements to the colonizing structure in *The Tempest*: the domination of the physical space of the island, the reformation of *natives*' minds, most particularly Caliban's and Ariel's, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective. This structure of complementary acts "completely embraces the physical, human, and spiritual aspects of the colonizing experience" (Mudimbe, 2).

Not only are Prospero's imperialistic values of domination and authority understandable from his relationship with insurgent Caliban but also implicated in his treatment of subservient and compromising Ariel. In fact, by promoting Ariel in the hierarchy of servitude to the position of the privileged and trusted servant, Prospero also places him in the role of the overseer whose function is to watch over and safeguard the island.

Ariel is reminiscent of the spy, the sentry, the secret eye. He serves his master dutifully and faithfully in order to morally induce him to keep his promise and grant him the freedom he longingly and impatiently awaited for. Yet, Prospero never stops testing Ariel's loyalty nor does he miss the opportunity to humiliate or to torture him in order to naturalize his subservience: "Hurry! Unless you want to be the next to feel my wrath", says Prospero intimidatedly addressing Ariel (*Une Tempête*, 3.3.50). He even keeps reminding him of his former life, how he freed him of his torment: "dost thou forget from what a torment I did free thee?", "thou liest, malignant thing! Hast thou forgot...?" (*The Tempest* 1. 2. 250).

Prospero's pronouncements perhaps perfectly illustrate the clonial strategy of the *The Tempest* as implicated in the violence and aggression which mark his authoritarian behaviour throughout the play. In *Discourse on Colonialism* Césaire adumbrates his conception of the phenomenon of colonialism embodied in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by equating the word colonization to thingification or chosification, terms which favour decivilization and subordination of the colonized subject. In fact, Césaire's approach to colonialism as a dehumanizing process might have shaped his counter-ideological orientation grounded in a reaction against Mannouni's idea of the "Caliban dependency complex", and hence augurs a reversal in the trope of colonialism through Caliban's self recovery.

In *Tempests after Shakespeare* critic Chantal Zabus sees at the heart of Césaire's *Tempête* a challenge both to Shakespeare and to the conception of colonial history he promotes in his play. The indefinite article which changes the current of the play from *The Tempest* into *A Tempest* is the gaze returned. It suggests a "hostile takeover", a seizure of authority over the original text which marks the play as interventionist and hostile in nature.

To Césaire who has suffered the miseries of colonialism with his fellow Africans, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* speaks the predatory language of colonialism and domination on behalf of governing structures of Western power and ideals. Césaire makes it clear that while Prospero identifies Caliban with irrationality, inconsistency and superstition by remaining cautious and suspicious of him, he uses these qualities as a background against which he foregrounds his principles of reason, order and measure.

Being Martiniquan by birth, a playwright who has had a first-hand experience of colonialism and experienced the pain of exile and exclusion, Césaire thinks of himself as "the son of uprooted African slaves". His reproduction of *The Tempest* provides learners with the tools necessary to re-read conceived colonial definitions of Shakespeare's cultural value. The sordidness of colonialism and its corollary ethnocentrism he dramatizes in the play through

Prospero's despotic and omnipotent reign on the island and machinations to subject the land and its real owner are but a spark of light reflected against the whole system of imperial domination based on the transformation of Old World colonial policy to the New World territory and to black Africa.

Césaire attributes a colonial role to Shakespeare by portraying him as instrumental in maintaining and implementing ideologies of race and hegemonies of colonialism on Afro-Caribbean lands. In *Le Théâtre de la Tempête*, as Jean Marie Serreau calls it, there is a total denunciation of the static conception of history as an interval embodying the dreams of the protagonist Prospero in *The Tempest*. Conversely, history, as we see in Césaire's *Tempête*, is oriented toward reopening the history of the "decolonizing process" (Fanon 66).

To cut a long story short, Shakespeare's intervention in the political discourse of early modern England takes the form of a powerful and pleasurable narrative which, we see in *The Tempest*, seeks to harmonize disjunction, to transcend irreconcilable contradictions and to mystify the political conditions demanded by that discourse. Yet, by reproducing the discursive logic implied within 16th century colonial England, the play also functions as an active agent in the construction of self awareness and the fashioning of national identity. The play is pervaded by a vocabulary which suggests the existence of natural differences, social, racial, cultural and historical, between colonizer and colonized whereby colonial identity is legitimized and naturalized.

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