

## *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism

G. A. WILKES

If the study of Shakespeare itself can be viewed as an act of cultural imperialism, a play like *The Tempest* can readily be seen as a text which is complicit with colonial power. Prospero is the usurping invader, nervous about the legitimacy of his rule, and Caliban is the representative of the subjugated race, his language lessons seen as an attempt to eradicate his own culture, or to bring it under imperialist control. The best way of entry into this debate is still Stephen Greenblatt's essay of 1976, 'Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century', though its implications may not yet have been fully grasped.<sup>1</sup>

Greenblatt begins with the prospect held out in Samuel Daniel's *Musophilus* (1599), that in the New World the 'unknowing Nations' are to be enriched with 'the treasure of our tongue', and in this vast civilizing process of the future, who can say

What worlds in th' yet unformed Occident  
May come refin'd with th' accents that are ours?

Greenblatt cites Spanish, Portuguese and English authorities to show the assumptions that underlie or accompany this prophecy: that the inhabitants of the new world were without a culture of their own; that they had no language, or else language at the level of gibberish; that they might conform to European conceptions of the Wild Man, or that they might be hardly distinguishable from beasts.

Although Greenblatt adduces *The Tempest* for its exploration of these issues, he does not fit it to any paradigm. He focuses instead on two ambiguities in the play, neither of

<sup>1</sup> Citations are from the essay as reprinted in *Learning to Curse : Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

which is finally resolved. The first is contained in Caliban's retort:

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!<sup>2</sup>

This might be taken as a confirmation of Caliban's brutishness (all he can do with the gift of language is curse), but in Greenblatt's view Caliban here 'achieves for an instant an absolute if intolerably bitter moral victory' (p. 25). The second ambiguity lies in Prospero's declaration at the end 'this Thing of darkness I/Acknowledge mine' (V. i. 277-8). Although this might be no more than a statement of which faction on the island Caliban belongs to, Greenblatt sees it as the acknowledgment by Prospero of a bond with, or even of a responsibility for, Caliban.

Greenblatt's placing of Caliban in the discourse of colonialism does not entail regarding him as human. 'Caliban', Greenblatt argues, 'is anything but a Noble Savage.'

Shakespeare does not shrink from the darkest European fantasies about the Wild Man; indeed he exaggerates them: Caliban is deformed, lecherous, evil-smelling, idle, treacherous, naive, drunken, rebellious, violent and devil-worshipping. According to Prospero, he is not even human: a 'born devil', 'got by the devil himself/Upon thy wicked dam'. (p. 26)

The Enlightenment might come to endorse some universal conception of the human in which a creature such as Caliban might participate, but this is a view which *The Tempest* 'utterly rejects'. The Caliban of Act V might be acknowledged as somehow Prospero's creature, but again, Greenblatt insists, 'by no means is Caliban accepted into the family of man' (p. 26).

2 *The Tempest* (The Challis Shakespeare, Sydney University Press, 1980), I. ii. 364-6. All subsequent references are to the Challis edition.

No one knows how Caliban was supposed to look. In the play he is most often referred to as 'Monster', and Trinculo contemplates making a fortune by exhibiting him at fairs in England. He is 'this puppy-headed Monster' (II. ii. 161-2), 'but half a fish, and half a Monster' (III. ii. 30-31), and he calls to mind 'Salvages, and men of Ind' (II. ii. 60-61). Anthonio, seeing him for the first time, describes him as 'a plain fish, and no doubt marketable' (V. i. 267).<sup>3</sup> The special effects producer of (say) *Aliens* might have projected a satisfactorily monstrous hologram from the evidence supplied. There could still be a production in which this is done, possibly coming nearer to the original conception. But on the stage Caliban has had to be represented by an actor,<sup>4</sup> so that the impression of his humanness is now hard to put aside.

To regard Caliban as non-human would be to change entirely the terms of the debate. If America and Australia had had no human inhabitants at the time the Europeans arrived, the only dispossessed would have been the buffalo and the kangaroos. This could be the situation envisaged on Prospero's island (assuming that Ariel is not interested in land rights), which would then escape colonialist discourse. Stephen Orgel might have hesitated to regard Caliban as one of Miranda's 'two royal suitors',<sup>5</sup> and the attempted rape would be even more distasteful. For all we know, this may be how Shakespeare saw it, and there is nothing in the play to forbid this interpretation. When Miranda says that Caliban

3 R.G. Howarth noted that when we liken someone to a fish, we are usually referring to his face (*Shakespeare's Tempest*, Sydney: Australian English Association, 1936, p. 13).

4 For an account of the tradition, see Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban : A Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1991). Under the 'Names of the Actors' in the Folio, Caliban is listed as 'a savage and deformed slave'.

5 'Shakespeare and the Cannibals' in *Cannibals, Witches and Divorce*, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 55.

'wouldst gabble, like/A thing most brutish' (I. ii. 357-8), this may be because it is what he did. Some critics hypothesize about the language spoken by Caliban and Sycorax,<sup>6</sup> but of course this is dramatically non-existent, and can give no support to arguments about Caliban's existing culture being erased.

Indebted as I am to Greenblatt for suggesting this interpretation of *The Tempest*, which may well recover its original meaning, I think that it is unlikely to take hold. Once Shakespeare gave Caliban the power of speech, he enhanced his status in the play irrevocably. How Caliban is identified (e.g. as not belonging to the family of man) will still be significant, and that Prospero fails to humanize him will be a conclusion difficult to resist, but his case must still be heard.

Caliban is vilified before he appears as 'A freckled whelp, hag-born' (I. ii. 283), as 'my slave, who never/Yields us kind answer' (I. ii. 309-10), and as 'a villain, sir,/I do not love to look on' (I. ii. 310-11). Prospero explains

But as 'tis  
We cannot miss him : he does make our fire,  
Fetch our wood, and serve in offices  
That profit us.

(I. ii. 311-14)

The Prospero who can conjure up a storm and yet preserve the vessel and crew intact must surely be able to keep himself in firewood. The play needs a reason for the continuing association of Prospero and Miranda with Caliban. In supplying one, it fits Caliban into the pattern of the enslavement of native peoples. The exchange of insults which follows his appearance reinforces this pattern, as the discourse theorists interpret it:

CALIBAN                    I must eat my dinner.  
This Island's mine by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,  
Thou strok'st me, and made much of me: wouldst give me

<sup>6</sup> See Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban*, pp. 166-8.

SYDNEY STUDIES

Water with berries in't, and teach me how  
To name the bigger light, and how the less  
That burn by day and night: and then I lov'd thee  
And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' Isle,  
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile.  
Curs'd be I that did so! All the charms  
Of Sycorax, 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 o' th' Island.

PROSPERO                    Thou most lying slave,  
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have us'd thee  
(Filth as thou art) with humane care, and lodg'd thee  
In mine own Cell, till thou didst seek to violate  
The honour of my child.

CALIBAN    Oh ho, oh ho, would't had been done!  
Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else  
This Isle with Calibans.

MIRANDA                    Abhorred slave,  
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,  
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,  
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
One thing or other: when thou didst not, Savage,  
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble, like  
A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes  
With words that made them known. But thy vild race  
(Though thou didst learn) had that in't, which good natures  
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou  
Deservedly confin'd into this rock,  
Who hadst deserv'd more than a prison.

CALIBAN    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. 332-66)

Some elements of the discourse of colonialism will be recognized here, but (as always) their interpretation depends on literary and dramatic analysis. Also on some matters of fact. I do not immediately fit Prospero to the role of imperialist invader, because he himself came to the island as a fugitive. The language lessons are not his project, but

Miranda's: she would therefore have to be seen in the role of misguided missionary. Caliban makes his claim to sovereignty over the island at the beginning of his speech:

This Island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from me

and more than one critic has observed that Prospero never refutes it. He might have done so, according to the facts already rehearsed for the benefit of Ariel:

This blue-ey'd hag was hither brought with child,  
And here was left by th' sailors.

(I. ii. 269-70)

Sycorax is not a native inhabitant of the island. As this has been explained already, there may be no need to devote any more time to it. But Prospero's response reflects the discontinuity of Caliban's speech, as a rhetorical analysis will show.

The important question is the literary-dramatic one. Is Caliban's complaint to be taken as a serious claim to sovereignty, or as one of a list of his grudges against Prospero? If both, which preponderates? The structure of the speech is revealing. There is a slippage between the first statement and the next, when Caliban bases his resentment afresh on the contrast between the way he was treated at first, and the way he is treated now:

When thou cam'st first,  
Thou strok'st me, and made much of me: wouldst give me  
Water with berries in't, and teach me how  
To name the bigger light, and how the less  
That burn by day and night: and then I lov'd thee  
And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' Isle,  
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile.

This conveys a sense of injury being expressed and protracted with a sort of childish logic or illogic, which is then - the instability is signalled by the rhetorical figure of *interruption* - suddenly impelled into execration:

Curs'd be I that did so! All the charms

Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!

Then the idea of ill usage stubbornly resurfaces:

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 o' th' Island.

Do we regard this speech as the voice of freedom, or as a discontinuous catalogue of Caliban's resentments, as they are jumbled in his head? The rhetorical structure shows a mind veering from one grievance to another, turning past kindness into injury, suddenly striking out for revenge. Prospero's reply engages with the last claim:

Thou most lying slave,  
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have us'd thee  
(Filt' as thou art) with humane care, and lodg'd thee  
In mine own Cell, till thou didst seek to violate  
The honour of my child.  
CALIBAN Oh ho, oh ho, would't had been done!  
Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else  
This Isle with Calibans.

Prospero's intemperance here has been seen as reflecting the colonists' concern at the vulnerability of their womenfolk, or the Renaissance ruler's protection of his daughter's chastity as an extension of his power. Stephen Orgel, who also relates Caliban's behaviour to the 'edenic innocence' of sexuality in the New World, sees the assault on Miranda 'not as destructive and uncivilized but as an act of political economy'.<sup>7</sup> Again the literary interpretation of it is paramount. Caliban's gleeful response ('Oh ho, oh ho, would't had been done!') cannot be construed as edenically innocent or impersonally political: it is mischievous, self-congratulatory, hurtful in its intent.

7 Orgel, 'Shakespeare and the Cannibals', *loc. cit.* pp. 42,55.

It has to be taken in conjunction with Miranda's response, although she is rarely allowed to speak in critical discussions at this point:

MIRANDA                      Abhorred slave,  
 Which any print of goodness wilt not take,  
 Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,  
 Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
 One thing or other: when thou didst not, Savage,  
 Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble, like  
 A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes  
 With words that made them known. But thy vild race  
 (Though thou didst learn) had that in't, which good natures  
 Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou  
 Deservedly confin'd into this rock,  
 Who hadst deserv'd more than a prison.

Remarking that the sexual division of rapist and virgin is common in colonialist discourse, Paul Brown argues that 'Miranda is represented as just such a virgin, to be protected from the rapist native and presented to a civil lover, Ferdinand'.<sup>8</sup> This is part of Prospero's programme of regulating sexuality, and it allows him to use the attempted rape to legitimize his seizure of power.

Again it is necessary to pay attention to what happens in the text. According to Caliban's own account, he was at the beginning treated with every kindness, which he then reciprocated ('Thou...made much of me...and then I lov'd thee'). The language lessons belong to this stage of the relationship, when Caliban had no cause to revenge himself on Prospero for anything, and Prospero no reason to buttress his power. Unless we are to assume that Prospero somehow instigated the rape, to bring the relevant phase of the colonialist discourse into play, it must have been an unprovoked response to the kindness which Caliban himself has described. *The Tempest* may indeed be presenting

<sup>8</sup> Paul Brown, "'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine": *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism' in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (eds) *Political Shakespeare* (Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 62.

Caliban as a creature ‘Which any print of goodness wilt not take’, unpalatable as this may be.

So far as the colonialist interpretation depends on seeing Caliban from the outset as a sacrificial victim, its foundation is insecure. It is not strengthened by seeking to show the contestation between Prospero and Caliban continuing to govern the play through Prospero’s attempts to assert his sovereignty and to subdue all else to it. This is broadly the argument of Francis Baker and Peter Hulme in ‘Nymphs and reapers heavily vanish: the discursive con-texts of *The Tempest*’ in *Alternative Shakespeares* (ed. John Drakakis, Methuen 1985). ‘Prospero’s play and *The Tempest*’, they rightly point out, ‘are not necessarily the same thing’ (p. 199). Through the action Prospero seeks to impose his interpretation on the text, and in particular to control the subplot focused on Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo. The tension generated by this breaks through when the masque is suddenly interrupted, and Ferdinand and Miranda remark on Prospero’s discomposure:

PROSPERO [*aside*] I had forgot that foul conspiracy  
Of the beast Caliban, and his confederates  
Against my life: the minute of their plot  
Is almost come.

[*to the spirits*] Well done, avoid: no more.

FERDINAND This is strange: your father’s in some  
passion  
That works him strongly.

MIRANDA Never till this day  
Saw I him touch’d with anger, so distemper’d.

(IV. i. 139-45)

At the level of character, this could be ‘the irruption into consciousness of an unconscious anxiety concerning the grounding of his legitimacy’ (p. 202), so that ‘the shakiness of Prospero’s position’ is staged by the play itself (p. 203). Prospero’s view of course prevails as the conspirators are routed, but this comic closure is itself ‘symptomatic of the text’s own anxiety about the threat posed to its decorum by its New World materials’ (p. 203). ‘The lengths to which the

play has to go to achieve a legitimate ending may then be read as the quelling of a fundamental disquiet concerning its own functions within the projects of colonialist discourse' (p. 204).

The interpretive model here is the model of the play as anthropomorphic, with its 'anxiety' or 'disquiet' announcing itself as though in relief of some internal pressure. A similar argument without quite these disadvantages is mounted by Paul Brown in his article in *Political Shakespeare*.<sup>9</sup> Brown sees the play not as simply reflecting colonialist practices, but as actually intervening in colonialist discourse, and seeking to contain or efface the contradictions which it uncovers. The play is about imposing order on 'masterless barbarity' (p. 56), and making this imposition of power seem beneficent. Caliban's resistance to colonization is represented as 'the obdurate and irresponsible refusal of a simple educative project' (p. 61), the attempted rape is exploited 'to legitimate the seizure of power by civility' (p. 63), and the masque of Ceres is used to efface Prospero's power into a trope of courtliness, as the plebeian revolt is simultaneously translated into the terms of an antimasque. Although Prospero's renunciation of his magical arts is designed to make the colonialist enterprise seem even more inoffensive, and the closure of the action is devolved on to the courtier Gonzalo, the ambivalences remain: '*The Tempest*...declares no all-embracing triumph for colonialism' (p. 68).

Whether by subterfuge or not, Caliban's activities after the encounter of the first act are in a comic mode. He and Stephano and Trinculo form a comic troupe, united by the liquor salvaged from the shipwreck, Stephano's dream of becoming lord of the isle, and Caliban's plan of revenge. They are eventually mired in a cesspool, and hunted by the dogs. If it is a comical troupe, it is not a particularly engaging one, with the Neapolitans planning to tame Caliban and either to sell or exhibit him, while Caliban tries to

<sup>9</sup> See note 8, above.

ingratiate himself with whichever he considers the stronger party:

That's a brave God, and bears celestial liquor: I will  
kneel to him. (II. ii. 123-4)

I'll show thee every fertile inch o' th' Island;  
and I will kiss thy foot: I prithee be my god. (II. ii. 155-6)

I'll kiss thy foot. I'll swear myself thy subject. (II. ii. 159)

I'll show thee the best springs: I'll pluck thee berries;  
I'll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough.  
A plague upon the tyrant that I serve;  
I'll bear him no more sticks, but follow thee,  
Thou wondrous man. (II. ii. 167-171)

How does your honour? Let me lick thy shoe. (III. ii. 24-5)

Do that good mischief, which may make this Island  
Thine own for ever, and I thy Caliban  
For aye thy foot-licker. (IV. i. 217-19).

Prospero is referred to as the tyrant and sorcerer who 'by his cunning hath/Cheated me of the Island' (III. ii. 46-7, 55-6), but Caliban is motivated by no thought of gaining freedom, or of reinstating himself as ruler: he is motivated by revenge. He plans to deliver Prospero to Stephano asleep, 'Where thou mayst knock a nail into his head' (III. ii. 63-4),

Or with a log  
Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,  
Or cut his weasand with thy knife. (III. ii. 92-4)

He offers Miranda as an additional enticement: 'she will become thy bed, I warrant,/And bring thee forth brave brood' (III. ii. 106-7).

The palliative effect of the comedy is not very material either way. If these are the two rival claims for control of the island, it is hard to imagine, in terms of colonialist discourse, how the rightness of Caliban's cause is self-evident, while

Prospero's is so flawed that its secret deficiencies will ineluctably manifest themselves in the staging of the masque. As at that critical moment Caliban's party is under Ariel's control, Prospero's discomposure is more naturally explained as coming from the failure of his own efforts with Caliban, as he again acknowledges:

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature  
Nurture can never stick: on whom my pains  
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost,  
And, as with age, his body uglier grows,  
So his mind cankers.

(IV. i. 188-92)

With Caliban, Prospero's powers have proved ineffective. This admission will be made again at the end in 'this Thing of darkness, I/Acknowledge mine.' (V. i. 277-8).

The more essential question is whether anyone at this stage wishes Caliban and his party to be victorious? We should, if they are carrying the moral standard of the action. Is any issue of legitimacy still operating in the play? At the end Prospero will quit the island, leaving Caliban in sole possession. This outcome should be crucial to the pattern. On one reading Caliban might be seen to grasp the imperium which he has been denied; on another reading Prospero might graciously cede it to him, in the way he has released Ariel. The play makes nothing of the motif at all. The issue is dead.

It could be argued that the Caliban who at the end resolves to 'seek for grace' (V. i. 297) has reached the position of the subjugated native. His own values have been extinguished, and replaced by those of the invaders. If this were so, then - to adopt the premises of this argument - this would be registered as a triumph for Prospero. He would have no 'Thing of darkness' to acknowledge. What is registered instead is Prospero's sense of failure, as interpreters of different persuasions agree. If the working out of the theme of colonial rights seems muted at the end, this may indicate that it is of more concern to the theorists than it is to the play.

It is a basic if unacknowledged tenet of the discourse of colonialism that where there is an inequality of power, the virtue must reside with those who have less.<sup>10</sup> The formula is too rigid and too unthinking to apply to a literary work of any complexity. It requires us to regard Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda as an aspect of the 'edenic innocence' of New World sexuality, and to see him so wrongfooted by Prospero that his feelings of dispossession can be interpreted as the stubborn refusal of 'a simple educative project'. The worst consequence of the formulaic approach is that it diminishes the creative feat represented in Caliban. This is the feat - attempted again by Browning in 'Caliban upon Setebos' - of getting inside the head of such a being, and seeing the world from his perspective. He has a nature which is not really human, yet he is given the power of speech; he can utter his sense of injury, and engage in a clumsily casuistical argument, while showing a malice and a vengefulness that prevent him from being sentimentalized. While Caliban is ingratiating himself with the Neapolitans so that they can be the instrument of his revenge, he reveals an attunement to his surroundings which they can never have:

I prithee let me bring thee where crabs grow;  
 And I with my long nails will dig thee pig-nuts;  
 Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how  
 To snare the nimble marmoset: I'll bring thee  
 To clust'ring filberts, and sometimes I'll get thee  
 Young scamels from the rock. Wilt thou go with me?

(II. ii. 174-9)

and as he plots to batter Prospero's head with a log, paunch him with a stake, and cut his weasand with a knife, he says to Stephano:

Be not afeard, 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 sometime voices,  
 That if I then had wak'd after long sleep,

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted hereabouts to a lecture by Ihab Hassan at the University of Sydney in 1994.

Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming,  
 The clouds methought would open, and show riches  
 Ready to drop upon me, that when I wak'd  
 I cried to dream again.

(III. ii. 139-47)

Caliban is reduced by being fitted to the role of expropriated native, carrying Prospero as some sort of black man's burden, as *The Tempest* is reduced by being fitted to the formula of colonialist discourse. The play takes up the idea of expropriation, as it takes up the notion of the ideal commonwealth, or the limitations of magical power, or the way new worlds cannot be exempted from the iniquities of the old. But as David Malouf remarked in an analysis of *The Tempest* that deserves to be better known, there is no one point of view in the play which 'offers us an unchallengeably true insight into the action, a point from which all the other conflicting views can be judged, explained, reconciled.' To lay claim to such a single point of reference is to distort the play. The test which *The Tempest* puts upon us, Malouf argues, is 'the test of our capacity to remain passive, to let the play *happen*, to allow different aspects of the play's world to reveal themselves and place one another, without our demanding a simple or a single point of view.'<sup>11</sup>

It may be natural for Renaissance texts to reflect twentieth-century preoccupations, or even for such issues to be projected on them, helping to exorcize a collective guilt. (The modernity of the issue was demonstrated in 1995 in the U.N. Women's Conference in Beijing. While the Western delegates went there with the best intentions, to some of the others present the enlightenment offered seemed like an attempt to colonize them.) In *The Tempest* so many elements are held in play — almost indeed in a ludic mode — that it deftly sustains so many possibilities, while never surrendering to a single reading.

<sup>11</sup> David Malouf, *Relative Freedom: The Tempest* (Sydney: The English Association, 1973).