

# CALIBAN IN SHAKESPEARE'S "THE TEMPEST": A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

In "The Tempest", William Shakespeare draws the character of Caliban with dubious shades. Critics down the ages have responded differently to the portrayal of Caliban. While some have downright dismissed him as a lowly savage, others (especially the post colonial critics) have focused on Caliban as the subjugated victim of colonial domination. Nonetheless, the portrayal of Caliban has interesting shades which have baffled and interested Shakespearean critics and audience. "The character of Caliban," as Hazlitt has put it, "is generally thought (and justly so) to be one of the author's masterpieces." Caliban has been wonderfully conceived as the embodiment of all that is gross and earthy – 'a sort of creature of the earth, as Ariel is a sort of creature of the air' (Coleridge). Indeed, the complexity of the character is reflected in the large volume of critical discussion that has grown around it. Morton Luce is of the opinion that "Caliban is not one but three. The monster, the slave, the aboriginal Indian – these are the three parts played by this triple character, who thus with a doubtful consistency fulfills the poet's three-fold purpose and serves as embodiment of the supernatural, the social and political topics of the day". According to Prof. Wilson, "Caliban is Shakespeare's portrait of the missing link" (in [Darwin's theory of evolution](#)) – a sort of "pre-Darwinian realization of the intermediate link between brute and man." It seems that Shakespeare having exhausted the world for purposes of characterization imagined a new order of character in this 'hag-seed.'

# Caliban: His History and Origin

When the play opens Caliban is twenty-four years of age, having been born on the island twelve years before the coming of Prospero. His mother was the foul witch **Sycorax**, who was banished from Algiers for "mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible to enter human hearing" and the father was the Devil himself. Thus, Caliban is a monster of evil and brute nature; ugly, deformed and stinking. Interestingly, the name has a phonological connection with the word cannibal, bringing up sinister satanic connotations.

## Caliban: His Physical Appearance

The make-up for the part of Caliban seems to have been a problem with Shakespearean produces, for his fantastic exterior is not clearly defined. It has to be pictured from some hints contained in the play. He is 'freckled,' a misshapen knave', 'not honoured with a human shape.' Prospero calls him 'thou tortoise.' Trinculo stumbling upon him describes him thus: "A strange fish... Legged like a man! And his fins like arms!" He "smells like a fish." All these confirm the theory of Wilson that Caliban is a primitive sea-monster, which is just subhuman and slowly emerging into the human. However, Trinculo and Stefano's descriptions are untrustworthy, since the first is frightened by the storm, and the second is drunk.

Caliban is described in the Folio edition of *The Tempest* as 'a savage and deformed slave'. The word 'salvage' is an earlier form of modern 'savage' but in Shakespeare's day it meant 'wild and uncivilized' rather than 'cruel or bestial.' Most people in England believed that uncivilized men were below their civilized counterparts in the hierarchy, which had God at its apex and inanimate nature at its base. However, some were beginning to question this assumption and there is evidence in the play that Shakespeare believed that the corruption in a civilized man was more abhorrent than any natural, albeit uncivilized behaviour. Caliban's deformity is never exactly specified. He is insultingly referred to as a 'tortoise', a 'fish' and a 'beast' and in the final act Prospero described as 'This misshapen knave' and as one who is

“.....as disproportioned in his manners  
As in his shape.”

It seems, therefore, that he has a physical deformity but his spiritual inferiority is also suggested by Prospero's claim that his birth resulted from a union between his mother, a witch, and the devil.

However, such choice of words may be seen as a tragic consequence of the Western ideologies which chose to marginalize 'the other' as inferior and deviation from normality.

## Caliban's Savagery and Malignant Nature

Caliban is entirely a creature of the earth: gross, brutal and savage. He regards himself as the rightful 'possessor of the island and Prospero as a usurper. In his young age he was on good terms with the usurper and consented to be received by the latter in his house and to be educated by him. But being 'capable of all ill', there will be no print of goodness in him'. He has learnt human language only to curse the master whom he abhors. Prospero "could only unfold his understanding, without, in the slightest degree, taming his rooted malignity; it is as if the use of reason and human speech were communicated to an awkward ape" (Schligel). Human speech is considered to be the ultimate hallmark of sophistication. In showing Caliban as incapable of decent articulation, Shakespeare further degrades Caliban to the level of bestiality.

His beastly nature soon breaks out and ends in a vicious attack on Miranda. This opens the eyes of Prospero who becomes severe to him and enforces his service by threats and violence. Prospero uses him to make dams for fish, to fetch firewood, scrape trenches, wash dishes and keep his cell clean.

## Caliban's Hatred for Prospero

A profound hatred for Prospero has taken hold of Caliban and filled all his nature. It springs from a sense of his being dispossessed and ill-treated. He would kill Prospero if he could, but he knows the power of Prospero's 'book.' Hence, he transfers his allegiance to Stephano who seems like a god to him and incites the two drunken associates to batter the skull of Prospero when he sleeps in the afternoon. There is obviously an opposition, between Caliban's instinctive knowledge of the natural and Prospero's studied knowledge of the supernatural.

From a moral standpoint, Caliban's motive for murder is less ignoble than that of Antonio and Sebastian. They plan to kill Alonso to gain his power and wealth. Caliban merely wants revenge and the return of 'his' island. Caliban's assault on Miranda may also be seen as either a desperate attempt to defy the codes of subjugation imposed upon him or a purely natural instinct driven by curiosity.

## Caliban's Instinctive Intelligence

He has learnt Prospero's language:

You taught me language; and my profit on't  
Is, I know how to curse.

He is well aware of the futility of arguing with one who has more power than he has:

"I must obey, his art is such power,  
It would control my dam's god, Setebos  
And make a vassal of him"

He realises the importance of Prospero's 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"

And he knows the value of stealth when attacking an enemy:

"Pray you, tread softly, that the blind mole me not

Hear a foot fall; we now are near his cell."

Caliban has a better set of values than Stephano and Trinculo. They are distracted from their plan by their greed for Prospero's rich garments. Only Caliban realizes that such finery is unimportant:

"Leave it alone, thou fool, it is but trash."

Caliban is not a good judge of character. He decides, for example, that Stephano is a god because he dispenses 'celestial liquor' but then it must be remembered that he has only known his mother, Prospero, Miranda and the spirits that torture him. He quickly discovers his error of judgment, however:

"What a thrice-double ass

Was I, to take this drunkard for a god

And worship this dull fool!"

Such a character trait clearly shows Caliban's inherent innocence and lack of shrewd understanding of complex civil society.

## Caliban's Imaginative Nature

There is hardly a touch of Shakespeare's art of characterization which has been applied with more consummate skill than this which brings out the poetic side of Caliban's character. If Caliban is subhuman in what has been said above, he is human in this respect. He listens to the music with rapture. He tells of the beautiful dreams in which heaven rains treasures upon him and which upon waking he yearns to renew. "He is a poetical being in his own way; he always speaks in verse."

His language, as Morton Luce says, is 'half-picture and half-music.' Indeed one of the most poetical passages in the whole play is the description of the island has come from him:

“Do not be feared; this isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.”

It reveals the soul of a poet in Caliban. We may well hope that he is capable of redemption, being possessed of a soul, which Ariel has not.

## Caliban: His Ambiguity and Significance

Many stage productions of *The Tempest* have depicted Caliban in varied ways — from the noble North American Indian, to African, to South American Indian or Mexican. Caliban's character is not delineated very clearly, so it is not easy to say whether he is a poor savage being grossly maltreated by Prospero or whether he is easy and must therefore be kept in subjection. He is contrasted with Ariel who is a spirit and thus ethereal, swift and uninterested in physical activities; he is contrasted also with Prospero who is the all-powerful master of the island and of the destiny of all those on the island; and finally he is contrasted with civilized man, showing himself to be less evil than Antonio and Sebastian, and less materialistic than Stephano and Trinculo if less knowledgeable than Prospero. Caliban's portrayal is therefore based not so much on direct delineation as on derived understanding based on his "otherness" or difference. The interaction between Caliban and Prospero affords interesting material for examination. Caliban has suffered at the hands of Prospero and he has learnt to curse by listening to Prospero's abuse. He certainly believes that Prospero has deprived him of his birthright and perhaps this was Shakespeare's way of confronting the audience with the problems of ownership of newly discovered lands. The growing critical interest in the character portrayal of Caliban is a sign of alternative perspectives in Shakespearean criticism, founded on deconstruction and post-colonial ideologies. This depends largely on the social and cultural constructs and subject-positions of the reader or audience.

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