“O, Brave New World
That Has Such People in It!”

An In-Depth Look into the Symbolism
Of Prospero and Caliban

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William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* was first printed in the 1623 collection of Shakespeare’s plays now known as the First Folio, but was presumably written and performed some time before. Even without knowing the exact year of composition, it can be said with confidence that *The Tempest* was written during a time of great cultural and political change. The London Company, an English company formed by James I in 1606 with the purpose of establishing colonial settlements in North America, established the first permanent English settlement in 1607. This settlement, called the Jamestown Settlement, became a source of great curiosity among the English population. Tales, many of them unfounded, began to circulate about the dangers of this New World and the strange creatures who reside there. Similarly, the rejection of medieval approaches in science and religion known today as the Age of Reason was another source of tension that arose during the dawn of the 17th century. New ideas of human rational led to the challenge of previous scientific thought. These scholarly innovations were very controversial and disturbing to many people. It is cultural tensions such as these that can be found reflected in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. More specifically, the characters of Prospero and Caliban represent these particular changes in thought, and by analyzing the actions and behaviors of these two characters one can gain an understanding of Shakespeare’s personal interpretation of these dramatic changes that arose in England during his lifetime.

In the analysis of Prospero one must first investigate his power. The text in *The Tempest* suggests that Prospero is a magician, that he possesses the miraculous ability to conjure creatures and cast spells. Modern intellectuals will also support these
assumptions. While some critics question exactly which powers are within Prospero’s capabilities, others simply ponder his categorization within the various levels of magical peoples: “The pattern established by Prospero’s magic acts and the duality of Prospero’s role, as both a worker of transitive magic and as a man whose fate concerns us, place him among the wizards.” However, if one were to simply investigate the text itself, it is clear that these curiosities are moot because Prospero does not possess any magical powers of the traditional sort.

Prospero addresses his own supposed magical accomplishments frequently in The Tempest. He clearly takes credit for these miracles, although a closer inspection of the text shows that it is Ariel who performed them all. The first example of this occurs with the tempest itself, the storm responsible for bringing Alonso and his men to the island on which Prospero resides. The creation of this storm is attributed to the magical abilities of Prospero, and he himself supports this assumption: “I did say so / When first I raised the tempest”. However, a conversation between Ariel and Prospero early in the play suggests that it was Ariel who created the storm. For not only does Ariel explain in detail how he transformed himself into elements of the tempest and guided the passengers of the ship with ease, but Prospero repeatedly inquires as to specific details of the events. Although one could assert that Ariel was acting on Prospero’s orders, it is obvious that Prospero had no involvement in the actual execution of this plan because if that were true

2 V.i.6-7.
then he would not need to hear the tale from Ariel and he certainly would not need to pose so many questions.

A similar example of the commonly misleading relationship of Ariel and Prospero is the manipulation of the other characters. At first glance, it seems as though the magician Prospero possesses the amazing ability to alter and predict the behavior of men. However, all of these tricks must also be attributed to the spirit Ariel. His musical and magical qualities allow him to manipulate whomever his master wishes: “So I charmed their ears...At last I left them I’ th’ filthy-mantled pool beyond your cell”.\(^3\) Once again Ariel must inform Prospero of whatever events occurred, effectively disproving both his involvement and his omniscience.

Upon careful examination of the text, one can find more examples of Prospero’s reliance on Ariel. When the ship that had previously been destroyed in the tempest was found miraculously intact, Ariel, in an aside to Prospero, states “Sir, all this service / Have I done since I went”.\(^4\) Similarly, after Miranda and Ferdinand expressed the expected fondness for each other, Prospero praises Ariel by saying “Thou hast done well, fine Ariel”, thereby illustrating that Ariel is responsible for the affection between the two characters.\(^5\)

It is clear that Ariel is responsible for the many miracles and magical happenings around the island. And it is easy to understand how the audience might mistakenly place credit on Prospero instead, as many scholars have done in the past: “Here we have a

\(^3\) IV.i.198-203.  
\(^4\) V.i.271-272.  
\(^5\) I.ii.602.
character quite different from any other Shakespeare ever created – one who knows that the ship of Alonso has left Africa and is on its way to Naples. Such omniscience would indicate some form of telepathy”. As with the example of the creation of the storm, Prospero repeatedly insinuates that his personal accomplishments were great when really he did little more than order Ariel to a task. Although the evidence for this fact can be found in several areas of the play, it is difficult to believe that the magic abilities belong to Ariel and not his master. It is a natural assumption to think that the character controlling Ariel must be more powerful than Ariel himself. In fact, the text suggests that Prospero has control over all of the mystical island creatures, not only Ariel or Caliban, which would certainly attest to the strength of his power.

It is important to note, however, that while Prospero certainly holds sway over Ariel, it is Ariel who holds sway over the other spirits. When Prospero seeks to have the island spirits perform a masque in celebration of the union of Miranda and Ferdinand, he cannot call forth the spirits himself, but relies once again on Ariel: “Go bring the rabble”. And although Prospero later refers to those secondary spirits as “Spirits, which by mine art / I have from their confines called to enact / My present fancies”, we can assume from previous precedents that Prospero is claiming the work of Ariel for his own recognition. No other evidence is given to suggest that he holds or has ever held any power over the island creatures, except for Caliban and Ariel.

7 IV.i.40.
8 IV.i.134-136.
Once it has been determined that Prospero’s power is limited to the influence of only two creatures, Ariel and Caliban, it is important to investigate the circumstances of their servitude. In each instance we are given only basic details without any indication as to the means of their enslavement. In the case of Ariel, we are told that Prospero released him after he was captured by the witch Sycorax and held within a tree. No specifications are made as to the manner in which he was released, although the audience is probably meant to assume that Prospero’s magic was involved. Similarly, it is unclear how Ariel’s release from captivity led to his enslavement, but assumptions can be made.

The history of Prospero’s relationship to Caliban is even more mysterious. Apparently they began with a mutually beneficial relationship, until Caliban attempted to assault his daughter Miranda, at which point he was somehow enslaved. Yet, once again, the specifications of the enslavement are unknown.

While the role of Prospero’s magic in the enslavement of these creatures is assumed by many, the lack of evidence is undeniable. Never once is there any indication that either Caliban or Ariel is being physically forced into action by some supernatural force or spell. Instead it appears that they are simply reluctantly following the orders of Prospero based on some sense of fear or obligation. If it is indeed true that Prospero somehow managed to release Ariel after he had been trapped for several years, it would not be difficult to suggest that the newly freed spirit felt as though he might owe Prospero something in return. Perhaps it is gratitude, and not magic, that causes Ariel to follow Prospero’s bidding. And maybe in the many instances in which Ariel requests his
freedom, he is truly requesting acknowledgment of a debt repaid. This theory is supported by the prosaic release of Ariel by Prospero at the end of the play: "My Ariel, chick, / That is thy charge. Then to the elements / Be free, and fare thou well". There is no sign of spells or chants, instead Prospero asks him to perform one final task before he gains his liberty.

In the case of Caliban, it is clear that it is not magic but fear that serves as the main source of his compliance. While Prospero frequently must coerce Caliban to observe his wishes by threatening violence and pain by magic, never does the audience witness Prospero actually following through with such a threat. Furthermore, when Caliban declares his abandonment of Prospero so that he may serve Stephano, there are no magical forces that prevent him from doing so. This suggests that perhaps the enslavement of Caliban involves no magic whatsoever, but instead the threatening and manipulation of a simple creature. And the fact that Caliban can so readily mistake a drunk for a god demonstrates how easily his ignorance could be used against him.

After reviewing the text carefully, the possibility that the character of Prospero possesses no magical abilities seems likely. The existence of magic on the island is irrefutable, but there is no evidence that Prospero controls any of it. The most that can be said for certain is that Prospero manages the magic and holds some influence over its usage. This is an understandable truth if one views Prospero as the scholar that he is, instead of the magician that he is not.

\[9\text{V.i.376-378}\]
An analysis of Prospero’s books solidifies his role as a scholar. These books are frequently portrayed as the source of his magical powers. When Caliban assists Stephano and Trinculo in planning the murder of Prospero, he is careful to specify the importance of the books: “Remember / First to possess his books, for without them / He’s but a sot, as I am, nor hath not / One spirit to command”. This passage attests that the books are the source of Prospero’s influence over the island creatures. Furthermore, when Prospero declares his intention to abjure his magic at the end of the play, he states that he will drown his book. These statements have contributed to the common misconception that Prospero possesses magical powers. Indeed, these books are usually visualized as some sort of mystical spell book by audience members.

Yet the text of the play informs us that the books of Prospero are of an academic nature, not a supernatural one. In the first act of the play, when Prospero tells the story of his political downfall to Miranda, he states that it was his passion for education in the liberal arts that caused him to neglect his ducal duties, resulting in his deposal: “And Prospero the prime duke, being so reputed / In dignity, and for liberal arts / Without a parallel. Those being all my study, / The government I cast upon my brother / And to my state grew stranger”. As he continues on with the tale, Prospero briefly mentions that those books which he had valued so highly were given to him by his sympathetic friend Gonzalo before he was exiled from his dukedom and sent to sea: “Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me / From mine own library with volumes that / I prize above my

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10 III.ii.100-103.
11 V.i.59-66.
12 I.ii.90-93.
dukedom”. From these simple statements, it is apparent that the books that have given
Prospero such great power within the island setting are texts of the liberal arts. The
books are indeed not the source of magical power, but of intellectual power.

To suggest that a man could possibly gain such immense authority over mystical
creatures with the use of earthly education might seem outrageous to the modern
audience. However, given the scholarly developments that were occurring during the
creation and production of The Tempest, it would not seem odd to the contemporary
viewer. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the true potential of the human
mind was being deeply explored for the first time since the work of the ancient Greeks.
Previously, education had always involved a strict coherence to the foundations of
ancient thought. Students followed and observed the same basic beliefs as Aristotle and
his peers, and all lessons were accepted blindly and without suspicion. However, during
the 17th century the intellectuals of Western Europe began to investigate and dismiss
previous scientific and philosophic theories. An influential academic leader of this time,
Rene Descartes, spoke of this dismissal in his literary work Meditations on First
Philosophy published in 1641:

"Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had
accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the
whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was
necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything
completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to
establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last." 14

13 I.ii.198-200.
14 Rene Descartes, Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff,
and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 76.
Although the work of Rene Descartes was not published until several years after the creation of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, it can easily be said that the need for renewal in scientific thought would have been felt, and tested, years prior to its expression in publication, especially since Descartes states that he felt this need early in his adult life. The character of Prospero is evidence of this fact in that he is a representation of this contemporary and suspicious scholar.

While the character of Prospero represents the new European scholar of the seventeenth century, the character of Caliban represents a very different figure of the time. Caliban symbolizes the peoples of the newly discovered areas of the world. And by analyzing the interesting interactions between this creature and Prospero, one can gain an understanding of the attitudes and beliefs that existed in regards to the separation between Europeans and the “others”.

There are few specific details provided on the subject of Caliban and his past. We are told that he is one of the few true natives to the island, born from the “foul witch Sycorax”. As such, he is treated as a monster and abused by all other characters. This quality could easily be compared to the treatment of native peoples in the New World. These peoples would be demeaned based on their birth instead of their personal natures, just as Caliban is deemed a monster based on the lowly status of his mother. Furthermore, Prospero’s possession of his island home is immediately reminiscent of the conquering of foreign territories by Europeans.

“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
This passage simultaneously illustrates the manner in which Prospero presumptuously seized control of the island and the benevolent manner in which Prospero and Caliban once interacted.

These two characters had once maintained a mutually beneficial relationship, yet now Caliban is enslaved. This is another commonality between the developments of the European colonies in the New World. With the original settling of the Virginia Colony, the Europeans and the native people sought to educate each other. They would often trade goods or food. However, after only a few years, tensions began to arise between the leaders of both groups. These tensions were usually results of territorial or trade disputes and they quickly escalated into violence. One colonialist described in a written testament one such event, in which an unfortunate colonialist named Humphrey Blunt was blown off course in a canoe resulting in his capture and "sacrifice" by the native Americans. In retaliation, the governor of the colony ordered a brutally violent attack on an Indian settlement. It would be easy to assume that the conflicts continued onward in such a manner, with instigation and violence from both sides. This situation is similar to

15 I.ii.396-406.
that of Prospero and Caliban because they each exemplify the souring of a previously comfortable relationship and each side holds fairly equal blame in the matter.

The behavior of the human characters in *The Tempest* towards Caliban offers further support of the symbolic nature of Caliban. Miranda admits to instructing Caliban in the English language so that they may communicate, an action that she claims to be ineffective in producing a cultured creature because of his "vile race". ¹⁷ This attitude of innate inabilities based solely on race or nationality is one that many Europeans applied to the peoples of the newly discovered areas of the world. And it is an attitude that could still be found within European thought for centuries afterwards. The description provided in an early twentieth century text of the various "backward races" of the world clearly illustrates this fact:

"The savage has not gone through that stage of settlement in a large well-ordered community...He is therefore comparatively unstable, without the same attachments either in space or time as the more cultivated of a later stage. He is the creature much more of emotion than reason, affectionate but violent, easily led but incapable of long views, of steady persistence, or of commanding others." ¹⁸

While such prejudiced views of foreign people were common within Europe, there were also individuals who spoke openly against them. Michel de Montaigne wrote in his essay *Of Cannibals* that native Americans "are still in such a state of purity that I am sometimes vexed that they were not known earlier, at a time when there were men who could have appreciated them better than we do". ¹⁹ The expression of such a

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¹⁷ Lii.430-431.
compassionate outlook is even more significant to the discussion of The Tempest because the first English translation of this essay would have appeared in 1603, the work of one of William Shakespeare's contemporaries and friends, John Florio. These facts would suggest that Shakespeare would have read these words and was perhaps moved by them.

The character of Stephano provides many insightful comments regarding his interpretation of Caliban following their first meeting. He immediately questions how Caliban could have learned to speak. He then asks "Have we devils here? Do you put tricks upon 's with savages and men of Ind?" Here, Stephano directly references the native people of America and categorizes them with both savages and devils. This also illustrates the negative perceptions that existed in Europe during the early seventeenth century regarding people of other origins.

The role of Caliban as a representative of the native peoples of the New World can also be detected when one views the primary sources that were created during the life of William Shakespeare. The most significant of these is the written account of the ship which traveled to the colony of Virginia in 1609 entitled A True Reportory of the Wrecke and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight. This source was authored by a man named William Strachey who was shipwrecked in the Bermudas while traveling to Virginia. Although this text was not published until after the death of Shakespeare, it has been determined that Shakespeare would have had access to the story, if not the text itself, even before its publication. Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, was a promoter of the Virginia Company and would have been aware of the events described in

\[20\] II.ii.58-59.
this source before it became public. Evidence also suggests that the author William Strachey and Shakespeare himself were within the same literary circles. All of this information shows that Shakespeare certainly would have heard the tale of this shipwreck even though it had not yet been published.

The close similarities in phrasing and other details between the events described in *A True Reportory of the Wrecke and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight* and William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* supports the theory that Shakespeare was aware of this tale. For example, the storm described by William Strachey is almost identical to that created by Ariel in *The Tempest*. Strachey states that a watchman on his ship “had an apparition of a little, round light, like a faint star, trembling and streaming along with a sparkling blaze, half the height upon the main mast and shooting sometimes from shroud to shroud, tempting to settle, as it were, upon any of the four shrouds”. 21 This mysterious light is very similar to the form Ariel took while creating the tempest in Shakespeare’s play: “I flamed amazement. Sometimes I’d divide / And burn in many places. On the topmast, / The yards, and bowsprit would I flame distinctly, / Then meet and join”. 22 These descriptions are clearly more similar than pure coincidence would allow. The notion that such a unique quality as these bizarre lights would appear in two completely separate tales is a virtual impossibility.

Another strong indication that William Shakespeare was influenced by the work of William Strachey is the presence of the uncommon word; glut. This word appears in

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21 Strachey, 12.
22 I.ii.234-237.
Strachey's text to describe the levels of water during the storm. This word also appears in *The Tempest* in a similar capacity. This fact is significant when one realizes that William Shakespeare only used the word “glut” once in all of his surviving works, and that was to describe the tempest. 23

The evidence strongly suggests that William Shakespeare had used the work of William Strachey in his writing of *The Tempest*. This tale, however, describes much more than a destructive storm. It tells of life in the colony of Virginia, and the tensions that existed between the colonialists and the native peoples. It would be easy to assume that if Shakespeare was so strongly influenced by the details of the shipwreck, he would be equally influenced by the rest of the story. The interesting and controversial subject of European domination of the New World would have been at the forefront of his mind while Shakespeare composed *The Tempest*.

Now that it has been established that Shakespeare was referencing texts which addressed the New World, and that the character Caliban appears to represent those conquered peoples, one must investigate what opinion, if any, was portrayed within the text of *The Tempest* regarding this sensitive subject.

If Caliban is truly meant to be a depiction of foreign peoples, one might assert that the image portrayed is an unflattering one. Caliban is repeatedly referred to as monstrous and appears to be of the most foolish nature. He admittedly attacked Prospero’s daughter Miranda and later decides to worship two drunken sailors. He is a blatantly flawed character and one might wonder if Shakespeare was intentionally portraying the natives

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23 Strachey, 7.
of the New World in a negative light. However, closer examination of the text shows that although Caliban is certainly not perfect, neither are the other characters within the play, demonstrating a sense of human equality.

When the actions of each character are compared more closely, the behavior of Caliban is not far from the equally appalling behavior of the others. While Caliban does admit to assaulting Miranda in an effort to “people else / This isle with Calibans”, the character of Stephano plans to do the same if given the opportunity.  

24 In planning the murder of Prospero and the seizure of the island, Stephano states that he will take Miranda and they will rule the island as king and queen. It seems that this European figure is equally unconcerned with the consent of his partners as the creature Caliban.

Caliban’s stupidity is easily identifiable when he joins Stephano and Trinculo. He displays shocking ignorance in mistaking Stephano for a deity. However, Caliban eventually comprehends his mistake and corrects it by saying “I’ll be wise hereafter / And seek for grave. What a thrice-double ass / Was I to take this drunkard for a god”.  

25 The fact that Caliban was able to learn from his mistake shows him to be a logical creature. Although many of the other characters of the play were guilty of equally grave mistakes, they did not repent in the way Caliban did.

By analyzing the characters of the text, it is clear that *The Tempest* holds more than simple entertainment value. Instead, it is a critique of the changes in thought that were occurring in early seventeenth century Europe. Prospero, the seemingly omnipotent

24 I.ii.420-421.
25 V.i.351-353.
magician, represents the evolving European scholar. Caliban, the beastly slave, represents the mysterious peoples of the New World. Together, they demonstrate the fragile relationship between these two groups in the contemporary context.

"O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O, brave new world
That has such people in 't!"26

This statement, perhaps the most well known quote from the play, effectively illustrates the underlying message of *The Tempest*. It praises the beauty of diversity within humanity. It also references the "New World", the term used to describe the Americas. However, in an interesting twist, this proclamation of surprised wonder over the "brave new world" was actually spoken by Miranda when she first encounters the men of Europe. To her, a woman raised on a secluded island, these men are new and beautiful. She shows that the people of Europe may appear to be just as strange to the people of the New World as they believe those natives to be. And although Europeans might consider themselves to be of superior intellect, with new theories and fascinating discoveries, the different peoples of the world possess the same rational capabilities, and perhaps more moral fiber. The lesson to be found within *The Tempest* is one of tolerance, humility, and cooperation. These are invaluable qualities to any society, regardless of race or century, because the underlying issues in Elizabethan England are not far from those that exist today. And while it is difficult to ascertain what impacts these lessons had on Shakespeare’s original audience, it is clear that his work has affected many people since then in a way that is immeasureable.

26 V.i.215-218.
Bibliography


