

Caliban and Colonialism

Throughout *The Tempest*, Shakespeare portrays Caliban as being barbaric, monstrous, uncivilized, and inhuman. A modern day reader might think that Caliban is a one dimensional character because of the repeated indications that he is monstrous. In fact, Caliban strongly resembles the typical European perception of Native American groups of the time, a portrayal that Shakespeare's contemporaries would not have missed when viewing the play. Like many of the characters in *The Tempest*, colonists held the belief that Native groups needed to be educated and civilized in the way that Europeans were. When this perspective is ignored, one can fail to recognize Caliban's complexity and the connections in *the Tempest* to contemporary issues of the time, such as colonization. With an understanding of the mindsets of colonialism and perception of native groups at the time in mind, readers can better understand Caliban's place as a flawed but uniquely vilified character among the other characters in the play.

Colonialism had a massive effect on the European perception of native groups. In Ronald Takaki's essay, *The "Tempest" in the Wilderness*, he points out the connections that audiences would have drawn about Caliban and Native Americans. At the time of the opening of *The Tempest*, England had colonized Ireland, and was beginning to colonize the Americas as well. According to Takaki, when the English first encountered Native Americans, their ways of life reminded them of the Irish, giving them a certain familiarity with how to communicate. However, Takiki points out that the English eventually came to the conclusion that while the Irish were teachable, and able to leave their old, natural ways behind, the same was not true for the Native Americans. They concluded that the Native Americans were "different from the

English in kind, rather than degree”, or, nature, rather than nurture, and therefore practically a different species, rather than just being different in their ways. (Takaki, 204)

Takaki may have summarized the perspective of the majority of European’s at Shakespeare’s time, but the nature of native peoples and how colonists should interact with them was very much a point of debate. This is apparent in the writings of Bartolome de las Casas, who was a missionary who spent time with the native groups and came to sympathize with them. De las Casas argued against Sepulveda and others who concluded that natives were not truly human. De las Casas took the position that native peoples in the Americas were as human and Europeans and deserved to be treated as such.

The ways in which Miranda and Prospero describe and speak to Caliban when he is first introduced demonstrates a dissonance in their understand of Caliban and appears to reflect the debate and difference of views on native peoples between De las Casas and Sepulveda. Miranda and Prospero at once recognize that Caliban is civilized enough to learn, but they also conclude that he is too evil to truly be taught morality. Miranda demonstrates this when she says that Caliban is an

“Abhorred Slave,

Which any print of goodness wilt not take,

Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,

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 endow'd thy purposes

With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures
Could not abide to be with..." (1.2.354-363)

Miranda contradicts herself here. On one hand, she claims that Caliban could be civilized enough to learn to speak in a coherent language -- which, of course, was an educated and cultured European language. In saying this, Miranda at least subconsciously implies that Caliban and other natives like him possess the same inherent intelligence and social capabilities as Miranda, Prospero and other Europeans -- that they essentially are all equally human. However, Miranda then quickly contradicts this, proclaiming that Caliban could not by his very nature learn goodness. She claims that goodness and Caliban do not mix, that he is capable of only evil, and that he was unable to even understand his own meaning prior to her educating him. This resembles the behavior of the English in their belief that Native groups needed to be taught to live in the ways that they did. While Caliban's race didn't stop him from learning a language, Miranda believes that it was ultimately the hindrance that stopped Caliban from being a good person, or even learning to be one. There is a conflict here in the question of whether Caliban is human or inhuman.

Not all Europeans took the position that native peoples were less than human. Bartolome de Las Casas' was an historian and missionary who witnessed the cruelty that Native Americans faced first hand during his time in the Americas, thereby gaining empathy for them and eventually becoming opposed to the cruelty they faced. In his Letter to Phillip, Great Prince of Spain, he pleads with the Prince to cease the callous methods of colonization that were being used on the Native Americans. In the letter, he counters the arguments of his contemporary, Juan

Gines de Sepulveda, who was in favor of colonization. Sepulveda argued that the violence waged against the Native Americans was lawful and justifiable. Sepulveda's perspective was similar to that of Takaki, who concluded that Native Americans were fundamentally different and "different in kind" from Europeans. Essentially, Native Americans were alien and lesser beings who were not entitled to the same treatment or consideration as white Europeans.

De Las Casas strongly disagreed. In his the work, de Las Casas references Native Americans as "innocents" and "human beings", and affirms their right to life. He argues that,

"countless human beings, suffering brutal massacres, perish forever, that is, men who, through the inhuman brutality of Spaniards, breathe their last before they hear the word of God..." (Sepulveda, 138)

In this quote, Bartolome de Las Casas recognized that the Native Americans are just as human as the Spaniards, and therefore deserving of respect and human decency. While he recognizes that they don't subscribe to his religion and that their way of life is different, he firmly believed that that did not justify the cruelty inflicted on them by Spaniards and other Europeans.

The connections of Bartolome De Las Casas' writing to *The Tempest* are especially clear in Act One, Scene Two, when Caliban says,

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,

Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,

Thou strok'st me and made much of me, wouldst give me

Water with berries in 't, and teach me how

To name the bigger light, and how the less,
that burn by day and night. (1.2.334-339)

Much like European colonists around the world, Prospero arrived on the island and seized ownership and control of the island, despite Caliban's claim to it through his mother, Sycorax. Caliban saw the injustice of this saying "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, which thou tak'st from me." In addition to the land itself, Prospero also took all of the knowledge from Caliban, the island's only native, that he had to give, and then enslaved him and locked him away. This cruelty was preceded by Miranda and Prospero trying to teach Caliban new things, like language, about the cosmos, and other knowledge that they felt was essential to leading a civilized life. Only once Caliban attempted to rape Miranda did they begin to feel that they could teach Caliban to express himself in words, but not teach him to be a good person. They enslaved him, marking Caliban's loss of humanity and personhood in their eyes, and frequently call him a monster throughout the play. This highlights the shift in their understanding of the island Native, from being different in behavior, to seemingly a different species all together.

Throughout *The Tempest*, the way the other characters interact with Caliban provide compelling examples of how native peoples were perceived and treated. Caliban is a far more complex character than the other characters in the play make it seem. The view of him that is held by the other characters closely resembles the view that colonists held of Native groups. Reading the play with Takaki's and de Las Casas' works in mind provides a clear understanding of why the other characters in the play perceive Caliban the way that they do.

Works Cited

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