The Tempest: The Dream as the Reality

Rosa Navarro
SLE Tutor- Douglas B.
Patrick Hunt
March 1, 1999
Essay # 3
William Shakespeare’s The Tempest, was first performed in London, in 1611. The time period it was performed in is important, because it was in the same period as the English colonization of the America’s. The Tempest presents a complex metaphor that reflects actual events in the New World during Shakespeare’s era, as portrayed in Prospero’s actions, as well as the European attitude of the New World natives, conveyed in the character of Caliban.

Shakespeare provides the play with a clever clue that leads one to believe the story is indeed about America: Caliban one of the principle characters, is a reflection of the New World inhabitant through the European perspective. “Carib,” the name of an Indian tribe, came to mean a savage of America, and from it, the word ‘cannibal’ is derived. Shakespeare sometimes rearranges letters in words (“Amleth”, the name of a prince in a Viking era tale, for example, became “Hamlet”), and here he creates another anagram in “Caliban.” Therefore since Caliban’s name is but ‘cannibal’ rearranged, it can be seen that Shakespeare chooses to convey the European understanding of the New World natives in Caliban’s character.

To the Europeans, the native people of the America’s were viewed as ignorant, uncivilized, and wild- their opposite in many ways. Unlike themselves, Europeans believed that the Indians were dominated by their passions, especially their sexuality. Amerigo Vespucci, whose name was to be given to these natives’ world, was struck by how the natives embraced and
enjoyed the pleasures of their bodies: "They.... are libidinous beyond measure, and the women far more than the men... When they had the opportunity of copulating with Christians, urged by excessive lust, they defiled and prostituted themselves" (Source: SLE Lecture: The New World in the European Imagination). In The Tempest, we see such passions Vespucci observed in the New World natives, personified in Caliban. His master, Prospero, sees Caliban as a sexual threat to his daughter, Miranda, whose "virgen-knot" is yet untied. "I have used thee (filth as thou art) with humane care," Prospero scolds Caliban, "and lodged thee in mine own cell till thou didst seek to violate the honor of my child" (The Tempest 1.2, line 344-48). With Prospero’s statement, Shakespeare conveys the base lustfulness in Caliban.

Shakespeare then goes on to reinforce the idea of Caliban’s dark nature in Caliban’s response to Prospero: "O ho, O ho! Would't had been done! Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else this isle with Calibans" (The Tempest 1.2, line 349-50). Caliban’s lack of penitence and shame emphasize his incivility and savagery. To the New World explorers and colonists, the natives appeared like Caliban, in that they failed to control their appetites, to create boundaries separating mind from body. In a sense, Caliban represents man on a lower scale of development. According to Gines Sepulveda, “the natural law [is] to obey those who are outstanding in virtue and character, in the same way that matter yields to form, body to soul, sense to reason,... the worse to the better,... to the
advantage of both” (In Defense Of The Indians, pg. 12). Sepulveda here seems to imply that to be civilized requires denial of wholeness- the repression of the instinctual forces of human nature. The body must yield to the soul, and one’s physical desires to one’s reason. This lack of denial of physical lust evident in Caliban’s attempt at raping Miranda, reinforces his savage nature. Sepulveda would probably agree it is to “the advantage of both” that Caliban is Prospero’s servant.

Contrasting with Caliban, Prospero, a personification of Sepulveda’s civilized man, identifies himself as mind rather than body. His epistemology is reliant on the visual rather than the tactile and on the knowledge of books rather than the knowledge of experience. Prospero is therefore able to split off his rationality and raise it to authority over the “other”- the sensuous part of himself and everything Caliban represents. Caliban’s distinctive physical characteristics signify his intellectual incapacity. Caliban is referred to as a “thing of darkness”, whose “nature nurture [could] never stick” (The Tempest 1.2, line 342-44). In other words, his physical appearance is representative of natural qualities that prevent him from becoming ‘civilized’ through Prospero’s nurture, or education.

The contrast in Prospero and Caliban’s characters is also emphasized in the locations of their residences on the island. Caliban protests to Prospero: "Here you sty me in this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me the rest o' the island" (The Tempest 1.2, line 342-44). Prospero justifies this segregation, with
stating that the "savage" possesses distasteful qualities, "which good natures could not abide to be with... therefore wast thou deservedly confined into this rock, who hadst deserved more that a prison" (The Tempest 1.2, line 360-62). Here we can see how Shakespeare manages to convey that, eventhough the island originally belonged to Caliban, he is now forcefully excluded from the majority of the island. Prospero also makes it seem as if he has been very just to Caliban whose nature, Prospero believes, is worthy of worse than a prison. It is also important to note how, through the choice of the word "sty" to describe Caliban’s residence; Shakespeare emphasizes his animal-like nature. This segregation can also be an important reference to events in the New World during colonization: Indians were driven out of their own lands and pushed farther inland, because living together with the incoming flow of Europeans was not possible.

Prospero taught Caliban the English language: "I ...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 endowed thy purposes with words that made them known" (The Tempest, 1.2, line 354-58). In this statement we see how Prospero considered Caliban’s native tongue “gabble”, and because Caliban could not communicate the meaning of his words to others, Prospero deemed them without purpose. Prospero here is conveying the arrogance of the Europeans, in the way that they considered the
Native American's ignorant because they could not communicate with the Europeans. Yet when you look at it from the New World natives’ point-of-view, it could seem that the Europeans are the ignorant ones because they could not communicate with them. Michel de Montaigne would agree that this practice of calling those that are different from one ignorant and barbaric, is unfounded, as the following shows:

“I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and patterns of the country we live in” (“Of Coaches”, pg. 58).

In learning Prospero’s language Caliban feels it serves him to be able to curse Prospero. "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!" (The Tempest, 1.2, line 363-65). Capable of acculturation, Caliban is now able to express his anger. This language barrier was something the natives in the New World rarely surpassed, unlike Caliban they did not have the opportunity to voice their protests and anger. Yet it may be said that throughout the play their anger and the unfairness of their situation can be heard in Caliban’s words.

One example where Indian sentiment can be found in Caliban’s words is when he protests: "As I told thee before, I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer, that by his cunning hath cheated me of the island" (The Tempest, 3.2, line 44-47). This
statement reflects the Indians sentiment of being cheated and driven out of their land by the conquistadors, as well as other European explorers, who were encouraged by their culture of expansionism to claim entitlement to the land. Gines Sepulveda asserts this idea of expansion when he says that “Roman Pontiff, Alexander VI, in a decree to the College of Cardinals declared armed expeditions against the Indians to be just, that he allowed the Kings of Castile the right to conquer them and add them to their empire” (In Defense of the Indians, pg. 15). Similarly to the conquistadors, Prospero claims Caliban’s island when he declares that he had been thrust forth from Milan and "most strangely" landed on this shore "to be the lord on't." Projecting his personal plans and dreams onto the wilderness, he colonized the island and dispossessed Caliban.

Once again we see emphasis of Prospero’s unfair claiming of Caliban’s island, when Caliban tells Stephano, “I say by sorcery he got this isle; from me he got it” (The Tempest, 3.2, line 56-57). It is obvious that Caliban believes that Prospero took his island away from him against his will. Also in Caliban’s statement we see elevation of Prospero, from a man to a sorcerer, a man with magical powers. This is similar to how the New World inhabitants saw the Spanish conquistadors as magical, even godly as they came riding in on horses, with their light skin and weapons that emitted fire and smoke, all things the natives had never seen before. Never before encountering such devices and
people, contributed to the development of the natives’ fear of persecution by the explorers, paralleling Caliban’s fear of persecution by Prospero.

Another important point, in the claiming of the natives’ lands, is that the majority of the English did not see the taking of the lands as robbery. This opinion is reflected in Utopia, when Sir Thomas More justifies the appropriation of Indian lands when he states: since the natives do not "use" the soil but leave it "idle and waste," the English have "just cause" to drive them from the territory by force (Utopia, pg. 56). More shows how many Europeans excused the taking of another’s property with the reasoning that the land will serve a greater purpose to the new ‘owners’.

Shakespeare’s Tempest reflects the reality of his time, like a dream of what actually was occurring. To the characters in the play, the events occurring in the play are their reality, yet in one of the most popular lines of the play Prospero states: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep” " (The Tempest 4.1, line 157-58). In this statement, it is almost as if Prospero is acknowledging the fact that they are fictitious characters and are figments of Shakespeare’s imagination, or in other words they are only the reality of one of Shakespeare’s dreams. In turn, this dream made into a play reflected the reality of events occurring in the New World. The New World explorers, like Prospero, saw the triumph over the continent and the Indians as a movement from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilization’. They viewed the native people as
savages, as "Calibans". The strangers then gave themselves the authority to
occupy the natives’ land, believing they were entitled to be "the lord on't".