

An Alternative Interpretation of Shakespeare's The Tempest : From the Perspective of Acculturation

Tokumi, Michio
Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University

<https://doi.org/10.15017/1654385>

出版情報 : 言語文化叢書. 9, pp.169-175, 2004-02-20. Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University
バージョン :
権利関係 :



An Alternative Interpretation of Shakespeare's

The Tempest

—From the Perspective of Acculturation—

Michio Tokumi

1

There are many plays in the work of Shakespeare which deal with an encounter with foreign culture and people and which cause characters to change their personality. For example, Prince Hal in *Henry IV* meets Falstaff, which to some extent affects his behaviour. In *The Tempest*, however, we see a direct and fateful encounter with foreign (or strange) people, and the characters in the play must alter their way of thinking in order to adjust themselves to their new circumstances. Both Caliban and the atmosphere on the island where Prospero and Miranda live have a great influence on the people who were forced to arrive on the island from Naples and Milan by the magic of Prospero. They are shocked to come face to face with a creature of such peculiar appearance, and struggle to contend with the island's strange atmosphere.

It is interesting to note that only the base characters in the play, Trinculo and Stephano, suffer no distress on seeing Caliban. Stephano regards Caliban as one of his companions after they share drinks together, and even tries to use Caliban to attack Prospero; whereas Caliban wants Stephano to be the new governor of the island, Stephano desires only Prospero's property. Because Trinculo and Stephano do not bring any fixed ideas about life, culture and society from their home country, they find it easy to accept a world of different and unfamiliar ideas. Other characters, however, fail to adjust themselves to the new environment so swiftly, for they carry in their hearts their own country's sense of values. That is, they do their best to uphold the ideals and principles by which they had lived before. In the Old World, for example, it is natural that the physical beauty of a character's human form should reflect in that character's beauty or nobleness, as Miranda points out:

There's nothing ill can dwell in such a temple.
If the ill spirit have so fair a house,
Good things will strive to dwell with't. (I.ii.458-460) ⁽¹⁾

The fact that Caliban does not have a beautiful form but an ugly figure means that he cannot possess a noble mind according to the Old World's concept of values. Although

the characters in *The Tempest* experience strange phenomena produced by Prospero's magic on the island and are compelled to change their hitherto firmly held ideas and values, it nevertheless seems rather difficult for them—and by extension, rather difficult for human beings—to change their long-cherished ideas about their own culture and society.

Prospero's daughter, Miranda, is a case in point, where we cannot help admitting how hard it is for human beings to accept and recognize other forms of culture. It is widely acknowledged that Caliban symbolizes a form of culture that is unfamiliar to Europeans, and Miranda curses Caliban in a fit of anger as follows:

Abhored slave,
Which any print of goodness will 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 endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy wile race—
Though thou didst learn—had that in't which good natures
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
Deservedly confined into this rock,
Who hadst deserved more than a prison. (I.ii.350-361)

Here Miranda clearly indicates that the culture her father Prospero conveys to her is superior to one represented by Caliban. From her perspective this is absolutely true, the same obstinate attitude being shown very obviously by European immigrants who suppressed many native Americans and their culture after arriving to settle in the New World. Indeed, there are many critics who take Caliban to symbolize the American Indians of the New World. For example, Stephen Orgel, the annotator and commentator of the text *The Tempest* (Oxford Shakespeare), makes the following point:

It is not true that 'the still-vexed Bermudas' is the only allusion in the play to the New World. Caliban's god Setebos was a Patagonian deity; the name appears in accounts of Magellan's voyages, and is clear evidence that the Americas were in Shakespeare's mind when he was inventing his islander. ⁽²⁾

When we see Caliban as a symbol of American Indians, Miranda's harsh attitude towards Caliban reminds us of the way Europeans persecuted the native inhabitants in the interests of making money in the New World. Only rogues like Trinculo and

Stephano can cooperate with Caliban but they frequently fall foul of the law. Most of us would concede that people who take no pride in their own culture cannot respect other types of culture. But when they cling to their culture and regard it as the only culture appropriate to a civilized society, then conflicts such as those in the early history of America will inevitably arise. Trinculo and Stephano find it easy to accept a new world, but we cannot expect them to understand an alien culture or to cooperate with strange and unfamiliar people. We might claim that acculturation is needed to achieve harmony between the two opposing cultures represented by Prospero and Caliban.

2

The word "acculturation" means that when two different cultures meet, each tends to influence the other; as a result, both can undergo changes or even be merged into a single culture. Even when one culture tries to suppress another, the dominant culture is likely to be influenced by the suppressed culture. In other words, when two cultures come into direct contact with each other, certain changes are inevitable on both sides. However, in those cases where a culture is unwilling or unable to adapt to new circumstances, bitter conflict may ensue. For example, Adolph Hitler could not (or would not) recognize the beliefs and traditions of Jewish people as one of the legitimate cultures of the world. He therefore took it upon himself to eradicate as much of Jewish society as he could, bringing despair and confusion to the German people in the process. People often say that we must have respect for cultural differences; but this is too shallow a philosophy. After repeated conflicts between different cultures, a state of harmony between those cultures can ultimately be attained. Moreover we must always bear in mind that we cannot possibly understand other peoples' culture fully and impartially.

Prospero uses his magic to make Alonso, Ferdinand and other characters from Europe confront strange phenomena and recognize that "there are many things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (I.v.174-5).⁽²⁾ But at the end of the play Prospero throws his magic away. It is true that he can force his brother, Antonio, to face up to a crime he committed against Prospero in the past, but Antonio's silence is a clear indication that he cannot or will not change his personality for the better.⁽³⁾ Prospero's decision to abandon his magic suggests he has become resigned to the fact that he cannot easily change other people's cultural beliefs and habits. And with his convictions so utterly broken, he can no longer find contentment in his life as it is. When Prospero arrived on the island he encountered Caliban, who symbolized a culture wholly different from the European traditions with which Prospero was familiar; and after he had given up forcing Caliban to learn about those traditions, he managed to safeguard his own culture by suppressing Caliban's culture.

Although he was able to convince Miranda that their culture was superior to any other, by the end of the play he himself had become doubtful of his own culture and magic. It is important to note that the notion of magic is closely related to the traditional European culture.

Curt Bright makes the following comments on Prospero's forgiveness towards his enemies:

Just as Angelo was sentenced to live by Vincentio at the end of *Measure for Measure*—and thereby rendered a living, humiliated, wretched example of the futility of aristocratic ambition in a “new” Vienna governed by a godlike ruler—so are Prospero's enemies spared not for sentimental reasons but for reasons of state.

(4)

Bright argues that Prospero forgives his enemies for political rather than humanitarian reasons. It will be recalled that after Prospero returns to his homeland, he is concerned not with political matters but only with his death, as the following lines demonstrate:

... and in the morn
I'll bring you to your ship, and so to Naples,
Where I have hope to see the nuptial
Of these our dear-belov'd solemnized,
And thence retire me to my Milan, where
Every third thought shall be my grave. (V.i.306-311)

He concedes that magic cannot completely transform other characters' minds, and that only after many years of conflict and turbulence can we reach a state of harmony between different cultures. It is safe to conclude that acculturation depends on our attitude towards other cultures, and that when we commit ourselves to understanding the differences between two cultures it is possible for us to bridge even the widest of cultural gaps. As we have seen, the case of Prospero and Caliban specifically illustrates this point.

3

Nowadays the world is becoming more and more international, and for this reason it is natural that we should understand other cultures and societies fairly and impartially. In addition, it is internationally recognized that the developed countries should be the ones to help the developing nations to stand on their own feet

economically and politically. However, it remains a contentious issue as to how this goal can best be achieved. As many experts have noted, simply donating large amounts of money to poor countries is both pointless and wasteful. Prospero tries to persuade Caliban into accepting his own culture, while Miranda teaches him how to speak her own language and how to develop a noble mind – a cherished ideal according to Old World beliefs. Yet they both failed, because they lacked the will to understand Caliban's new and unfamiliar culture. When they finally recognize that they cannot sympathize with Caliban's sense of values, they attempt to suppress him like European people had done in the case of American Indians in the New World. So, by way of a negative example, *The Tempest* teaches us how to reach out to the refugees in developing countries. Stephen Greenblatt makes the following comments on the ambivalent attitude shown by Europeans towards native Americans:

The Europeans queasily oscillate between the motives of exploitation and conversion: they have a simultaneous interest in preserving difference—hence manipulating the possibility of grossly unfair economic exchange—and in erasing difference — hence both christianizing the natives and obtaining competent interpreters. They want the natives to be at once different and the same, others and brothers. ⁽⁵⁾

When the Europeans went to America in the 16th and 17th centuries, their priority was to exploit the natives and make money. In addition, converting them to Christianity was encouraged during the colonial period. The same is not true today, however. Christianity is only one of many world religions, though even now we see a religious motivation for some of the attacks by American soldiers on the people of Iraq. Although the Iraqi war may appear to have stemmed from international political concerns, the underlying impetus is the collision between religions: Christianity and Islam. We are forced to admit that war is an outcome of our failure to understand other types of culture.

Prospero breaks his magic wand at the end of the play and accepts his fate with resignation, saying that “this thing of darkness I/ Acknowledge mine.”(V.i.275-6) Of course, this thing refers to Caliban. ⁽⁶⁾ Stephen Greenblatt gives the following comments on the relationship between Prospero and Caliban:

... “this thing of darkness I/ Acknowledge mine” (5.1.275-76). He may intend these words only as a declaration of ownership, but it is difficult not to hear in them some deeper recognition of affinity, some half-conscious acknowledgment of guilt. At the play's end the princely magician appears anxious and powerless before the audience to beg for indulgence and freedom. ⁽⁷⁾

Greenblatt explains the reason why Prospero says, "this thing of darkness is mine" and points out that it indicates Prospero's awareness of his sinfulness towards Caliban.

Prospero's line admits that Caliban and other culture types should merge with his own culture someday. When we try to help other countries, we must abandon the notion of imposing our own opinions and beliefs on to other societies (this attitude is, to some extent, symbolized by Prospero's magic wand). And we should recognize that when two cultures meet, both cultures can and should be transformed. This awareness is of utmost importance when the developed countries offer assistance to the developing countries. Let us consider Gonzalo's idealistic image of the world.

All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour. Treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine
Would I not have, but nature should bring forth
Of it own kind all foison, all abundance
To feed my innocent people. (II.i.157-162)

Antonio and Sebastian sneer at Gonzalo's naïve utopian idea of the world. They have been immersed in a power struggle in their home country and cannot understand why Gonzalo dreams of such an earthly paradise. On the surface, Gonzalo simply tries to console Alonso, who thinks that his son, Ferdinand, has died at sea. An underlying theme of the play, however, is the contrast between Antonio's lust for power and Gonzalo's depiction of the utopian world. Recall that Sebastian and Antonio are now separated from the world in which the struggle for power was of central importance. On this island people need to be sufficiently flexible in their way of thinking to be ready to accept unfamiliar ideas; this is true even for Gonzalo's idealism. It is highly probable that the world Gonzalo dreams of will come true on the island. Shakespeare seems anxious to illustrate the differences between Antonio and Gonzalo in the way they react to cultures entirely at odds with their own. But even Gonzalo fails to understand the strange culture that this island symbolizes, for he also clings to his ideal world so firmly that he leaves no room in his mind for reconsidering his ideal world. Human beings must be prepared to break their magic wands as Prospero did at the end of the play, and open their eyes to the wonderful diversity that this island offers. When that happens, the phenomenon of acculturation will help the peoples of the world to understand each other better. It will act as a bridge between the various culture types across the world.

Notes

- (1) Stephen Orgel (ed.), *The Tempest* (Oxford University Press, 1987).
- (2) Harold Jenkins(ed.),*Hamlet* (Methuen, 1982)
- (3) Deborah Willis comments as follows on Antonio's silence:

Caliban, along with Stephano, Trinculo, and the blasphemous Boatswain, all take their place in a restored political order to which only Antonio refuses to be reconciled, an order confirmed primarily by disclosing the threat, not of masterlessness or savagism, but of aristocratic over- reaching.

Deborah Willis, "Shakespeare's *Tempest* " and the Discourse of Colonialism", *SEL*, 29(1989), p.286.

I cannot agree with Deborah Willis, because without so many conflicts and a long period of time he could not take his place in a restored social order.
- (4) Curt Bright, "'Treason doth never prosper': *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Treason", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41(1990)), p. 21.
- (5) Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possession—The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago U. P., 1991), pp. 108-9. Greenblatt also stresses wonder when Europeans encounter Native Americans:

Wonder is, I shall argue, the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference.... *op. cit.*, p.14.
- (6) Meredith Anne Skura makes the following point that Caliban symbolizes Prospero's childish dream:

Caliban's childish innocence seems to have been what first attracted Prospero, and now it is Caliban's childish lawlessness that enrages him. To a man like Prospero, whose life has been spent learning a self-discipline in which he is not yet totally adept, Caliban can seem like a child who must be controlled, and who, like a child, is murderously enraged at being controlled. Prospero treats Caliban as he would treat the willful child in himself.

Meredith Anne Skura, "Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40(1989), p.65.
- (7) *op. cit.* , p.157.