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Caliban in history

The Tempest has been imbued with so much meaning in colonialist discourse because it contains much ambivalence which opens the play up to various interpretations. For instance, the question of the name Caliban cannot be resolved and thus colonial discourse has designated multiple meanings to his character. Since the late eighteenth century the name Caliban has been widely accepted to be an intentional anagram of "cannibal." The argument is that the consonants l, n and r are interchangeable in European transliterations of the unwritten Caribbean languages, thus, "Calib" is tantamount to "carib" or "canib" of which "canib" is an acknowledged linguistic source of "cannibal." A close alternative explanation could be that "Caliban" is an extended anagram of "carib." Shakespeare could have contrived "Caliban" as an anagram of "cannibal" to suggest the savage's moral degradation or from the anagram "carib" to suggest a New World native but not necessarily a man-eater.

Another example of ambivalence would be Caliban's parentage. Prospero tells us his mother Sycorax was an Algerian before her banishment to the island and his birth, "This damned witch Sycorax, / For mischiefs manifold, and soeries terrible / ...,from Argier."(I.ii.263-265) His father was a "demi-devil", "a born devil" and although unions with the devil, especially by a witch, often brought forth grotesque births, the charge of devilish parentage may be Prospero's hyperbole. He may be speaking of Caliban's father as the "devil" in figurative terms arising from his malice toward

Caliban. Judging from this, it is possible that Caliban has African roots making him available as a representative of the blacks rather than just American Indian as textual evidence shows for there is mention of the "Bermoothes"(I.ii.229); of "a dead Indian"(II.ii.34) and very few "men of Inde"(II.ii.58) and "Setebos"(I.ii.375) a Patagonian God. Not surprisingly, Morton Luce saw Caliban as a compound of three typical ideas - monster, African slave and dispossessed Indian. In any event, whatever confusion that abounds in The Tempest has encouraged artists, actors, academicians and readers to see Caliban however they wish.

African and Latin American writers drew inspiration from The Tempest metaphor. Aimé Césaire of Martinique wrote a play Une Tempête in which Caliban and Ariel were both slaves - the former black, the latter Mulatto. In Cuba, Roberto Fernández Retamar identified Caliban with the Cuban people in an essay on Fidel Castro that was written in Spanish.

Apart from the writings generated from the fringes of the former empire, events in Europe have also led to reinterpretations of The Tempest as embodying themes like absolutism, property, rebellion and subjection. Especially in the hands of New Historicists, The Tempest resonates with the social and political issues of Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. It is significant that the location of Prospero's island is so ambiguous for it is said to be somewhere between Naples and Tunis yet there are indications in the text which place it in the Bermudas or even in the Caribbean. Perhaps Shakespeare created such an exotic island not only to reflect the New World but also England. For example, Gary Schmidgall sees the play as a political

allegory and argues that it was written for King James 1 in accord with the "courtly aesthetic" - a theatrical mode of "spectacular, decorative and romantic courtly fashion." By 1610, James 1 of England had substantially stabilized his kingdom, enjoying an uneasy peace with her traditional enemies, France and Spain. This is the premise that David M. Bergeron uses in his argument that "James and his family are represented in The Tempest through the issues of peaceful succession, royal genealogy and the union of kingdoms." (181) Judging from this, it is only natural that the play centres upon the figure of the good sovereign and the "mere presence of the royal personage and the power of the royal gaze are able to transmute hitherto recalcitrant elements of the body politic, engendering in the place of disorderly passion a desire for service that is akin to an exotic courtship." (Brown 53-54) The play's preoccupation with usurpation then is a demonstration of what can go wrong with the body politic if the ruling sovereign is not careful or forgets his public duties as Prospero does.

Therefore, at the heart of The Tempest is a preoccupation with the ruler and the ruled in which Caliban symbolizes the antithesis of order. He also reflects the abundant Tudor homilies on disobedience which were propagandistic state sermons that preached the evil of rebellion: "Prospero's powers rise to the angelic, while Caliban's are deteriorated, animalistic, of the earth and earthy. He is 'filth', 'earth', 'a thing of darkness', and thus is 'deservedly confin'd into this rock.' The obedience Caliban owes to Prospero is then like that of a man to God, man to king, beast to man". (Schmidgall 43)

Caliban's deformity symbolized his ignorance, sensuality and immorality. Apart from Caliban, Stephano the "drunken butler" and Trinculo the "jester" can also be seen to represent the masterless or lawless men of England, the ungoverned and unsupervised men without the restraining forces of society, "an embodiment of directionless and indiscriminate desire." (Brown 52) Thus, Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo are symbolic of the destructive forces of rebellion that Prospero (surrogate for King James) is duty bound to repress and punish.

Elements of deep resentment towards authority are hinted at in the play as seen in Stephano's remarks to Trinculo that "The King and all our company else being drown'd, we will inherit here" (II.ii.174-175) and to Caliban: "Trinculo and thyself shall be viceroys" (III.ii.108) without sparing a moment to mourn the King's "death", they celebrate with cheer and liquor the prospect of being rulers instead of the ruled. Not surprisingly they later have no qualms in conspiring with Caliban to execute a brutal murder of Prospero as a means of gaining sovereignty of the isle. A disturbing factor to consider here concerns the fact that although murder is an unnatural and extreme step, one cannot blame Caliban for desperately wanting to be rid of the man who has not only usurped his kingship, but enslaved and tortured him for so many years. Many world leaders have been killed for much less. Compared to Caliban's motives, Stephano's and Trinculo's are rather trivial for they seek to murder a man who has not harmed them in any way purely for selfish personal gain.

Furthermore, Caliban seems to have no intention of setting himself up as king which makes his yearning and struggle for freedom all the more compelling. Caliban, as Lamming has observed, has a "tendency to take people at their face value and is the epitome of a pure and uncalculated naiveté." (Lamming 114) His guilelessness surfaces as it has before when Prospero first "strok'd" and "made much" of him because Caliban is as equally quick in offering to show Trinculo and Stephano "every fertile inch o' th' island" (II.ii.147) as he was with Prospero. In both instances Caliban is generous to his guests when treated well. Perhaps Caliban is willing to accept Trinculo and make Stephano his new master when he realises that they are not spirits sent to torment him and after sharing their liquor, the slave who has not known recent kindness naturally basks in the feeling of camaraderie. To Caliban, Stephano is not as powerful as Prospero. Instead he is a benign god who provides "celestial liquor" and Caliban, either under the influence of alcohol or happy for merely being treated well becomes obsequious offering to kiss and lick Stephano's foot while pleading for him to be the slave's god. Clearly, Shakespeare makes Caliban out to be the stereotype of the native whose weakness is a susceptibility to liquor. Thus, having no strength of mind, Caliban is not able to be near God. This reinforces the idea of him as a benighted soul fit only for slavery.

With regards to Stephano and Trinculo, there is another point worthy of colonialist consideration to be observed in their conduct and more notably their speech. The jester and drunken butler, although hailing from the lower classes, are just as guilty of colonialist assumptions as those who come from the upper classes such as Prospero and Gonzalo. They assume inheritance

of the island on which they shall rule as viceroys and their claims are made in the presence of Caliban - who is the more rightful "inheritor" than Stephano if only on the grounds of prior inhabitation. Their conduct reveals a complete obliviousness to the idea that indigenous natives might have a legitimate claim to lands upon which Europeans have stumbled. Whether out of ignorance or sheer arrogance they further assume that the deformed Caliban is fit to be their servant instead of discouraging and treating the misguided slave as a human being if not an equal. In their eyes, Caliban is an object - a monster, a servant-monster, a fish, and Caliban is also cast in a derogatory association with the moon for he is called a "moon-calf"(II.ii.112) which is a synonym for monstrosity. As for Gonzalo, the urge to dominate can even infect a well-meaning honest old Counsellor who in his commonwealth speech unwittingly reveals a subconscious desire to be king for he begins his speech using the colonial word "plantation": "Had I plantation of this isle, / ...And were King on't, what would I do?"(II.i.141) Gonzalo's assumptions are partially excusable for he is not aware of Caliban's presence and also he does not act upon his ambition to rule the island. His contradictory ideas remain an idealist's dream without the basis of practicality.

Returning to Stephano and Trinculo; clearly, given a chance, masterless men like them too can nurse hidden aspirations to be colonizers for the colonizing desire lies buried in various strata of European society as already demonstrated by the text. However, this urge to rebel and rule was seen by the ruling Elizabethan class as a threat to their position of power and had to be suppressed. Hence the Elizabethans devised figures to

represent characteristics of anarchy, destruction, violence and danger such as the homo ferus, the wild man or the man of the woods, a label frequently pinned onto the Irish and Scottish rebels fighting against British rule. It is notable that Caliban is the product of the fornication between a witch and a devil for the slave seems affiliated with the sorcerers and witches who were hunted down during the reign of James I as well as the Indians of America who were accused of witchcraft by the Puritans.

The constant punishment of those guilty of various transgressions or those designated as masterless by the ruling class was not simply a strategy to legitimate civil rule for it exposed a genuine anxiety, a real fear of the power of the increasing numbers of the governed classes should they revolt against their betters. Perhaps this deep fear of rebellion is what perpetuated the continuous fascination for the disorderly other. The Tempest can then fully be "implicated in the process of 'euphemisation', the effacement of power"(Brown 64) while it also simultaneously demonstrates "the strict form of government" which was how England should be governed.

Sovereign power, be it of King James I or Prospero is effaced when colonial power is made to appear benign and advantageous to their colonized subjects. As is demonstrated in the play, the colonizer is said to bring freedom or education and the colonialist regime is portrayed as a "'family romance' involving the management and reordering of disruptive behaviour."(Brown 64) Furthermore, the use of harmonious music to enchant and restore and references to the pastoral and dreams all give the impression of a "disinterested, harmonious and non-exploitative

representation of power." (Brown 64) Such effacement of power are actually rationalizations meant for the justification of the use of violence or coercion when carrying out colonial rule. There are many instances in the play where the brutal methods of punishment employed by Prospero are similar to those used by the European colonizers. This is especially true in the case of Caliban, the island native, and Stephano and Trinculo - men from the lower classes of European society. Prospero first enslaves Caliban for not abiding by the western standard of virtue or morals. Imprisoned in a "hard rock", Caliban is forced to do hard labour and his rebellious instincts are kept under control with severe physical punishment. Working on the principle of torture, Prospero afflicts his slave with grievous mortifications - "But they'll nor pinch, / Fright me with urchin-shows, pitch me i' th' mire, / Nor lead me, like a firebrand, in the dark / Out of my way, unless he bid 'em : but / For every trifle are they set upon me; / Sometime like apes, that mow and chatter at me, / And after bite me; then like hedgehogs, which / Lie tumbling in my barefoot way, and mount / Their pricks at my footfall; sometime am I / All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues / Do hiss me into madness." (II.ii.4-14) The means to bring about fearful obedience in the colonized subjects remain the same with the difference being that the agents of torture here are spirits conjured by magic and not those employed by European courts.

Caliban's sufferings do not end here for Prospero later resorts to an even crueller punishment which is not commensurate with the slave's feeble revolt. Prospero conjures up diverse spirits in the shape of dogs and hounds to hunt down Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo thereby reinforcing the sense

that this mode of punishment recapitulates the many early modern accounts of New World natives being terrorized by dogs. Prospero's words "Go charge my goblins that they grind their joints / With dry convulsions; shorten up their sinews / With aged cramps; and more pinch-spotted make them / Than pard or cat o'mountain"(IV.i.258-261) seem to reveal an almost diabolical aspect in him. One sees an unflattering picture of the smug magician rubbing his palms together with glee and with his command "Let them be hunted soundly. At this hour / Lies at my mercy all mine enemies."(IV.i.262-263) It is clear that Prospero is once again revelling in this surge of great power, indulging in his magic before he has to give it up. A more compassionate and humane leader would also feel the pain of punishment but such sympathy is not to be found in Prospero. Interestingly, the hounds are called "Fury", "Silver" and "Tyrant". "Fury" and "Tyrant" could be seen as spirit manifestations of Prospero's inner turmoil and wrath especially so since they appear right after Prospero is observed to be in a fit of passion such as has never been encountered by Miranda before - "Never till this day / Saw I him touch'd with anger, so distemper'd."(IV.i.144-145)

Other punishment of a lesser degree meted out by Prospero concerns Ariel whom he controls with the threat of reimprisonment in the cloven pine and the errant aristocrats whom he maddens by playing with their conscience. Can Prospero be guilty of practising double standards because of the vast disparity in the way Caliban is severely punished compared with the mild flirtations with insanity that Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian go through? Why let the aristocrats off so easily especially when they do not even repent?

In employing magic and violent means of reproach towards the native Caliban and helpless drunkards, Prospero becomes no different from the European colonizers who used barbarous ways of teaching their slaves in colonized territories as explained by Lamming in his book The Pleasures of Exile concerning the African slaves exiled in Haiti. These slaves were looked upon as property and in their owner's eyes, they possessed no language "but the labour of their hands. If these hands, like the prongs of the plough, showed signs of weakening, the property was disposed of; buried or burnt while it was still alive. If this property risked any deliberate signs of inactivity, the most ingenious experiments in torture were devised. This property ...was hounded by dogs, dynamited for the sheer fun of seeing human flesh blow up. The whip was regular as wind, no less brutal on the bones than any hurricane which ripped open the land."(Lamming 120) A regime of calculated brutality and terrorism (not unlike that of Prospero's) was necessary to cow these slaves into the desired docility.

We often hear of European propagandists expounding on their favourite theme which was the cruelty of the Turks, of the treachery and cannibalism of natives in faraway lands and more. However, as Montaigne very aptly said in his essays of cannibals: "So we may call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity."(150-159) He was referring of course to the cruelty of Christian Europeans who would eat a man while he was still alive and torture his still feeling body by tearing at it and roasting him bit by bit. Furthermore, they would have him bitten and mangled by dogs and swine than in roasting and eating him after he is dead as is the normal

practice of native cannibals. He quotes other examples where Chrysippus and Zeno the Greek, heads of the Stoic sect thought nothing wrong in using carcasses for the purpose of getting nourishment from them as was done by the French when besieged by Caesar in the city of Alesia who sought to relieve their famine by eating old men, women and other people useless for fighting. European physicians too were not adverse to the use of human flesh (e.g. mummies) to maintain good health, applying it either externally or internally.

Other instances of barbaric acts committed by so-called civilized Europeans include a red-hot crown placed as punishment on the head of George D'ozsa, leader of the Hungarian peasant revolt of 1514 while a comrade lies impaled at his feet. The Turks too were made victims of European propaganda when they were accused of subjecting the Venetian commandant, Bragadino to the grossest indignities and of flaying him alive. Bragadino's crime was that of personal insolence to Lala Mustapha, the leader of the Turks and although his punishment seemed rather too severe, it is important to note, as did a modern German historian, Von Hammer, that the deed of the Turkish commander was an act that was much in the spirit of the age.(see Creasy 218) The Turkish king, Selim II was the contemporary of Charles IX and Ivan the Cruel. The massacre of St. Bartholomew occurred a year before the murder of Bragadino and at the capture of the fortress of Wittenstein, in Finland, the garrison was cut in pieces by the Russians and the commandant tied to a spear and roasted alive. If such atrocities could happen in France and Finland what more could one expect in Turkey under the government of a young ambitious prince. It is revolting to study at great

lengths the subject of comparative cruelty. Such deeds only bring shame to particular nations of mankind and also upon human nature in general. Suffice it to say that the Europeans too were capable of the same acts of horror which they have continually accused the colonized natives of. However, by labelling the natives as uncivilized brutes and cannibals they were able to convince themselves that the move to conquering new lands was for the sake of bringing civilization, education and Christianity to these new lands.

As we have seen, The Tempest portrays the ruling sovereign Prospero, the surrogate for King James I, as the Godly figure, omniscient and omnipotent. This reflects the belief in the Renaissance era that the task of colonization was actually a godly project. Therefore, when the Renaissance conqueror went to the newfound territories, he believed that he was acting out a vital part of God's commandments, that he was created not for "transitory pleasures and worldly vanities, but to labour in the Lord's vineyard, there to sow and plant, to nourish and increase the fruites thereof, daily adding with the good husbandman in the Gospell, somewhat to the tallent, that in the end the fruits may be reaped, to the comfort of the laborer in this life, and his salvation in the world to come." (cited in Brown 50) However, the increasingly secular aims of the Renaissance produced the doctrine that man can become like God while on earth through his capacity to refashion the materials into forms that would be more satisfying to his desires. The Renaissance writers had broken away from the medieval beliefs that the desires of man would find fulfilment in the union with God. The doctrine of man as God on earth with the authority to make the universe

over, gradually led to the birth of capitalism and the greedy exploitation of the colonized territories. Clearly the noble aim of the conquerors who believed that they were advancing the work of the Kingdom of God to the margins had become twisted when the emphasis shifted from that of religion to that of profit.

Traces of capitalism in The Tempest can be found in the exploitative nature of the Europeans shipwrecked on the island. Upon seeing the strangely deformed Caliban, Trinculo's first words are of what a fortune he could make by exhibiting Caliban to the public at home for a fee. We learn from Trinculo's speech that exhibitions of so-called exotic beings were quite commonplace and in fact were a regular feature of colonial policy under James I in England where the public would not give a "doit to relieve a lame beggar [but] will lay out ten to see a dead Indian." (II.ii.32-34) Sadly, many of the Indians brought to England rarely survived the experience. Stephano sees Caliban as a "monster of the isle" and talks of transporting Caliban to Europe in a get-rich scheme, "If I can recover him, and keep him tame, I will not take too much for him." (II.ii.78-79) Clearly, Stephano will sell Caliban for the best price anyone can offer him. Stephano and Trinculo's materialistic leanings are echoed in the conduct and words of the aristocrats Sebastian and Antonio which proves that the power of money can corrupt even the most highborn of men. True to their exploitative characters, both see the commercial value of Caliban for Sebastian speaks of buying him while Antonio finds him "marketable." (V.i.264-266) Their views of Caliban as an economic commodity give rise to various ways in which the native is

demonized and his status as a human being mystified or otherwise rendered uncertain.

Like Caliban the New World natives were also demonized and subjected to an elaborate system of binaries which was part of the now farcical godly project. In order to justify the very profitable slave trade or even the inhumane treatment and exploitation of rebellious plantation slaves or natives, the demonized Other was frequently portrayed as no better than animals, uneducable, so evil as to be fit only for drudgery, while the Europeans were the good masters trying their very best not to let the natives idle their lives away. In the play, Prospero assumes ownership of the island and his actions on it can be seen as those of a man subconsciously replaying his failure and betrayal as a means to exorcise his embarrassment and guilt. The similarities are clear for Caliban, the would-be usurper of Prospero is a parallel of the original usurper Antonio, only this time, Prospero is in full control to effect a resolution to his advantage. This results in Prospero's relationship with Caliban becoming a reflection of the system of binaries when Caliban is turned into a convenient scapegoat who stands as a token of his master's victory and power. Caliban is Prospero's polar opposite, the malicious ingrate who is the constant reminder of his master's beneficence and patience. The sin of usurpation is so clear-cut a case of villainy that Prospero's mind is set permanently at ease. Caliban is stereotyped as an irreformable being and is counted on to behave in a manner deserving only of righteous anger, discipline and punishment. Prospero has only to lay eyes on his dark and disproportioned shape to know what Evil truly is, "This thing of darkness" as he calls him.

Any encounter between people from two or various cultures is bound to be plagued by a power struggle which can be potentially destructive. Rather than subscribe to the "I am superior to you" attitude, more could be achieved if people from all parts of the world would capitalise on their strengths to solve the problems of mankind. Such a wish may be deemed too idealistic but it is heartening to note that injustices in race relations are being more openly discussed and intelligently dealt with especially in the twentieth century which has been rocked by the horrors of the holocaust. Writing from the margins to expose the faults of our former colonial masters, the post-colonial writer has to refrain from subverting the hegemony by not reinstating the margins as the source of new power for we would then be as guilty as the west with all their various assumptions. Post-colonial discourse is rife with many complexities and grey areas to which there are as yet no satisfactory answers.

One such complexity is demonstrated in Caliban's ironic cry of "Freedom, high-day, freedom!" (II.ii.185-186) for indeed he would be free of Prospero yet hadn't he just secured a new master in Stephano? Likewise, the relationship between former colonizers and post-colonial peoples is ironic. Each needs the other to define themselves. Post-colonialist discourse tries to do away with differences between the two to free them from the shackles of stereotyping yet it is precisely these differences which are being used to solidify colonialist arguments. Another complexity concerns language. In order that his or her impassioned diatribe is heard by the relevant parties, the post-colonial writer often has to resort to the former colonizer's language. With this act, the freedom to express one's opinion

comes ironically hand in hand with imprisonment within the language of expression. Such contradictions or ironies in post-colonial discourse are so inevitable and ingrained that one soon wonders when it will end.

Clearly, Caliban or the Other is used here to teach a lesson in the perils of treachery and usurpation. However, the heavy and humiliating penalty that Caliban pays for his crimes is a telling contrast to Antonio's who deserves a treatment just as harsh if not harsher for his sins. Perhaps it was easier to treat the Other and not the European aristocrat as a wild beast hunted by a pack of dogs because such punishment was the norm in the history of slavery and any deviations from such a norm would have been intolerable to the Europeans who prided themselves in their refined sense of decorum. Putting them on the same footing as the Other would have meant a degradation of their race.

From these observations, it is interesting to see that The Tempest is such a treasure chest out of which any analysis of the elements in the play can provide only a partial picture of responses to colonialism or issues of race, class and politics which are frequently associated with it. In the case of Caliban however, the increasing uniformity in the interpretations of him as the oppressed and marginalized hopefully signifies the beginnings of a better world where tolerance and equality between men will be commonplace.