



Shakespeare's Tempest: Post Colonial Criticism

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ABSTRACT

In the context of post colonial criticism, the concept of hybridity is important , which , broadly speaking, is what is produced by the encounter of the two cultures of colonizer and colonized :colonial masters imposed their value system through Shakespeare, and in response colonized people often answered back in Shakespearean accents. The study of Shakespeare made them “hybrid” subject. For reasons that are sufficiently obvious, many post-colonial accounts of Shakespeare have focused primarily on the tempest. It is, after all, not hard to relate the tempest to the history of colonialism. In the first place , there is clear historical relationship between the play and some of the earliest English attempts to found colonies abroad. Between 1957 and 1973, most African and large Caribbean colonies won their independence. Dissenting intellectuals and writers from these regions decide to appropriate the tempest as a means of supporting decolonization and creating an alternative literary tradition... for forty years or more – in Spanish , French and English- African and caribbean writers and critics have, directly and indirectly, appropriated or discussed the appropriation of shakespeare's play.

Key-words : Post-colonial, hybridity, post-medernism, Marxism, decolonization, stereotyped, cultural heritage, colonized, transformation, savage, civility, core, semiperiphery.

Shakespeare's Tempest

What is postcolonial criticism of Shakespeare? The simple answer to that is that it is criticism of Shakespeare produced from the perspective and informed by the awareness of the fact that we live in a world where some nations, including the United Kingdom, have historically colonized others, which may now have gained political independence but in many cases are still labouring under serious economic disadvantages and are also struggling to come to terms culturally with their new situation. It is, moreover, criticism which accepts as axiomatic that Shakespearean plays were implicated in the processes of colonialism, and is generally very interested in how they were.

To accept that this is so, moreover, may well imply not only that Shakespeare ought to be discussed in tandem with colonialism but also that he cannot be discussed without it, as Loomba and Orkin suggest.

“Political criticism of Shakespeare as well as of early modern England has begun to show, with increasing detail and sophistication, that it is virtually impossible to seal off any meaningful analysis of English culture and literature from considerations of racial and cultural difference, and from the dynamics of emergent colonialisms.”¹

Particularly important in the context of postcolonial criticism is the concept of hybridity, which, broadly speaking, is what is produced by the encounter of the two cultures of coloniser and colonised : ‘Colonial masters imposed their value system through Shakespeare, and in response colonized people often answered back in Shakespearean accents. The study of Shakespeare made them “hybrid” subjects’ (Loomba and Orkin, P.-7). Since postcolonial identities are dependent on an acute sense of the fact of having once been colonized (or for that matter coloniser), and since we all live in a postcolonial world, Loomba and Orkin declare that ‘from the perspective of this volume it could be argued that any act of reading and performing Shakespeare in the latter twentieth century generates multiple levels of hybridity’. (P.- 8)

The task of discussing Shakespeare in this way is, not however, a simple one. There are a number of theoretical and, to some extent, even practical difficulties besetting the enterprise. Perhaps most crucial and troubling is the often-voiced worry about whether our condition as postcolonial subjects in itself inherently precludes us from even understanding the position of colonial subjects. Put simply, might it be the case that the more we understand what Shakespeare's plays mean to us now, in the postcolonial world, the less we understand what they actually meant when he wrote them, in an emergently colonial or (as some critics would have it) even precolonial

world? And how valid or meaningful a term is 'postcolonial' in the first place? Is colonization really over when the last governor leaves the territory? And do the similarities in the experiences of former colonies outweigh the differences? Certainly, as Loomba and Orkin point out, 'Various critics have complained that not enough attention is paid within post-colonial studies and theories to specific locations and institutions. Thus "post-coloniality" verges on becoming a rather vague condition of people anywhere and everywhere' (P.- 11). Finally, what is or should be the relationship of postcolonialism to other critical perspectives? Loomba and Orkin note, for instance, that 'although each side usually tries to enlist feminists, considerations of gender are always sidelined if the battle is configured as one between post-modernism and Marxism, or between post-colonial intellectuals inside and outside the Western academy'. (P.- 16)

The Tempest

For reasons that are sufficiently obvious, many postcolonial accounts of Shakespeare have focused primarily on *The Tempest*. It is, after all, not hard to relate *The Tempest* to the history of colonialism. In the first place, there is a clear historical relationship between the play and some of the earliest English attempts to found colonies abroad. Serious attempts at colonization, central at Roanoke off the coast of North Carolina, had begun in 1584. The ensuing years had seen considerable interruption to the attempts to maintain the colony, but these resumed at the turn of the century, and in 1609 a ship called *The Sea Venture*, bound for Roanoke's successor colony at Jamestown, was wrecked on the coast of Bermuda. The crew survived and were eventually rescued, and on their return to London one of those aboard, William Strachey, published *True Repertory of the Wrack, and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates Knight, upon and from the islands of the Bermudas, his coming to Virginia, and the estate of that colony* (1610). Unmistakable verbal echoes prove beyond doubt that Shakespeare used Strachey's account as a source for *The Tempest*. There is also another possible sign of interest in the New World on Shakespeare's part in the choice of the name Caliban, which could be an anagram of the word 'cannibal', or might relate to the term 'Carib' (though it is also possible that this may derive from the Roman word 'cauliban', meaning 'black').

Since its origins were so clearly traceable to this particular historical moment, it is both appropriate and unsurprising that *The Tempest* should in turn have become a key text in the subsequent history of colonialism. Few plays have been more frequently or extensively adapted than *The Tempest*, and very often the changes made have had the intention or at least the effect of pressing the text into the services of arguments for or against, or discussions about, colonialism. Aime Cesaire's *Une Tempete*, Marina Warner's *Indigo*, and numerous others have all constituted

The *Tempest* as a key text for discussion of issues associated not only with the originary moment of colonialism but also what it was subsequently to become. As Jonathan Hart observes.

Between 1957 and 1973, most African and large Caribbean colonies won their independence. Dissenting intellectuals and writers from these regions decide to appropriate *The Tempest* as a means of supporting decolonization and creating an alternative literary tradition...for forty years or more – in Spanish, French and English– African and Caribbean writers and critics have, directly and indirectly, appropriated or discussed the appropriation of Shakespeare's play.

Sustained encounters with *The Tempest* are recorded in a host of imaginative and theoretical texts of the postwar decades of national emergence, beginning with Octave, Mannoni's *Psychology of Colonization* (1950) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), and notably including George Lamming's *The Pleasure of Exile* (1960) and *Water with Berries* (1971), Aime Césaire's *A Tempest* (1969), Roberto Fernandez Retamar's *Caliban* (1971), and *A Grain of Wheat* (1968), among other works, by the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In most of these works, contemporaneous British and American attempts to problematize the traditionally stereotyped critical estimate of the relationship of Prospero and Caliban are resisted in favor of recuperating the starkness of the master/slave configuration, thus making it appear to function as a foundational paradigm in the history of European colonialism. In this process, writers like Ngugi, Lamming, and Césaire regenerate out of their own firsthand experience of colonization a conception of Shakespeare as a formative producer and purveyor of a paternalistic ideology that is basic to the material aims of Western imperialism.

New historicists, eager to emphasize the 'American' contexts of *The Tempest*, while distancing themselves from the morally prescriptive nature of its supposed colonial politics, nevertheless reproduce a long-held preoccupation defining the play as part of America's own cultural heritage and abiding relationship with one of its colonial creators, early modern England. In claiming an exclusively American context for the play's production, American new historicist critics overinvest something of their own peculiarly post-colonial identities as American intellectuals within the one text that purports to establish a firm connection between American and the culture which these critics analyse with such intensity : early modern England. (P.- 27)

It is perhaps a neat irony that early postcolonial criticism should thus have been doubly belated; in a sense, both British and American academics had, as Brotton see it, already been 'colonised', or at least conditioned, by the dominant ideologies of their respective professional and national cultures.

The tempest is not simply a reflection of colonialist practices but an intervention in an ambivalent and even contradictory discourse. This intervention takes the form of a powerful and pleasurable narrative which seeks at once to harmonise disjunction, to transcend irreconcilable contradictions and to mystify the political conditions which demand colonialist discourse. Yet the narrative ultimately fails to deliver that containment and instead may be seen to foreground precisely those problems which it works to efface or overcome. The result is a radically ambivalent text which exemplifies not some timeless contradiction internal to the discourse by which it inexorably undermines or deconstructs its 'official' pronouncements, but a moment of historical crisis. This crisis is the struggle to produce a colonialist discourse adequate to the complex requirements of British colonialism in its initial phase. (P.- 48)

To some extent, these are the attitudes and words that we might by now expect to find in Political Shakespeare. There is the characteristic emphasis on the mystification of political conditions, the objection to any idea of 'timelessness' and the call to historicise instead, and also, as in Kathleen McLuskie's essay on King Lear in the same volume, the acknowledgement that the reading being proposed is to a large extent one that goes against the grain, and robs the text of much of its pleasure. What is specific to Brown's argument, however, is his stress on a precise moment in the history of colonialism as the context most germane for *The Tempest*, and this departs from the frequent practice of Cultural Materialism of relating Shakespeare's plays not primarily to his time but to our own. For Brown, *The Tempest* is a play that attempts to tell a story about the English colonialist enterprise and to speak, indeed to create, a language which is appropriate to that particular moment, although ultimately it fails in that attempt because we are able to detect the signs of strain in its project.

A demand for both order and disorder, producing a disruptive other in order to assert the superiority of the coloniser. Yet that production is itself evidence of a struggle to restrict the other's disruptiveness to the role. Colonialist discourse does not simply announce a triumph for civility, it must continually produce it, and this work involves struggle and risk. (P.- 58)

For Brown, however, there is a threat posed to this process by the fact that 'The same discourse which allows for the transformation of the savage into the civil also raises the possibility of a reverse transformation' (P.- 57), and this means that there is an inherent instability in all colonial transactions. Consequently, there are distinct stains visible in the project of *The Tempest*.

The second scene of the play is an extended demonstration of Prospero's powerful narration as it interpellates. Miranda, Ariel and Caliban... This reinvestiture is civil power through the medium of the non-civil is an essentially colonialist discourse. However, the narrative is fraught because it reveals internal contradictions which stain its ostensible project and because it produces the possibility of sites of resistance in the other precisely at the moment when it seeks to impose its captivating power. (P.- 59)

'Interpellation', a term derived from the Marxist critic Louis Althusser, refers to the rhetorical and ideological processes by which people are constituted as 'subject', who have the illusion of subjectivity (that is, of free individuality) but are in fact subjected within the ideological order. In Brown's account of *The Tempest*, Prospero is attempting to constitute (or situate) Miranda, Ariel and Caliban as subjects within his desired order, and the ways in which he seeks to do this parallel the strategies used by colonizers when dealing with indigenous inhabitants. Prospero's project is disrupted, though, by what the play reveals as cracks in the consistency and capabilities of his enterprise— and therefore, by analogy, as cracks in the consistency and capabilities of the English colonial enterprise as a whole.

Brown detects a number of such fissures or faultlines in the play, pointing out, for instance, that 'In the recitation to Miranda, for example, Prospero is forced to remember his own past forgetfulness' (P.- 59), and he therefore concludes that—

The Tempest, then, declares no all-embracing triumph for colonialism. Rather it serves as a limit text in which the characteristic operations of colonialist discourse may be discerned – as an instrument of exploitation, a register of beleaguerment and a site of radial ambivalence. These operations produce strategies and stereotypes which seek to impose and efface colonialist power, in this text they are also driven into contradiction and disruption. The play's 'ending' in renunciation and restoration is only the final ambivalence, being at once the apotheosis, mystification and potential erosion of the colonialist discourse. If this powerful discourse, thus mediated, is finally reduced to the stuff of dreams, then it is still dreamwork, the site of a struggle for meaning.

In Willis's view, *The Tempest* is a play in which we are carefully and deliberately invited to look at Prospero, not with him. She argues that While Prospero clearly views Caliban as a threatening 'order', the audience does not; the play invites us to sympathize with and to laugh at Caliban, but not to perceived him as a real threat. No necessity compels Shakespeare to giving him a persuasive claim to legitimate ownership of the island, or to undermine Prospero's claim that Caliban is ineducable by having Caliban state his intention to 'seek for grace' in the play's final scene. (P.- 279)

For Willis, 'the Play's true threatening "order" is not Caliban, but Antonio' (P.- 280), though 'Oddly, Brown scarcely refers to Antonio or to Prospero's attitude towards him' (P.- 281). Willis's reference to 'The Audience' here, however, seems to me to threaten a collapse of both historical and geographical distances by implying that all audiences everywhere, at whatever time and whatever the nature reaction to play. Personally, I distrust that idea, not least because of the remarkable range of variety in Shakespearean production which the next chapter will explore. For me, one of the most interesting the next chapter will explore. For me, one of the most interesting things about Shakespeare's representation of Caliban is how little we are actually told about him, and this leaves considerable scope for directors of the play to present a wide variety of Calibans.

Willis seems further to override the specifics of history when she observe that– Brown's understanding of colonialism is shaped in part by categories he borrows from Immanuel Wallerstein. To Wallerstein, the colonial enterprise may be seen to operate in three domains, the 'core,' 'semiperiphery,' and 'periphery'. The colonialism of the core involves the reinforcement and expansion of royal hegemony within England itself; that of the semiperiphery involves its expansion into areas (such as Ireland) only partially under English control; that of the periphery, into the New World. The 'production of the order' takes place in all three domains, and Brown finds all three relevant to *The Tempest*. (P.- 279)

Willis makes this point in order to argue that–

The Tempest celebrates what Wallerstein calls the 'colonialism of the core' while rendering the 'colonialism unequivocally, the play should be understood as an extremely successful endorsement of the core's political order. At the same time, the play registers anxiety about the legitimacy of peripheral colonial ventures and their ability to further core interests. (P.- 280)

Skura points to what she sees as three main areas of weakness or blindness in postcolonial accounts of the play. In the first place, as we have seen, she objects that this approach is not in fact historicizing at all:–

We have no external evidence that seventeenth-century audiences thought the play referred to the New World. In an age when real voyages were read allegorically, the status of allegorical voyages like Prospero's can be doubly ambiguous, especially in a play like *The Tempest*, which provides an encyclopedic context for Prospero's experience, presenting it in terms of an extraordinary range of classical, biblical and romantic exiles, discoveries, and confrontations. (P.- 294)

Instead

When *The Tempest* was written, what the New World seems to have meant for the majority of Englishmen was a sense of possibility and a set of conflicting fantasies about the wonders to be found there; these were perhaps the preconditions for colonialism – as for much else – but not yet the thing itself. (P.- 36)

However, Skura's argument that postcolonial readings are insufficiently historicised seems rather undermined by her contention that in these 'new' readings it is always assumed that –

If Caliban is the center of the play, it is not because of his role in the play's self contained structure, and not even because of what he reveals about man's timeless tendency to demonize 'strangers,' but because Europeans were at that time exploiting the real Calibans of the world, and *The Tempest* was part of the process. (P.- 290)

It is hard to see how an allegedly historicising approach finds room for a phrase such as 'man's timeless tendency'.

As a related point, Skura further objects that because we are misguidedly concentrating on the early history of the English colonial enterprise, which, she maintains, is a red herring, we are no longer paying sufficient attention to the contexts that were relevant to an early seventeenth-century audience, most notably Shakespeare's other plays :–

Long before writing *The Tempest*, Shakespeare written another play about a ruler who preferred his books to government. Navarre's academy in *Love's Labor's Lost* who no island, but, like an island, it was supposed to be isolated from territorial negotiations. And Navarre, oblivious to colonial issues, though certainly not exempt from timeless aristocratic prejudice, brought his own version of Ariel and Caliban by inviting Armado and Costard to join him. (P.- 309)

Skura also compares Prospero and Caliban to Hal and Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part One*, to Duck Senior and Jaques in *As You Like It* (P.- 312), and to the Duck and Lucio in *Measure for Measure* (P.- 313) – all plays which do not have a colonial setting or context of any kind.

Lastly, Skura raises another more wide-ranging objection to Brown's reading and those which followed it : 'this shift in our attitude toward and object of interpretation entails a less explicit but extremely important move away from the psychological interpretation that had previously seemed appropriate for the play (even to its detractors) largely because of its central figure who, so like Shakespeare, runs the show' (PP. 290-1). Because of this, she complains, 'Even in less polemical examples the "political unconscious" often replaces, rather than supplements, any other unconscious; attention to culture and politics is associated with an implicit questioning of individuality and of subjective experience' (P.- 291). Skura regrets this move away from the psychoanalytic, and thinks that we ought to notice, for instance, that Prospero appears to project his own darkest fears on to Caliban :

If Prospero is to pass on his heritage to the next generation, he must at this moment repress his desire for power and for revenge at home, as well as any sexual desire he feels toward Miranda. Both desires are easily projected onto the fishily phallic Caliban, a walking version of Prospero's own 'thing' of darkness...Caliban's function as a walking screen for projection may help explain why Caliban's sin does not consist in cannibalism, to which, one assumes, Prospero was never tempted, but rather in Prospero's own repressed fantasies of omnipotence and lust. (PP.- 301-11).

Conclusion

For many notable recent critics, the question of what the play did or did not mean in its own time is beside the point; what matters is not the relation of *The Tempest* to the ordinary moment of English colonialism but the role it has played since. Thus Ania Loomba declares in her book *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* that –

It 'cultural production occurs all the time and at every point where meaning is communicated' (Sinfield, 'Reproductions', P.- 131), then these are not limited to the ideological and material conditions of the inception of text but must include its subsequent deployments. (P.- 2)

Reference

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