

How the Tempest Explores Prospero's Degrading Language Toward Caliban

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Abstract:

This essay focuses on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, exploring the themes of language, history, and adoption. It examines the role of language as a tool of power and control, particularly through Prospero's degrading language toward Caliban. Rooted in colonialist theory, the analysis reveals how Prospero's treatment of Caliban reflects European biases against Indigenous peoples and reinforces colonial authority. Additionally, the essay addresses the theme of adoption, by analyzing the relationship between Prospero and Caliban. It highlights how their dynamic evolves from one resembling a father-son bond to one marked by domination and subjugation, and the profound effects this transformation has on both characters.



Illustration by Hillary Vuong

Language is one of humanity's most powerful tools, capable of uniting communities and being used as a weapon of power. Language can be defined as "the system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, or community ... typically consisting of words" ("Language," def. 1.a). In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare explores the extent of this power through Prospero's use of demeaning descriptions to subjugate Caliban—a tactic rooted in colonialist practices. Thus, arguments made in this essay will be based on colonialism, which Hogan defines as "a systematic restriction on the autonomy of a national group" (37). Firstly, I will examine how Prospero's treatment of Caliban embodies European fears and biases toward Indigenous people. Next, I will examine Shakespeare's term "slave" (1.2.369) and its effect on Prospero and Caliban's relationship, exploring how it reinforces colonial authority. In this paper, I will claim that Caliban is colonized, which is "to affect, influence, or shape" the minds and culture of Indigenous people to ensure their submission to colonial power ("Colonize," def. 2.d). Finally, Prospero's descriptions of Caliban as "got by the devil himself" (1.2.383) will be explored as a tactic of demonization, labelling Caliban as a taboo to be feared. Additionally, I will analyze Caliban's poetic descriptions of the island as acts of resistance against Prospero's suppression or, essentially, colonization.

From his very introduction, Caliban is associated with racist and derogatory stereotypes that reflect both Prospero's colonial mindset and the prejudices of Shakespeare's audience. "Caliban" is an anagram of "cannibal," meaning "devourer of human beings," and it joined European vocabulary after Christopher Columbus discovered the New World (Walton 2). Shakespeare not only used this language to reveal the innermost thoughts of his characters (Mahood 34), but also to mirror the prevailing views of his audience. For the Europeans, these foreign populations were known by their differences in appearance, customs, and mannerisms and often labelled as "savages" (Takaki 893). When Caliban is called a "freckled whelp," "hag-born," and "not honored with a human shape" (1.2.337), each

term works to frame him as less than human. A "whelp" refers to a young dog, and the modifier "freckled" implies being "spotted" ("Freckled," def. 2), connoting a marked, sinful, or dirty state. Thus, Caliban is reduced to a stained animal, inherently unclean. Moreover, the term "hag" traditionally implies a witch, but it also refers to an "ugly woman... who is malicious or immoral" ("Hag," def. 1.2.a.), casting Sycorax, his mother, as evil. By extension, Caliban is framed as malevolent by birth, further stripping him of any moral standing. Christenbury states that "[w]hen we name we control" (17), which encapsulates the idea that Prospero is given the power to define and limit Caliban's identity. Before their first interaction in the play, Prospero creates a foundation on which he is the superior and Caliban is the inferior, setting the stage for his eventual consignment of Caliban to the role of slave.

This toxic relationship is even more insidious because Prospero and Caliban initially shared a bond resembling a father-son relationship. After Prospero arrived on the island, he took the orphaned Caliban into his care, nourished him physically and educated him. Caliban recalls: "Thou strok'st me and made much of me...then I loved thee" (1.2.397-402), and Prospero pitied him and became his "adoptive father" (Shin 374). However, Shakespeare shows through Caliban's later demotion from "son" to "slave" how powerfully mere words cannot only transform social relations but also reshape identities—a process Prospero argues is a moral obligation.

Prospero's view of Caliban as subhuman reinforces his power over him and facilitates Caliban's functional enslavement. The term "slave" (1.2.412) is defined as "a person who has the status of being the property of another, has no personal freedom or rights, and is used as forced labour" ("Slave," def. 1.1). The word strips Caliban of his agency, reducing him to a possession rather than a person. This label solidifies a stark power imbalance that is highlighted when Prospero commands him, "Fetch us in fuel...If thou neglect'st or dost unwillingly...I'll rack thee with old cramps" (1.2.441-444). Here, Prospero's imperious language leaves Caliban no choice but to obey under threat of physical

punishment, much like a subjugated animal. In Ng's preface entitled "Power of Language and Power Behind Language," he further illuminates this hierarchy by arguing that "verbal behavior towards the negotiating partner is more controlling when the latter has been labeled as submissive than it is when the latter has been labeled as dominant" (349). By constantly referring to Caliban as a "slave," Prospero positions himself as master and conditions Caliban to internalize this identity. The ramifications of this become evident when Caliban willingly offers to serve Stephano, saying "I will kiss thy foot" and "I prithee, be my god" (2.2.155). The term "slave" can be likened to being colonized, and after years of being exposed to Prospero's verbal abuse, Caliban no longer sees himself as worthy of freedom but believes his only option is to serve a new master, revealing the psychological toll of language.

Lastly, Prospero's description of Caliban as "got by the devil himself" (1.2.383) escalates his disdain to outright demonization, as mentioned earlier, framing Caliban as inherently evil. Shakespeare's choice to name Caliban with an anagram of "cannibal" likely signals to the audience a taboo associated with barbarism so that they, alongside Prospero, would dislike Caliban. Similarly, Prospero saw Caliban as "filth" (1.2.415), but viewed himself as morally obligated to civilize Caliban, casting his control as a duty rather than an abuse of power. One way he does this is by teaching Caliban his language, and Shakespeare shows the vast difference between these two characters in their speech. When Caliban curses, saying, "Drop on you both! A south-west blow on ye; And blister you all o'er!" (1.2.387), the strong "o" sounds create a tone of unrestrained, primitive anger. Prospero's response—"to-night thou shalt have cramps, / Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up" (1.2.389-390)—uses softer, hissing "s" sounds, conveying controlled yet ominous anger. This juxtaposition underscores Prospero's view of Caliban as "savage" and himself as "civilized," supporting the idea that his domination is a natural right. However, Caliban fights back against the false accusations about him through his poetic descriptions of the island: "The isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs that

give delight and hurt not" (3.2.148-150). His lyrical imagery in his well-known speech underscores his unbroken spirit and shows his true character—one with profound depth and connection to his environment, unlike the beast that Prospero wishes to portray. When Caliban describes the beauty of the island, he mentions "scamels" (2.2.178), a word absent from the English dictionary (Lindsay 418) which "owes its force to Caliban's adherence to his mother tongue, his doughty refusal to let his thinking be dominated by Prospero's master-tongue" (Abrams 26). This subtle defiance implies that, despite abuse and indoctrination under Prospero's command, Caliban clings to his original identity, as the native master of the island, free before Prospero's arrival. This is also a resistance against colonization. In fact, Shakespeare restores Caliban's land at the play's end, boldly mocking his xenophobic audience. By highlighting Caliban's resistance and reclamation of his identity, Shakespeare challenges colonial narratives of supremacy and moral superiority.

In conclusion, *The Tempest* is a carefully crafted and controversial play for its time. Shakespeare masterfully explores the duality of language as both a tool of domination and a means of resistance. Despite Prospero's attempts to degrade him, Caliban's poetic language and steadfast connection to his identity reveal an unbroken spirit that defies the colonial authority imposed upon him. By the play's conclusion, Shakespeare critiques the very notions of superiority and control that Prospero represents, leaving the audience to question the morality of colonization and the legitimacy of power built on the suppression of others.

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