

THE TEMPEST AND THE NEW WORLD

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PROSPECTUS

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It is the purpose of my dissertation to examine Shakespeare's last unassisted play, *The Tempest*, with regard to setting-specific problems that have, in the last forty years, taken a critical turn towards colonial and ancillary political issues. My reading of the play seeks to contest the validity of the insistence that the play has a *singularly* New World setting, physically or on a metaphorical level, an interpretation most often suggested by New Historicists, Cultural Materialists, and post-colonial critics. The method of my analysis is rooted first and foremost in examining the text itself, but is also seen against a more "discourse"-based understanding of how texts and contexts influence one another. It is not my desire to suggest one "correct" interpretation or methodology for discussing the play, but I hope to show that these two very different ways of looking at the play – a "New Critic", textual approach versus a "New Historicist", context and discourse-centred method of analysis – can coexist and in many ways illuminate the "opposing" reading. I do, therefore, take issue with the tendency amongst recent (often Cultural Materialist) criticism to insist on a monolithic method of reading the play metaphorically (and also "prophetically" and anachronistically), especially as pertains to the setting of *The Tempest's* island.

I wish to draw attention to an oft-neglected European, or Old World, frame of discourse for the problem of locating the play's setting *within*, rather than against, New Historicist critical methods, an issue which has only in the last ten years received scholarly

attention. It is within this Old World frame of reference that an analysis of the character Caliban becomes so diametrically different from the prevalent tendency to see him as a victim of colonialism and (ig)noble savage or Indian, a very contentious issue which I try to put in a new light by examining his strong connections to European folklore and mythology, often an overlooked dimension in recent criticism.

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, as opposed to New Criticism, tend to see art in Marxist terms as the material and intellectual result of already existing forces, and claim that history and ideology are the preconditions for the artistic product. *The Tempest*, as well as all other works, are textual products, therefore, which in the eyes of the Marxist cannot extricate themselves from the historical moment, the material forces, and the ideology under which they were produced. It is a view of literature as something dependent on the forces of reality (in a clearly Platonic sense) that allows – or indeed often *confines* – critics of New Historicism and (especially the essentially Marxist) Cultural Materialism to see a play like *The Tempest* as a direct product of its immediate environment. As will hopefully be clear from this dissertation, my reading of the play tries to evade such reductive interpretations, especially with regard to resultant claims that the text necessarily, and *explicitly*, deals with the colonial moment in 1610-11, when *The Tempest* was written.

According to New Historicist and Cultural Materialist scholars, the creative moment that produced texts like *The Tempest* can best be understood as a woof of history, a frame of (often seemingly casual) references, or a sort of contextual matrix against which texts can be seen, understood, and analyzed. Drawing on such in many ways very helpful similes and metaphors, these critics call attention to the particular talk, hum, background noise, or, as they prefer, “discourse”, that exists in every society. It is such “discourse”, then, that is most frequently used to support a colonialist (often “Americanist”, or New World) reading, and my

dissertation seeks to assess this particular method of Shakespearean scholarship, as well as explore new angles of looking at the text with regard to New World resonances and utopian possibilities.

The dissertation is divided into two clearly separate sections, the first dealing with the New World, from textual setting and geography, to New World textual allusions, sources, travel narratives, and New Historicist and Cultural Materialist suggestions and claims that Caliban be seen as a Native American (that is, “Indian”) or an oppressed Caribbean/African/Australian aborigine. The implicit ideological and political edge of such a reading opens up the play to a political analysis. The second section deals with the political and ideological implications of the text, with regard to colonialism and imperialism, power struggles, slavery, masterlessness, vagrancy, anarchy, and utopias.

At the heart of most recent interpretations of *The Tempest* is the slave Caliban and his relation to the master Prospero. In spite of the play’s highly ambiguous geographical and metaphorical setting, the vast majority of critics today treat the play as if it were set, as a rule, in the New World, a setting that invites a tremendously politically laden debate. In the last forty or so years, allusions to colonialism, both textual and contextual, have been discussed vigorously, especially with reference to how the themes and progress of the play fit with those travel stories narrated by amongst others William Strachey, Richard Hakluyt, Thomas Hariot, and Sir Francis Drake. For this reason the play comments, according to many critics, on the colonial practices the English conducted in Virginia at the time the play was written, namely in 1611, and the critics are mostly engaged in this discussion with an emphasis on the treatment of the characters Prospero and Caliban. As it is clear from the text that Caliban was living on the deserted island before Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, was forced into exile there, the similarities with the lot of the American Indians, and indeed with all other

indigenous populations to suffer under European colonialism, become clear.¹ It is to this discussion Caliban is so central a character, since so much of our interpretation of him is coloured by the question of his race and place of origin, that is, whether he may be ascribed to the folkloric traditions of Europe, or to New World populations, and the manner in which natives (or Others) were presented in the travel tales at the time, as well as later.

Hence, it will be clear that the political discussions concerning race, colonialism, and utopian thought all change dramatically were we to see the play as set in its *literal* geography, namely in the Mediterranean. For example, if one chooses to see the setting as European, Caliban's race becomes "less" of a colonial issue, and the colonialism (such as it is) Prospero conducts on the island bears upon ancient pastoral ideas of retreat and escape rather than the (topographically *real*) sense of utopia the newly-discovered continent to the west represented to many Englishmen and Europeans.

As will be shown, setting in many ways dictates our reading of the political issues in the play, since they are specific to each location. In order, therefore, to deal with any structured discussion of political implications of the play's content, it is essential to determine whether we wish to read the play as set in the Old World or the New World, or at least (perhaps more realistically) determine which characters, which textual passages, what dialogue, and what historical relevance and congruence these factors in sum offer to the discussion of the play's setting.

The political implications of *The Tempest* are particularly interesting and relevant to the discussion concerning the New World, as this brings a whole new dimension into the discussions concerning colonialism, which was just emerging with the establishment of the Virginia Company. Also, utopian thought, seen in earlier works like Sir Thomas More's

¹ Vaughan, Alden T., 'Shakespeare's Indian: The Americanization of Caliban', in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, no. 39. Washington D.C.: The Folger Library, 1988, p. 148.

Utopia (1516), and Montaigne's *Essays* (translated by John Florio into English in 1603), and also highly present in the propaganda pamphlets of the Virginia Company, becomes increasingly relevant with the advent of colonialism. Furthermore, with regard to Ariel and Caliban (and the more recent comparisons both have drawn to American Indians) an almost proto-Darwinian idea of the nature of man, his proper place in society and in the divine master plan (confer E.M.W. Tillyard's concept of "The Great Chain of Being"), are put in a new and sometimes disturbing light in *The Tempest*. The play, moreover, deals with the question of power to such an extent that the struggle between masters and servants (and slaves) are always going to be highly potent and significant within a confined space like the island, but, as will be shown, the ensuing political discussion is particularly relevant to that most ordered society that was the Renaissance.

I will explore the play's relevance to the New World in relation to setting, themes, characters, literary influences, and what New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critics somewhat carefully term (cultural and historical) "discourse",² and will show how the play is indebted to the many ideas about the New World prevalent at the time, and how the text's impact would be diminished if we were to read the setting as singularly European. I will, however, discuss the evidence that *The Tempest* is also indebted to an exclusively European pastoral tradition, derived from the literary vestiges of Ancient Rome and Greece, and also to the *Commedia dell'Arte* of Renaissance Italy, as well as drawing on more or less contemporary English pastoral poets like Edmund Spenser. These, conversely, in many ways incline us to see the setting within the intellectual and cultural sphere of the Old World.

² See, for example, Brown, Paul, 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine', essay in Political Shakespeare. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985. Brown contends that texts may not be read as simply texts, and that their particular con-texts, including everything from other, similar texts on which they may depend to the historical and intellectual climate of their period, are vital to understanding what they really convey. See pp. 48-50.

In Section Two I will write about the political and ideological implications of *The Tempest*, keeping the historical differences in mind, so as not to pass judgement, as it were, on the historical conditions of early 17th-century England applying the standards of the 21st century. I wish especially to make clear what implications the setting of the play has on its political interpretation, what themes and dialogue are politically dependent on *our* view of the setting, and what parts are not. Clearly, when dealing with as widely an interpretable term as “political”, I find it necessary to clarify just what “political drama” is. Alexander Leggatt begins by defining its opposite by asserting that “if everything is political, then nothing is, for the world has lost its edge”.³ My own working definition of politics is restricted, in this dissertation, to that which concerns the governing of the *polis* (or state), as opposed to the view, espoused by many Marxist critics, that politics pervades most anything in a given text, since the textual product is *itself* (consciously or not) an ideological utterance.

Accepting, nevertheless, that Renaissance drama has political content, I will discuss the question of *how* political *The Tempest* is, or, better, how political, and radical, the play *would have been perceived to be* at the time of performance, in 1611. We would do well to remember, to take an example relevant to the hierarchical status of Prospero and Caliban, that participation in political life was a privilege rather than a civic right.⁴ Hence, what *we* consider political and subversive might not have been thought so at the time of writing, and, conversely, what an English Renaissance audience would frown upon, we might think of as mere trifles, which is a dangerous liability when writing of something so indefinite and susceptible to change as politics. Therefore, as we can see, the terms “political”, “radical” and

³ Leggatt, Alexander, *Shakespeare's Political Drama*. London: Routledge, 1988, p. ix.

⁴ Norbrook, David, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 19.

“subversive” are in themselves highly relativistic, and I will try to use these words as carefully as possible.

I will show with regard to *The Tempest*'s politics what philosophical edge the play's pastoral features have, what kind of society these features incline us to prefer, what ideology might be implied within them, and what the different characters observe with regard to the political construct. *The Tempest* contains some highly significant political passages in this respect. In Section Two, then, I hope to focus especially on the ones that relate specifically to the play's setting in the New World (and vice versa), and examine their validity against those conditions under which the play was written, as well as the conditions in which we read it.

Section and Chapter Outlines:

Section I – New World.

The brief introduction to this Section deals with how the play was first associated with the New World, as early as 1808 by Malone, and then most specifically argued by Sidney Lee almost one hundred years later. The introduction seeks to establish the turn criticism of the play has taken as a result of this in many ways revolutionary new reading. Of chief concern will be the 50-year gap between Lee's Americanist reading and Octave Mannoni's anti-colonialist interpretation in the '50s, and the latter's influence on post-colonial (and other ideological) readings of Caliban as an oppressed indigenous slave.

a) Physical setting and geography.

This chapter deals with the explicit geographical setting of the play as well as somewhat less tangible textual *hints and gestures* to (often highly ambiguous) geographical locales. As an island lying somewhere between Tunis and Naples, presumably in the shortest ship route between the two, the setting seems, at first glance, convincingly Mediterranean. Textual details, however, sometimes suggest otherwise, such as allusions to New World places like "the still-vex'd Bermoothes" and Miranda's "brave [N]ew [W]orld", Trinculo's mentioning of "dead Indian[s]" on display, and Patagonian deities like "Sycorax, [Caliban's] mother". The dropping of these strange and foreign references to the New World make for a natural focus on metaphorical setting, dealt with in the next chapter.

b) Metaphorical and "intended" setting.

This chapter is a natural continuation of the previous, focusing on how the critics of the past forty years have established *The Tempest*, especially amongst post- (and anti-) colonialist critics, as *the* quintessential colonialist play. The chapter delves into New

Historicist and Cultural Materialist analyses of the play, their respective common angles and methods, as well as significant differences. Important critical contributions by Octave Mannoni, Leo Marx, Leo Salinger, Paul Brown, Paul Barker, Peter Hulme, Thomas Cartelli, and Donna Hamilton will be examined in this chapter.

c) Caliban as Indian/African/Caribbean indigenous slave.

As many of the above mentioned critics have helped bolster the claim that *The Tempest* is “really” set in the New World, and that Prospero should therefore be seen as an imperialist and colonialist slave master, this chapter looks at the subsequent claim that Caliban ought to be seen as an American Native, or “Indian”. Critics like Meredith Anne Skura, Virginia and Alden T. Vaughan will be given special attention here, since their views of Caliban as Indian tend not to take the Americanist dimension at face value, and hence throw new light on both the setting of the play and Caliban’s origin.

d) Caliban as myth or monster.

This chapter in many ways contests the prevalent interpretative tendency, that Caliban be seen as an Indian, and explores Caliban rather as a product of European folklore and mythology naturally inclined to regard him as a monster or sub-human rather than a (New World) man. Critics like John Hollander and Frank Kermode, as well as Gunter Walch, have all suggested that Caliban is indeed more like the monsters of mediaeval nightmares, than the men the explorers encountered on the travels to the newly discovered lands in America. Contemporary travel narratives will prove particularly useful in this respect, in order to establish precisely what sort of impression English explorers had of the natives of America at the time of *The Tempest*, and how these initial encounters fit with the play’s treatment of Caliban.

e) Close reading.

The last chapter of the first Section endeavours to further illuminate, and tentatively reconcile and conclude the four previous problems by help of a close reading of the text. In short, this is a chapter which tries to resolve just where the island might be physically set, and what details in the play might suggest an alterative, *metaphorical* setting. The central point of interest here will be what sort of character – historical or literary – Caliban was (and has later come to be), and what the textual details themselves concerning him might contribute towards the play’s physical versus “intended” setting.

Section Two: Political and ideological implications.

The brief introduction to this Section will gesture towards the political discussions of colonialism and imperialism that have dominated much of recent *Tempest* criticism. I will also attempt to clarify on what grounds critics term the play as racist (if one chooses to see Caliban as an Indian) and oppressive in a colonial sense (again, if an Americanist angle is preferred), readings both closely dependent on setting. Of the greatest importance to my own political reading of the play are phenomena like masterlessness (or vagrancy), and the absolutist power struggles and power vacuum between which the play oscillates. Sometimes these power vacuums threaten to result in chaos (as seen in Caliban’s plot to have Prospero murdered), but other times envision a diametrically opposed scenario, as an *ordered* anarchy (oxymoron intended – Gonzalo speaks of being king in a society that has no laws), and a real sense of utopia which is only half-heartedly dismissed by Antonio and Sebastian as dystopian. Section Two is subdivided into three separate chapters:

a) A close look at (anti)colonial and postcolonial interpretations and appropriations:

Their respective political interpretations.

This chapter will look at major postcolonial critical and creative readings of *The Tempest*. I will consider especially Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, and George Lamming's *Pleasures of Exile*. Critics like Alden T. Vaughan will be given special attention here, as his work *Caliban: A Cultural History* deals with how South American colonialist readings, for example are highly different from African and Caribbean *post*-colonialist interpretations. This chapter examines the political and ideological thrust behind the demonizing of the character Caliban as both (European) colonizer and imperialist "Yanqui" (i.e. "Yankee" – a derogatory term used by South American intellectuals to account for the growing sense of frustration with U.S. domination in the Western hemisphere round the turn of the twentieth century) in early-twentieth-century colonial criticism, as well as his victimization as an oppressed and destitute post-colonial native.

b) Masterlessness, anarchy, chaos, pastoral politics.

This chapter intends to look at the potentially radical and subversive *motivation* behind the rebellions of Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo, seen against stubbornly absolutist and omnipotent monarchs. Perhaps most seductive and eloquent, though, is Gonzalo's Montaigne-inspired reverie about the free and idle pastoral life, a dreamy passage often dismissed by many critics as one of little significance in the discussion of politics. My reading of this passage is very important to the political aspects of my dissertation, since it is one that clearly yearns for a simpler life in a pastoral and demi-Edenic tradition (which harkens back to an Old World set of ideas and discourse), but was also, by 1611, a highly *topical* (in both senses of the word) passage. With the

discovery of the New World, a passage such as Gonzalo's is no longer the dreamy and utopian (as in its Greek roots: *ou-topos* = "nowhere", "no place") wishful thinking a number of critics have thought it to be. The New World began to suggest itself as the Atlantises, Edens, and Tir n'a Nogs of Old World religion, mythology, and folklore. Hence, because Gonzalo's passage is iterated at this particular juncture, the sense of utopia becomes *topographically* real, more than a mere "notion", and, which the Mayflower in 1620 will testify, has enormous political and historic ramifications.

c) Utopias, dystopias, Early Modern notions of The American Dream.

The final chapter examines every character's own idea of the perfect society (Miranda's "brave new [actually Old] world", Prospero's hard-fought new power and alliances with Tunis and Naples, Gonzalo's "plantation", etc.). Some of these are more verbally and eloquently put than others – in Caliban's case, after Prospero's departure, his sense of a *new* utopia (after it is clear that he will no longer be able to "be master o' the isle" or to "people[...] this isle with Calibans") is left hanging in the air. The chapter will pay particular attention to how the play operates with a political dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis with regard to (a mostly metaphorical) setting. In this dialectic especially Gonzalo's vision of the island (metaphorically, "America") is seen as the pastoral paradise against which tainted Europe may be criticised. This "America" in the Mediterranean – the sometimes very subversive *idea* of America transported to Europe – poses as radical a utopian threat to European order as the raw struggle for power between Prospero, Antonio, and Caliban is able to do. In this respect, Gonzalo's passage is a highly potent and intelligent discussion of an alternative society, and one which Prospero in many ways carries to its logical conclusion (admittedly via rather Machiavellian

realpolitik) of a Christian forgiveness which serves as the dialectical synthesis and final solution to the problem of power and evil.

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