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“All the charms of Sycorax – toads, beetles, bats – light on you”: Colonization in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* Through Césaire’s *Une Tempête*

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Aimé Césaire, a Martiniquais poet, writer, and politician, makes the implicit themes of decolonialization in *The Tempest* explicit within the canon of his 1969 play, *Une tempête*. The roots, however, of decolonization must have already been present in the original play, *The Tempest*, for

Césaire to make this connection. Using Shakespeare's play as his foundation, Césaire simply amplifies both the colonization and the decolonization of these characters and the island where the play is set. Through his adaptation, Aimé Césaire foregrounds Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a decolonial work. In this paper, I will discuss the colonialism in Shakespeare's original play, *The Tempest*, and juxtapose it with the colonialism in Césaire's adaptation, *Une tempête*. Using this as a foundation, I will then analyze the implicit and explicit decolonialism in both plays. Through this paper, I wish to discuss how understandings and readings of Shakespeare's plays to take on new life and new meaning; this results in exploration and conversation, allowing scholars and students to unpack the impacts of the issues his works consider in their own writing and their own lives.

Keywords: *postcolonialism, Aimé Césaire, Shakespeare, pedagogy and interpretation*

In order for Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to be considered decolonial, a foundation and history of colonialism must be established within the play's fictional world. Colonization functions in many ways, including the imposition of language, culture, and ideology; the dehumanization of so-called 'uncivilized' peoples to legitimize or excuse their mistreatment by colonizers; and the exploitation and claiming of land. Decolonization is expressed as resistance against colonialism. For Caliban, the resistance is verbal as well as cultural and familial; he resists colonization by remaining faithful to his own history, a history that is not respected by the colonizer. Ariel's resistance is verbal, more subtle, and expressed far less frequently.

Aimé Césaire, a Martiniquais poet, writer, and politician, makes the implicit themes of decolonialization in *The Tempest* explicit within the canon of his 1969 play, *Une tempête*. The roots of decolonization, however, must already be present in the original play for Césaire to be able to make this connection. Using *The Tempest* as his foundation, Césaire simply amplifies both the colonization and decolonization of these characters and the island where the play is set. Through his adaptation, Aimé Césaire foregrounds Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a decolonial work. In this paper, I will discuss the colonialism in Shakespeare's original play, *The Tempest*, and juxtapose it with the colonialism in Césaire's adaptation, *Une tempête*. Using this as a foundation, I will then analyze the implicit and explicit decolonialism in both plays.

The assertion of a supposedly superior language, culture, and ideology is a fundamental part of colonization, designed to prevent Indigenous peoples¹ from accessing their own histories and alienating them from their own families. This imposition appears throughout colonial history, from Indian residential schools in Canada to the introduction of colonial English-language education in Kenya, both of which forced children—often with the threat of violence—to unlearn their native languages.² Using humiliation or corporeal punishment, children were told that their native languages were inferior to colonial languages (Thiong'o 11). In *The Tempest*, Miranda expresses this same perspective on native languages to Caliban in act I, scene ii, calling his language “gabble” (357), “brutish” (358), and “vile” (359). Prospero demands that Caliban learn Italian,³ which Caliban condemns, stating “[y]ou taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language” (Shakespeare 1.2.364–366).

¹ In the context of my paper, Indigenous refers to the ‘first peoples’ of a country or territory, and not to the contemporary definition of Indigenous as an ethnicity.

² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a prominent decolonial scholar, discusses this in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, where he describes being belittled and harassed for speaking Gikũyũ while at a school in Kenya when he was a child (11).

³ In the context of the play, the characters most likely speak Italian (as they are from Milan) though it would have been performed in English.

Colonial culture and ideologies are also forced upon Caliban. His statements that Prospero is more powerful than Setebos, the god his mother worships (Shakespeare 1.2.374), and that Trinculo, a King's servant, is a "god" (Shakespeare 2.2.146) are consistent with the colonial narrative that the colonizer is the superior in the relationship, comparable to a deity. Colonized peoples may begin to share this psychology, not because of any intrinsic truth, but out of colonial indoctrination. Additionally, Caliban has no way of accessing his own culture because his mother is dead, and Prospero forces him into slavery and takes control of the island's resources. Prospero himself fits the paradigm of the colonizer from a psychological perspective. As Madagascan psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni explains in his book *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, the colonizer "finds [a] relationship ready made ... and very often exploits it" (97). Prospero arrives on the island with no prior intention of becoming a 'master' over anyone, but when Caliban presents himself as an option for labour that is easy to take advantage of (because of his age⁴ and naivety), he exploits the relationship, taking Caliban as his 'servant.'

This method of colonization is reflected in Césaire's *Une tempête*, though the nature of the linguistic, cultural, and ideological colonization Prospero inflicts upon Caliban and Ariel is more explicit to a contemporary audience. Césaire uses language that contemporary audiences associate with colonization in order to increase their understanding of the play's colonial narratives. In act I, scene ii, Césaire's Prospero refers to or describes Caliban as "monkey"⁵ (24), "barbaric" (25), "devil" and "cannibal" (28), and demands gratitude for educating and civilizing Caliban (25). As James A. Arnold explains, "[i]n designating Ariel as a slave (ethnically a [M]ulatto) and Caliban as a [B]lack slave, Césaire has set the action within a recognizable set of Caribbean problems" (237). Racialized,

⁴ Sycorax arrived on the Island while pregnant with Caliban (1.2.169), and Ariel was trapped in the tree for "a dozen years" (1.2.179), meaning that Caliban is approximately 12 when Prospero and Miranda arrive.

⁵ All translations of Césaire's *Une tempête* are my own.

pejorative language is present in *The Tempest*, but Césaire places the colonization within a familiar set of actions and vocabulary, bringing the source material into a modern⁶ context for his audience.

Dehumanization is another fundamental part of colonization. It allows colonizers to treat the colonized without empathy. The process of dehumanization removes an individual's human characteristics, stripping them of self-sufficiency, and allowing the colonizer to exploit them for personal and financial gain. Both Ariel and Caliban are dehumanized in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the former's dehumanization being propagated by his own actions.⁷ Prospero treats him as an object, expecting Ariel to complete tasks and manipulating him when he protests (1.2.250), but unlike Caliban, Ariel actively seeks out Prospero's approval, attention, and love (4.1.48). In doing so, he acknowledges his position as a slave. Caliban is dehumanized in a way that is more typical of colonizers—by deeming him a “beast” (Shakespeare 2.2.30), a “savage” (Shakespeare 1.2.356), a “monster” (Shakespeare 2.2.64), and—strangely, to contemporary audiences—a “fish” (Shakespeare 2.2.25). In act II of *The Tempest*, Trinculo states:

...Were I in England now (as
once I was) and had but this fish painted, not a holiday
fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would
this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes
a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame
beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. (Shakespeare 27–32)

As Virginia Mason and Alden T. Vaughan explain in the Arden edition of *The Tempest*, “[a]fter Martin Frobisher's expedition to North America in 1576, Native Americans were occasionally

⁶ *Une tempête* was written in 1969; I have chosen to use “modern” because it is broad term, one that encapsulates the concerns of the late 20th century as well as the early 21st century.

⁷ At 1.2.193, Ariel says, “To thy strong bidding, task / Ariel and all his quality”, because of this I will use he/him pronouns when referring to Ariel throughout this essay.

brought back to England and, for a fee, displayed by their masters to a public audience” (230). A similar sentiment is expressed by Antonio later in the play: “[Caliban] / Is a plain fish but no less marketable” (Shakespeare 5.1.255–266). Both Prospero and Antonio recognize the potential profit in Caliban’s body and labour, thus expressing their colonial-imperialist perspectives.

In the parallel scene from Césaire’s adaptation, *Une tempête*, Trinculo refers to Caliban as a “Zindien” (58), a member of the East Indian (Indigenous) merchant class in Martinique (Arnold 245), once again bringing a familiar context to the scene for Césaire’s Caribbean audience. Trinculo then says: “[t]hink of it, a *Zindien* like that—well that’s cash. Exhibited in a fair! ... A real *Zindien* from the Caribbean! Dough, I tell you” (Césaire 59). This echoes *The Tempest*, and the colonizer associates Caliban’s body with the profit from which he can benefit. The language and the context (“Zindien”) have been altered to encourage Césaire’s Caribbean audience to empathize with Caliban.

The final mechanism of colonization to consider in Shakespeare’s play is the colonizer exploiting and claiming land, as exhibited by Prospero and Gonzalo. Prospero does this by arriving on the island, befriending Caliban (Shakespeare 1.2.337), and proceeding to take advantage of the island’s resources, including Caliban himself. As Caliban states, the island is his, through his mother, Sycorax (Shakespeare 1.2.332), and Prospero has robbed him of his inheritance. Gonzalo expresses his perceived entitlement to land in act II, scene ii, while remarking on the beauty of the island. To him, the island is unsettled and uninhabited territory, the perfect place for him to create a utopian plantation where all men have no “occupation” and are “idle” (2.2.155). He goes on to say that no work will be done on the island and “nature should bring forth / Of its own kind all foison, all abundance” (Shakespeare 163–164).⁸ This is an absurd notion and both Sebastian and Antonio mock him for it (Shakespeare 2.1.144–184), but it is a clear representation of the entitlement

⁸ “Nature” may be a reference to slave labour, as Caliban is compared to nature and earth throughout the play, revealing the true source of the labour that sustains Gonzalo’s carefree utopia (Banerjee 293).

colonizers feel toward Indigenous lands and spaces. Because Indigenous peoples are not truly considered ‘people’ (i.e., European), the colonizer does not recognize that the land is occupied at all. To the colonizer, the land is *Terra Nullius*, theirs to use as they please no matter the sovereignty of the people living on the land. For Gonzalo, it also represents a kind of profit—he and other Europeans can exploit the island and use it as a place to rest and be without work. While they rest, the land and its people are enslaved; they labour on the Island and earn a profit for Gonzalo.

The colonial habit of laying claim to and exploiting land is present in *Une tempête* as well, where Gonzalo expresses similar feelings about the island in more explicit colonial terms, going so far as to use the word “colonize” (40). When they first arrive on the island, Gonzalo says, “I think we should canvass every cave on this island one by one to see if there is any guano, in which case this country, under wise leadership, will be richer than Egypt and its Nile” (39). During the late 18th century, guano (bat feces) was mined from caves to “extract nitrates for the manufacture of gunpowder” (Simons 33). Despite Gonzalo’s assertion that he wishes the island to be a resting place where travelers “will come periodically to refresh our old hearts” (41), he clearly intends to exploit the island’s resources, including its Indigenous peoples (40), to accomplish his goals: exploitation of the land for his own profit and the continuance of colonialism. Guano is also a food source and fertilizer, and its removal will doubtlessly damage the island’s ecosystem.

Césaire’s foregrounding of colonialism in *Une tempête* is to identify the threads of colonization in Shakespeare’s original. Unlike some scholars’ analyses that suggest there are no or only incidental links to colonialism in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*,⁹ I believe there are many clear connections to colonialism within the play. The fact that these connections have been traced and amplified by Aimé

⁹ Meredith Anne Skura in “Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*” (1989), James A. Arnold in “Césaire and Shakespeare: Two Tempests” (2002), and Duke Pesta in “Thou dost here usurp the name thou ow’st not”: *The Tempest* and Intercultural Exchange” (2015), for example.

Césaire, an intellectual whose work—both in literature and in politics—was predominately concerned with decolonization, supports this understanding of Shakespeare’s play.

Not only does Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* consider colonization, but it also considers decolonization as well. The subtle allusions to decolonization in Shakespeare’s original are made explicit through Césaire’s *Une tempête*, which is a predominantly decolonial and postcolonial play. In *The Tempest*, language and communication are the primary ways that the colonized individuals express their desire—their demand—for decolonization. In act I, Caliban’s first lines are as follows:

As wicked dew as e’er my mother brushed
With raven’s feather form unwholesome fen
Drop on you both. A southwest wind blow on ye
And blister you all o’er. (Shakespeare 1.2.321–325)

Virginia Mason and Alden T. Vaughan explain that “wicked” means offensive or foul and the raven is commonly linked to witchcraft (194); winds from the southwest “often brought warm, damp air, with implications of unhealthiness,” and cause blisters (“infectious lesions”) all over the body (195). Only a few lines later, Caliban curses Prospero, saying “[a]ll the charms / Of Sycorax – toads, beetles, bats – light on you, / For I am all the subject that you have” (Shakespeare 1.2.340–342); not only is he wanting to release these creatures against Prospero using witchcraft, but he also taunts Prospero in reminding him that Caliban is his only subject. The power Prospero had as Duke of Milan is gone, and now he has only Caliban and the otherwise uninhabited island. Finally, in the exchange with Miranda about learning Italian, he curses them both once more. This establishes a callous, caustic characterization of Caliban. In addition to his vocal resistance to Prospero, Caliban praises Setebos, his mother’s god, in act V, indicating that he still worships his ‘heathen’ gods rather than any of the colonial Christian or Roman symbols that appear in the play. Even Ariel objects to what Prospero expects of them in *The Tempest*, reminding him that they made an agreement for Ariel

to be released from slavery after a certain amount of time (Shakespeare 1.2.249). In allowing Caliban in particular, but Ariel as well, to respond to Prospero in this manner, Shakespeare's play asserts that the two slaves have their own voices, opinions, and thoughts, and are articulate enough to express them. Giving them a voice is a distinctly decolonial decision. Despite the colonizers' understanding of Caliban and Ariel as non-human objects whose bodies can be used for profit, their value extends beyond their labour.

Later in the play, Caliban attempts to recruit Trinculo and Stephano into murdering Prospero—a revolutionary act for a slave—but does so by debasing himself to two other colonial 'masters.' His genuflecting towards Trinculo lacks dignity and self-respect which cannot only be attributed to his intoxication; he repeats these behaviours in his final lines in act V, when he says "[h]ow fine my master is!" (Shakespeare 5.1.262) to Prospero. This indicates that subservience is a part of Caliban's character—possibly as a consequence of colonization. Caliban also "becom[es] a compliant and docile slave" after admitting the "error of his ways" in attempting to murder Prospero with Trinculo and Stephano (Sarnecki 282).

There are other elements of Caliban's depictions that problematize his role as a symbol of decolonization. His supposed physical disfiguration or unattractiveness is mentioned by several characters, including Prospero—"misshapen knave" (Shakespeare 5.1.268) and "hag-seed" (Shakespeare 1.2.367)—and Trinculo and Antonio—in referring to Caliban as a "fish" (Shakespeare 2.2.25, 5.1.266). The equation of physical unattractiveness and moral value is part of "the neo-Platonic doctrine according to which Caliban's 'deformity is the result of evil natural magic'" (Arnold 241). Because of European standards of beauty, Blackness, Indigeneity, and disabilities were viewed as undesirable and as a result, Black, Indigenous, and disabled peoples were considered

inherently immoral or evil. The fact that Caliban attempts to rape Miranda¹⁰ is a part of “the belief that Indians¹¹ [were] ‘naturally’ inclined to sexual violence,” an “established and essential component of colonial rhetoric” (qtd. in Bryant 101). Caliban’s attractiveness being equated with morality and his attempted rape of Miranda does not allow Caliban to be a full representation of decolonization, as this choice on Shakespeare’s part is rooted in colonialism and stereotypes of Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour.

As a poet and writer, Césaire prioritized and understood the value of language in his work. Sarnecki explains the importance of Caliban’s use of language in *Une tempête* in the following statement:

for Césaire uses French in new ways, bringing about a revolutionary shift in how colonized peoples might view themselves...

The all-important change Césaire affects in *Une [T]empête* is to transform Shakespeare’s deformed and sorry creature, Caliban, into a revolutionary hero by giving him a new way of speaking in a language all his own—a French punctuated by African and Creole expressions and rhythms. (278–282)

Césaire was from the French colony Martinique and chose to write all of his texts in French, the colonizers’ language.¹² French is written in different registers, with different levels of formality. Caliban addresses Prospero using the informal register and the informal *tu* (“you”) throughout the play. Use of this informal *tu* can be insulting in the wrong context, and for Césaire’s French audience, Caliban using it to address Prospero would have clearly indicated his disdain and

¹⁰ Some scholars believe that Caliban did attempt to rape Miranda (Banerjee 302, Pesta 143, Skura 49, Vaughan 197), while others believe that Caliban attempted to rape Miranda to “implicitly accept Prospero’s partisan version of events” (Bryant 101).

¹¹ Caliban is not explicitly Indian; his race is unknown, but this is linked to general assumptions about colonized peoples in new colonies.

¹² Césaire was widely criticized by his contemporaries and Black scholars, including Frantz Fanon, for writing in French (Sarnecki 277).

disrespect. Césaire also employs contemporary slang—“ghetto” (26), “bellyaching” (27), “dough” (58), “scoundrel” (60), “booze” (59)—allowing Caliban’s protests and notions of revolution to become relatable and relevant for his audience.

For Black decolonial and postcolonial activists or scholars who read or watch *Une tempête*, the many references to Black activism contextualize the play. Caliban’s first word is “Uhuru!”, Swahili for freedom or independence commonly used in the decolonial movements of the 1960s (Sarnecki 281); the phrase “Freedom now!” (Césaire 36) is a reference to the Black Panther Party’s rallying cry (Arnold 236); and he insists Prospero “Call [him] X. That would be best. It’s what you call a man without a name” (Césaire 28) an obvious reference to Malcolm X (McNee). Caliban is the loud cry, the revolutionary who believes that violence may be necessary to evoke change, while Ariel is the quiet resistance, questioning Prospero’s motives (Césaire 22) and refusing to “believe in violence” (Césaire 37).¹³ Ariel’s decolonialism has the same quiet, deeply patient and respectful tones in *Une tempête* and *The Tempest*.

While both Ariel and Caliban are freed and Prospero returns to Milan to become the Duke at the end of *The Tempest*, only Ariel is freed from slavery at the end of *Une tempête*. Just as colonial influence remains in colonized nations even after the colonizers leave, or some slaves have been freed, Caliban and Prospero remain on the island. This choice is the most drastic change Césaire makes to Shakespeare’s original plot; the decision to have Caliban and Prospero stay reflects Césaire’s contemporary Martinique, where the French held onto their power for many years after formally ‘leaving’ the colony (Gallagher 578).

¹³ Some scholars understand *Une tempête* to be an allegory for the Black Civil Rights Movement in the United States, with Caliban representing Malcolm X and Ariel representing Dr. Martin Luther King (McNee); Césaire’s closeness with global Black freedom movements and decolonial movements problematizes this understanding, though it is generally accepted as an aspect of the text (Arnold 236).

Texts that rewrite and reconsider the European canon “create the spaces necessary for the construction of a postcolonial identity and literature” (McNee) and encourage audiences to reflect on political and racial themes (Sarnecki 276). By grounding *Une tempête* in the themes of colonization and decolonization, Césaire has illuminated these ideas in *The Tempest*. Césaire draws on the evidence of decolonization that is already present in Shakespeare to erect a monument to Black liberation movements around the world, from North America to the Caribbean to Africa. The threads of this understanding of *The Tempest*—a so-called revisionist understanding (Pesta 128)—are incredibly valuable in helping contemporary students and scholars consider this play and all of Shakespeare’s plays beyond their original contexts. Shakespeare’s plays take on new life and new meaning when people are allowed—and encouraged—to explore his writing and the issues he considers.

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