

The Tempest: For an age or for all time?

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Hi everyone. My name is Dr Gabriella Edelstein. I'm a Lecturer in English at the University of Newcastle. I specialise in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. What you're going to hear today is a 30-minute lecture on *The Tempest*. I'm going to focus on the themes of race, colonisation, and how our understanding of Shakespeare changes over time. I've also developed some questions to spark your thinking about the play and its language. I hope you find this useful, and hopefully interesting! I know Shakespeare can be hard. My biggest tip for when you're reading is to imagine what's happening on stage. Look for verbs in the text – verbs tell you what the actors are meant to be doing. This helps you visualise the action. My other biggest tip is to get up and perform scenes! It's fun, weird, and is the best insight into what the plays are about. Good luck for your HSC year, and hopefully we'll meet one day at university!

How we interpret Shakespeare changes over time. We're told that Shakespeare is universal, 'not of an age, but for all time', in the words of fellow playwright Ben Jonson, but the truth is that we read and understand Shakespeare's plays according to the state of the world and its politics at a particular moment. That is to say, how we learn about Shakespeare usually tells us more about our own context rather than Shakespeare's. Shakespeare was a product of the early modern period. "Early modern" is the term we use for European history, it is the period roughly around 1450-1700, which includes the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras that Shakespeare was writing in. Because Shakespeare was a product of his time and culture, his ideas are very different from our own.

For example, we tend to read his plays which feature characters from racial and cultural minorities – such as *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* – as being about prejudice. It wasn't always like this. Although Shakespeare gives characters like Shylock and Othello nuanced and multifaceted personalities, people in the seventeenth century would have identified these cultural outsiders as the plays' "bad guys". The idea of race is much more nuanced for us now. For twenty-first century literary critics, when we read or see characters

like *Othello* and *Shylock* we're more likely to think about how the representation of these outsiders reflects the beliefs and prejudices of early modern Europe. Ironically, critics used to ignore the importance of race in *Othello*, arguing that the play is not about the tragic general's blackness at all. It was widely thought that *Othello* is a play about jealousy. The critical tide has turned, and now we see it as Shakespeare's defining play about race.

The same process of interpretative renewal has also happened to *The Tempest*, perhaps more so than any other Shakespeare play. During the nineteenth century, the prevailing interpretation of *The Tempest* was that the play is an allegory for artistic, specifically theatrical, creation. Prospero, the magician-duke at the centre of the play, was interpreted as a stand-in for Shakespeare himself because the play is filled with self-knowing references to theatre and stagecraft. We call these sorts of winking references to theatre inside plays "metatheatre" – it's when a play draws attention to its nature as a piece of drama, and to how it's being performed. Like a playwright, Prospero orchestrates and directs the characters around him into various performances and theatrical tableaux. The exiled duke directs the storm that begins the play, he manipulates the action, organises settings and props, and tells his "actors" what to do. He even writes the magical spirit world into his grand performance, having them perform as goddesses and monsters.

The critical tradition of the play, before fifty years ago, has interpreted Prospero as Shakespeare in stage form. Prospero was understood to be a benevolent artist who is putting on one last theatrical hurrah before he retires away his magic. Why did scholars see Prospero as Shakespeare? Because it was believed that *The Tempest* was his last play, and thus *The Tempest* was Shakespeare's goodbye to the theatre and writing. We now know that this wasn't the case: Shakespeare wrote three plays after *The Tempest* with a collaborator, so *The Tempest* wasn't his goodbye to the theatre after all. By limiting our interpretations of Shakespeare's plays to the playwright himself, we blind ourselves to the other potential meanings of the texts. These sorts of Shakespeare-centric readings have a name in literary criticism. We call it "Bardolatry" – it's a portmanteau of the words "idolatry" and "Bard", as Shakespeare was known as the "Bard of Avon". Why is all of this important? Because it tells us that our interpretation of Shakespeare changes over time.

Whilst it's certainly useful to think about *The Tempest* in relation to theatre, it is not useful to think of the play as being *about* Shakespeare.

By the 1960s, this Bardolatrous interpretation of *The Tempest* was largely put to bed. But what emerged as the theory replacing the idea that *The Tempest* is about Shakespeare's playwriting? During the twentieth century, critical thinkers started looking at *The Tempest* in a different light, through the theory of what we call "postcolonialism". Postcolonialism is a way of looking at society and the literature that it produces through studying the legacy of imperialism, which is the creation of empires. Literally meaning "after colonialism", postcolonialism is interested in what we call "colonial discourses". If you haven't heard the word "discourse" before, it's a word that comes from the literary theory of poststructuralism, meaning the way that a concept is spoken and thought about. So, how did colonial powers – like the Belgium, Spanish, French, German, Italian, and English empires – think, talk about, *represent* and write about the countries and the peoples they colonised? Postcolonial criticism often analyses these literary and artistic representations but also "talks back to" empire by reinterpreting colonial works of theatre and literature in empowering ways. For example, what would it mean to perform a play like *Othello* in South Africa before and after Apartheid? Or even *The Tempest* in Australia? Postcolonial theory asks these sorts of questions.

As colonised countries across the world became independent from the empires which controlled them – countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean – it became more and more obvious that *The Tempest* is open to a postcolonial reading. In the 1960s and 1970s, Shakespeareans started to notice that there was something fishy going on in terms of "Prospero's" island. I use these words intentionally – as Caliban, who is frequently described to the audience as looking like a fish, tells the audience, the island never belonged to Prospero. Caliban angrily accuses Prospero, 'This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me' (1.2.331-32). But it's worth noting that Sycorax did not come from the island either but was exiled there for her magic. The only character indigenous to the island, it turns out, is the spirit Ariel. So there's a lot of complexity in the play about who has the right to the island. My point is this: Shakespeare scholars were no longer convinced that Prospero is some kind of benevolent, godly creator, practising 'the liberal arts' (1.2.91).

Rather, Prospero began to be seen as the island's coloniser, exerting his rule over the island's inhabitants: the 'thing of darkness' (5.1.330) Caliban and his airy 'servant' (1.2.220) Ariel.

Through a postcolonial reading, we can better see two of the play's main themes: imprisonment and control. There is imprisonment throughout the play. This is an idea that Margaret Atwood picked up in *Hag-seed*, which she sets in a literal prison. In *The Tempest*, Prospero and Miranda are exiled and imprisoned on an island in the Mediterranean. Ferdinand is imprisoned by Prospero and made to perform grunt labour. Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, and Gonzago are imprisoned within their madness on the island. Prospero even asks the audience to set him free with their applause at the end of the play! But we can especially see the theme of imprisonment and control if we look closely at Prospero's relationship with Ariel and Caliban.

Ariel and Caliban seem, at first, like very different characters. Ariel gains the audience's respect through his magical powers, and Caliban is largely the source of the other characters' derision. But the audience is meant to see a parallel between these two characters. They were both on the island before Prospero and Miranda arrive, they're both represented through natural metaphors, they are both under Prospero's control, and both of them have some of the most the play's most mellifluous and beautiful language. Modern audiences tend to empathise much more with Caliban and Ariel than with the plays "human" characters, because we see in the island's original inhabitants the suffering that comes with powerlessness and enslavement.

We can understand the theme of control and imprisonment when we first meet Ariel. In some ways, Ariel is the play's most powerful character: he has magic powers that exceed even Prospero's. But he is also one of the most powerless characters because he has no agency: he is, in effect, an indentured servant. We learn of Ariel's servitude when we first see him interact with Prospero. The spirit asks Prospero for his freedom, gently reminding him that the duke has already promised Ariel his liberty:

ARIEL

Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains,

If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak
And peg thee in his knotty entrails till
Thou has howled away twelve winters. (1.2.349-51)

That's a pretty extreme response to Ariel asking for his freedom, speaking negatively to Prospero's character, and perhaps also settler-colonialism at large.

In fact, even if Prospero is the play's hero, the audience is also meant to view him with some disapproval. Though no one would say he deserved to be exiled to an island, Prospero was also a failure of a duke. He tells Miranda that he spent more time in his study learning magic than ruling his people, which meant that he could not see his brother and Alonso's conspiracy against him unfolding:

Those being all my study,
The government I cast upon my brother
And to my state grew stranger, being transported
And rapt in secret studies. (1.2.92-95).

In Shakespeare's plays, bad kings are always punished in some way or another, even if the play has a happy ending. If you abnegate your responsibility as a ruler, you may as well abnegate your happiness, according to Shakespeare. At the end of *As You Like It*, the bad duke goes off to become a monk to atone for his crimes. Macbeth, Claudius, and King Lear die for being bad kings. In another dark Shakespeare comedy, *The Winter's Tale*, the king's young son dies as punishment for the king's irrational jealousy. So, within the logic of Shakespearean theatre, Prospero too deserves punishment – he forgot his responsibility was to his citizens first, and not to magic. What differentiates *The Tempest* though, is that at the end of the play, Prospero too must show humility and remorse to be forgiven and set free from the island.

Thinking about *The Tempest* through a postcolonial reading can particularly help us understand the characterisation of Caliban. More so than Ariel, Caliban is reminiscent of the struggle of indigenous, colonised people the world over. Caliban is sometimes thought of in relation to the seventeenth century's Atlantic slave trade, in which people from Africa were trafficked to the Americas, sold, and condemned to slavery. But *The Tempest* was written nearly ten years before the beginning of the Anglo-American slave trade. Rather, this play

and the character of Caliban can help us understand European ideas about what seventeenth-century people called the “New World” and its inhabitants. The New World, in contrast to the Old World of Europe, was the name given to the continent that holds the Americas. In a way it’s hard for us, as twenty-first century people, to imagine, but before the fifteenth century European people did not know that there was a whole other, enormous, continent in the world, with people who looked different and had different cultures, societies, and religions. For us, it may be like learning about alien life. As Miranda says, when she meets the other characters at the end of the play, ‘O, brave new world / That has such people in ‘t!’ (5.1.217-18). *The Tempest* is also a play about discovery – discovering new people, new places, new cultures. But neither *The Tempest* nor we should romanticise these discoveries.

By reading and analysing Shakespeare and the ideas about discovery he references, we can better understand the past, or ‘the dark backward and abysm of time’ (1.2.61-2), as Miranda calls it. Shakespeare, of course, never went to the Americas, and *The Tempest* is set in the Mediterranean. Why then do postcolonial critics see this play in relation to New World exploration and colonisation? Because Shakespeare references books, news accounts, and sermons from the period that discuss what European explorers found in the Americas.

Even the plot of the play is derived from an historical event that Shakespeare read about. The English began colonising North America in 1606, founding the colony of Virginia. Three years later, in 1609, a convoy of ships travelled to Virginia to re-supply the developing colony. But the ships sailed into a hurricane off the islands of Bermuda. The flagship called the *Sea Venture* was separated from the rest of the fleet and went down, whilst the rest of the vessels made it to Virginia. They assumed that the 150 people upon the *Sea Venture* were drowned. Ten months later, to the great shock and awe of the people in Jamestown, those people travelling on the *Sea Venture* arrived. As it turned out, they were marooned in Bermuda for 10 months, where they built small boats that later brought them to Jamestown. Shakespeare was engaged with the world around him and would have read about these sorts of expeditions in books and news pamphlets.

Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, considered the Americas with a sense of wonder. But *The Tempest* also shows us his ambivalence – ambivalence means having contradictory thoughts or feelings – particularly about the ways that Europeans relate to the indigenous peoples whose land they appropriated. It was easy for Europeans to see the peoples they met in the New World as “savages” and “barbarians”, because they were not white, Christian, or living in civilisations that approximated the cities of the Old World. Most Europeans were simultaneously fascinated and horrified by the indigenous people of the Americas, even going so far as capturing people and bringing them to London for Englishmen to gawk at. *The Tempest* mentions this practice. When Trinculo first sees Caliban he says, ‘Were I in England now... and had this fish painted, not a holiday fool there would give me a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man’ (2.2.28-31). He means that this “monster” – as in Caliban – would make Trinculo very rich. Shakespeare is referencing a man called Martin Forbisher, who captured three Inuit people and took them to England to put them on display. The Inuit man, woman, and child died soon after they arrived in England. Shakespeare seems to acknowledge the cruelty and irony of this practice – as Trinculo says, ‘When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian’ (2.2.32-4), as in: Londoners will not give out any money to help the poor, but they’ll pay handsomely to see a dead Native American.

We do sense, throughout the play, the characters’ disgust at people who are different. Reviled by Prospero and Miranda, and then derided later by the clowns Stephano and Trinculo, the audience’s relationship to Caliban is an ambiguous one. Are we meant to be disgusted by him too? This ‘freckled whelp’ (1.2.336) and ‘poisonous slave’ (1.2.383), as Prospero calls him, is set up for us as an antagonist. After all, he did attempt to rape Miranda to people the island ‘with Calibans’ (1.2.421-2). This is, no doubt, a disturbing crime. And Caliban is represented as irrational, aggressive, unfaithful, and foolish. This representation makes us think of the various racist stereotypes colonisers held of indigenous people, seeing them as barbarians who can’t be civilised.

But the play also wants us to question our assumptions when it comes to Caliban. When writing *The Tempest*, Shakespeare was reading the writings of a philosopher called Michel de Montaigne. We know this because Gonzago quotes almost word for word Montaigne’s

ideas in an essay called “Of Cannibals” (1580). This philosophical essay is about the possibilities of the New World being a utopia where there are no ‘riches, poverty... treason, felony, sword, pike, knife, gun’ (2.1.165, 176-7). But much more importantly, Montaigne got Shakespeare thinking about the fine line between the “savage” and the “civilised”. Indeed, even the name Caliban is an anagram of “Cannibal”. In the essay, Montaigne writes about the ceremonies of the Tupinamba people of Brazil, who ate their dead enemies after battle as a matter of honour. Sure, this is disturbing to other cultures where cannibalism is a horrifying concept. But Montaigne was making a point about something called cultural relativism – this is the idea that we cannot use our own culture as the basis for understanding someone else’s. Montaigne writes, ‘We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed them’. The philosopher’s point is this: the Tupinamba may eat their enemies, but they also have a society that is free of, I quote, ‘lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction’ – and the problems of riches and poverty that Gonzago mentions. So, the characters may see Caliban as barbarous in comparison to the Old World culture, but on the island, Caliban’s actions are perfectly natural.

The play makes a point of telling the audience that Prospero has exerted his control over Caliban and the island. When we first meet Caliban, we learn that before meeting Prospero, he had no language, though he did understand the music of the island. So whilst Prospero taught Caliban ‘To name the bigger light and how the less’ (1.2.401-2) – meaning, giving him the names for the sun and the moon – Caliban taught Prospero ‘all the qualities o’ th’ isle, / The fresh springs, brine fits, barren places and fertile’ (1.2.403-5). The two mutually educated each other. But whilst Caliban could have survived without Prospero’s language, Prospero wouldn’t have survived without Caliban’s help. The audience also learns that, at the beginning of their relationship, that Prospero ‘stok’st’ Caliban and ‘made much of’ him (1.2.397-8), but now keeps Caliban inside of a cave and tortures him if he disobeys Prospero’s orders. As Caliban accuses the duke:

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. (1.2.409-12)

Caliban also laments how Prospero's spirits pinch and prick him. He tells the audience that 'Sometimes am I / All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues / Do hiss me into madness' (2.2.12-14). We hear in these lines Prospero's cruelty. His actions of caring for Caliban, then subsequently enslaving, torturing, and appropriating his land look uncannily like the processes of colonisation that we are familiar with.

Shakespeare also gives Caliban the honour of having one of the play's most beautiful speeches. When Ariel plays music to Caliban and the two clowns, Trinculo and Stephano are scared. But Caliban says to them:

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 sometimes voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
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 waked
I cried to dream again. (3.2.148-56)

We hear in Caliban's speech a true love of the island, his knowledge of its mysteries, and his sensitivity to nature. He describes hearing the music of the island, and his tears as he hoped to hear the sounds again. As a poet, Shakespeare delights in musical sounding language, and some of his most famous speeches are of this ilk – I'm thinking of the 'I know a bank where the wild thyme grows' speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the 'sceptred isle' speech from *Richard II*, where melodic language seduces the listener into appreciating the beauty of words and the natural world. Caliban cannot be such a savage if he loves words and nature. Unlike the other characters of the play, Caliban is the only one with a true love for the island.

But as I mentioned before – the characterisation of Caliban is ambivalent. He does, after all, attempt to rape Miranda and kill Prospero. So we need to understand Shakespeare's play as a product of its time. Shakespeare may have sympathy for Caliban, using the themes of power and imprisonment, whilst also showing horror and disgust at otherness and

difference. We cannot expect Shakespeare to have our values – the plays are not products of *our* time – but the way we understand the plays are very much dependent on our historical context. As I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, *The Tempest* used to be understood as Shakespeare's swan song celebrating theatre. But because of our coming to terms with colonial history, *The Tempest* is now largely understood through postcolonial readings. What will *The Tempest's* future be? A lot of scholarship being written about this play now is to do with the representation of storms and weather. Why? Because we are going through an ecological crisis. Shakespeare was not, as the saying goes, "a man for all time". Rather, he is a man who adapts to the times. What we think about Shakespeare tells us more about ourselves, and that's something we need to keep in mind when studying his plays.

So thanks everyone, I hope you enjoyed that, or learned something! Best of luck with your studies. Take care!