

# William Shakespeare's The Tempest

A closer look at the character of  
Caliban in The Tempest

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Original Research Paper

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This is an introduction of what is considered one of Shakespeare's best plays, *The Tempest*. It is also an in-depth look at one of the most interesting characters in Shakespeare's entire repertoire, Caliban.

Although *The Tempest* is categorized in Shakespeare's romantic and comic plays, Meredith Anne Skura sees *The Tempest* as a political play and Caliban's part in that is his constant fight for his right to rule the island, (44). Caliban is a very complex and multi-sided character. On one hand, he can be expressing his "aggressive animal drives", and then turn around and show readers that he has an "instinctive appreciation for the natural wonders of the island", (Coles, 40). For an example of this contrast, Act III, scene ii, is perfect. In lines 86-103 Caliban is describing to Stephano and Trinculo the perfect way to kill Prospero;

*Stand farther, Come, proceed.  
Why, as I told thee, 'tis a custom with him  
I' th' afternoon to sleep. There thou mayst brain him.  
Having first seiz'd his books; or with a log  
Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,  
Or cut his wezand with thy knife. Remember  
First to possess his books, for without them  
He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not  
One spirit to command. They all do hate him  
As rootedly as I. Burn but his books.  
He has brave utensils, for so he calls them,  
Which, when he has a house, he'll deck withal.  
And that most deeply to consider is  
The beauty of his daughter. He himself  
Calls her a nonpareil. I never saw a woman,  
But only Sycorax my dam, and she,  
But she as far surpasseth Sycorax  
As great'st does least. [Act III, scene ii]*

and then, in lines 135-143, he begins talking about his beautiful dreams;

*Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,  
That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again, and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open, and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me, that when I wak'd,  
I cried to dream again.* [Act III, scene ii] (footnote 1)

All in all, “the character of Caliban is generally thought (and justly so) to be one of the author’s masterpieces.” (Hazlitt, 91.)

Shakespeare burdened directors with many varying descriptions of Caliban throughout the play and thus, through the many productions of *The Tempest*, there are many different visions of his character, appearance, and personality, (Vaughan, V., 391). For example, when Caliban is first introduced to us, Prospero calls him “a *tortoise*”, [I.ii.316]. Later, when Caliban meets with Trinculo and Stephano, we hear him described in many ways including “a *fish*”, [II.ii.24-28], “a *cat*”, [II.ii.84], and “a *delicate monster*”, [II.ii.90]. Stephano later calls him a “*moon-calf*” in Act III, scene ii [line 21-22], and in the last act of the play Prospero calls him a “*demi-devil*”, [V.i.273]. As a result, Caliban has been seen by directors as a Virginian Indian, a black slave, a “half-monkey, half coco-nut”, or even as some kind of aquatic animal, (Skura, 47). The BBC Production of *The Tempest*, for example, clothes Caliban in a primarily human form with a covering of long, brown hair, like an ape. (footnote 2) Obviously, the physical appearances of the characters are very important to the play, (Shakespeare, Penguin Books, 18). Caliban’s appearance is particularly important because his character generates an initial reaction from the

audience based on his physical appearance. This audience reaction demonstrates the prejudices against those who are not white, anglo-saxon protestant, which have existed for centuries. Initially, it is easy to form a dislike of Caliban, based on his repulsive appearance, but as his character begins to unfold we see that there is more to him than just an unattractive exterior. Although Caliban is supposed to be some kind of horrid monster, he surprises us by saying things like, "*And then I lov'd thee,*" to Prospero, [I.ii.336], or describing the island as, "*...full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.*" [III.ii.135-143], (Frye, 176).

Even Caliban's name is thought of as part of his character. In fact, "...Shakespeare's name for Caliban is widely accepted as an anagram of 'cannibal'." (Skura, 51). However, Skura then argues that Caliban is far from a cannibal, because he eats only roots, berries, and the occasional fish, and that his name is more like "a mockery of stereotypes than a mark of monstrosity", (51-52).

Throughout the play, Caliban stays close to these characteristics, but in Act V, scene i, there is one flaw in his presentation. When Caliban says, "*I'll be wise hereafter/And seek for grace*", it is a sign that Caliban is becoming civilized, and that is uncharacteristic for him, (Coles, 48).

Caliban as the uncivilized man is actually a contrast to civility. Representing the uncivilized man makes us reconsider what we consider civilized behaviour, (Skura, 44).

Caliban also serves as a contrast to the character of Ariel, the sprite-like servant of Prospero, (Miko, 15). Caliban is an earthy character, living off the earth, and living close to the earth, (Kermode, lxxxi). In contrast, Ariel is completely unearthly, a supernatural

being, much like Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, (Hazlitt, 93). Coles notes provide many other contrasting elements between the two characters. Ariel floats freely around the island singing songs and reciting poetry in a lighthearted fashion, whereas Caliban is burdened with heavy labour, which he curses and complains about constantly, (Coles, 29). Ariel is like our image of perfection or heaven and as the contrasting character, Caliban is chaos or hell. Prospero could be seen as reality because he is caught between the two.

Caliban may contrast with Ariel, but he closely resembles the character Antonio. There are two conspiracy plots devised in the play, one by Caliban, the other by Antonio, but neither succeeds, (Shakespeare, Penguin Books, 32). Perhaps the fact that neither of these plots succeeds serves to demonstrate that those who partake of such conspiracies are destined for a fall, no matter what their status, savage or noble.

Sometimes in the play Caliban is referred to as a "*demi-devil*" or "*a born devil*" and as the offspring of a witch and the devil, there is a chance that Caliban is supposed to be the devil, (Vaughan, V., 391). However, Caliban does not act, or speak, in the way of the devil. Caliban appreciates the beautiful, musical sounds of the island, and dreams of wonderful things, [II.ii.135-143], which contrasts what people imagine the devil to be like. The devil would be more eloquent in his speech, using all the right words to trick you into betraying your faith, but Caliban's speeches are very rugged, and it is obvious he is not trying to hide anything, including his feelings and motives.

Instead, Stephen Miko suggests that the character of Caliban represents characteristics in us all. Caliban does not want to be a slave but wants to be in control of his own life, not unlike Prospero, Ariel, you, or me, (Miko, 13). As Robert Egan puts it,

“He is the amoral, appetitive, suffering Self in all of us, ever in search of freedom to satisfy all its hungers – visceral, sexual, and emotional – and ever ready to follow any ‘god’ who promises such freedom”, (95).

However, if there is a ‘Caliban’ in everyone, then it is a part of the personality that everyone is trying to conceal. This would make Caliban an honest and open character because he does not try to hide his varying personalities. Most people, on the other hand, are always trying to present an image of perfection.

Shakespeare obviously combined many characteristics into the making of Caliban, but where did the idea of this character come from? Some modern literary historians believe that the English colonization of America influenced Shakespeare to write *The Tempest* and create the character of Caliban, (Vaughan, A., 137). Shakespeare had a great interest in ships, shipwrecks, and voyages to the New World, (Hollander, 445). In fact, Caliban could reflect the images of what the citizens of Stuart England thought American Natives were really like, (Vaughan, A., 137). William Hamlin describes this phenomenon using the term “naïve ethnography”, meaning that the people of the Renaissance Era had no concept of ethnic groups, especially of the American Indians, (3236A). This idea that Caliban is a vision of the American Indian is very popular among most of the researchers of the Caliban character. Skura strongly argues that “...if Caliban is the center of the play...” it is, “...because Europeans were at that time exploiting the real Calibans of the world,” (Skura, 44-45). These ‘Calibans of the world’ would be a metaphor for the exploitation of the Natives of the New World. Of course, anyone who has ever attended a production of *The Tempest* would see that Caliban appears nothing like an American Indian and if this is the image they had of American Indians then it was a false one. From this perspective, *The Tempest* might be seen by modern readers as a

tragic comedy because of its elements of servitude, racism, prejudice, and exploitation. Skura goes on to say that Caliban resembles a variety of other minorities that have been suppressed, such as, “demonized women, Moors, and Jews in the canon”, (44). Like these minorities, Caliban has been suppressed, abused, thought to be inferior, and kept captive in a cave like a prisoner.

The play further fosters prejudice by its justification of “Prospero’s power over Caliban”, (Skura, 45). To the modern reader, Prospero’s treatment of Caliban is more monstrous than Caliban’s appearance. It is possible to relate Caliban to a child who is constantly abused verbally and who grows up feeling inferior. Thus, a close reading of the play may cause some to feel hostility toward Prospero who has never forgiven Caliban for mistakes he has made. Perhaps if he had been treated better, Prospero may have had more cooperation from him as a ‘servant’. Instead, Prospero deals with Caliban through “verbal chastisement and physical pain”, (Egan, 95). Egan suggests that this “chastisement and pain” was the only form of teaching that Prospero knew. Prospero’s teaching technique is intended to expose your faults, so he can lead you to goodness and show you how perfect the future could be, as he does with Caliban, but also with most of the other characters in the play, (Egan, 96). Caliban does not respond well to this form of moral teaching and must suffer a “constant stream of abuse”, (Frye, 180). Going back to the analogy of Caliban being an abused child, we see that Caliban has begun to believe the words of Prospero and thinks very little of himself, “*How does thy honour?/Let me lick thy shoe.*” [III.ii.23], (Egan, 93). Is it possible that Caliban, that uncivilized monster, simply could not be taught morals, language, and art? In Act II, scene ii, Caliban, through his poetry and dreams, shows us that he is “capable of a finer sensibility”, (Coles, 37). Although Prospero may have failed to ‘civilize’ Caliban his intentions were good, but the relationship between two people as master and servant

has always been doomed to evolve into a relationship of resentment, (Schoenbaum, 137). However, in Act V, Prospero seems to be attempting to try and redeem himself when he says, "*this thing of darkness I/Acknowledge mine*", [V.i.276-277], (Shakespeare, 38). Much controversy over the meaning of this speech has arisen in the sources for this paper, but my interpretation is that perhaps Prospero is taking responsibility for pushing Caliban away from his civility by his harsh punishments. Caliban can now be considered a rebel against exploitation and prejudice, not just a monster.

The character of Caliban may also have some social significance because he represents some of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century European attitudes, such as those toward the New World as stated above. At the beginning of the play Caliban is a savage slave, but he evolves into a revolutionary. Initially Caliban is defenseless against Prospero's power but when he meets up with Triculo and Stephano he decides to try and convince them to help him overthrow Prospero. By doing this Caliban is taking control of his own future. Although the act of usurping Prospero may not have been the right action to take, Caliban did use what he could to gain independence, and from the experience learned a little more about civilization. This revolutionary aspect mirrors life in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century with the conflict between countries and common threat of war, (Campbell, 857). However, even more socially significant is that Caliban, in his progression through the centuries from a "drunken beast of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century" to a "Third World victim of oppression in the mid-twentieth Century", represents the changes that have developed in the Anglo-American attitude toward the primitive man, (Vaughan, V., 390).

As a comic play there is, of course, some humour. Despite the fact that Caliban is seen as representing all these dark and serious subjects he is also a source of humour in the

play. Take for example, Act II, scene ii, when Caliban tries desperately to hide from the drunken Stephano, but when discovered he thinks he is a god because he has “celestial liquor”, [II.ii.117], (Coles, 37). The passages of humour are brief however, compared to those of the romance passages between Ferdinand and Miranda, and thus, the play is primarily considered to be a romantic play.

After researching the character of Caliban, the theory of his being representative of an American Indian is quite an insightful idea, in my opinion. His contrast to Ariel and his character being a representative of the good and evil in all humanity is usually quite evident to even the most casual reader, but most would probably not see Caliban as an early Stuart England perception of the Native American Indian without further study. Only one source of reading that was encountered in this study felt that the character of Caliban had been “over-philosophized by the critics” and that although readers and audience members may feel sympathy for Caliban in the play, if ever confronted with the real thing, would probably be repulsed and therefore, act differently, (Shakespeare, *The New Shakespeare*, liii). Although I must include myself in this group of readers and audience members who feel sympathy toward Caliban, I would not support the idea that he should have been ruler on the island, because clearly he could not. To be a ruler of civilization, one must be civilized themselves, and Caliban does not fit into this world. Alone on the island, Caliban would have been ruler of himself and an uncivilized world. The idea of ‘ruling class’ is a ‘civilized’ notion and it is quite obvious that Caliban is not ‘civilized’, nor should he be made to enter a society of which he is not a part.

Therefore, in conclusion, if readers look beyond the surface of the character sketches, they can see much more enveloped into a character’s personality than just the textual description can provide. In *The Tempest*, if a reader looks beyond the surface

description of Caliban, or any of the characters presented, he/she may learn a little bit more about attitudes, society, and life in Renaissance England.

## Footnotes

1. All references in this paper to scenes in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* are from the Stratford Festival Edition of *The Tempest*.
2. For a pictorial of some of the varying physical appearances of the character of Caliban, please see Appendix A.

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## Appendix A



From the "Theatre in the Park" production of *The Tempest*, Raliegh, North Carolina



Painting by Ann Arnold



Caliban from the Royal Shakespeare Production, 1982.



Caliban from the Hampshire Shakespeare Company Production.