THE TALE OF TWO TEMPESTS: A POST-COLONIAL JOURNEY

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Abstract: Shakespeare's play The Tempest has been the subject of intense critical scrutiny in contemporary times. The play's treatment of the racial question has generated tremendous anxiety. This is most evident in Aime Cesaire's play A Tempest: a post-colonial response to Shakespeare's Tempest which politicizes the colonial undercurrents of Shakespeare's play and brings them to the fore. Cesaire's location of the events in Haiti, and his representation of Caliban as a black and Ariel as a mulatto firmly place the play within a framework of colonialism which Shakespeare had only hinted at. Cesaire further problematizes the colonizer-colonized paradigm and highlights the former's dependence on this process for his very identity, presenting a complicated relationship of power and vulnerability. Attempts to consider Cesaire's play as a prejudiced denunciation of the colonizer are therefore reductive, and fail to take into account the various complex issues it raises. This paper attempts to analyze the dialogic relationship between the two Tempests of Shakepeare and Cesaire, and thereby explore the ideological implications of Cesaire's play, especially in relation to his theory of Negritude. The paper also attempts to locate this relationship within the larger framework of post-colonial adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, which include works like Charles Marowitz's An Othello and Orson Welles' Voodoo Macbeth, which work towards destabilizing the traditional image of the racial subject.

Keywords: Caliban, Negritude, Post-colonial, Shakespeare.

The Tempest, William Shakespeare's last play, is also regarded as his most controversial, especially since the advent of post-colonialism as a major theoretical approach. Critical perspectives about the play have undergone a major ideological shift post the 1950's, with the traditional interpretation of Prospero as the hero being problematized by post-colonial readings, which center on the representation of the colonial paradigm in the Prospero-Caliban/Ariel relationships. The "comedy" has thus become one of Shakespeare's problem plays, and has prompted responses from many artists. This paper attempts to explore one such response to Shakespeare's play: Aime Cesiare's play A Tempest and its relationship to the "original", to analyze the evolution of Shakespeare's Tempest and locate it within an inter-textual framework of Shakespeare's post-colonial engagement, which includes other plays like Othello, Antony and Cleopatra, which deal with the subjectivity of the racial "other", and their adaptations. Shakespeare wrote The Tempest in 1610, in an age which was witnessing the rise of the European colonial enterprise. Even though traditional Eurocentric responses to the play firmly centered on the heroic pursuits of Prospero, a Faust-like European over-achiever, and Ariel and Caliban were marginal characters, post-colonial criticism has not only challenged the way these characters are viewed, but also their centrality: Caliban and Ariel have thus emerged as pivotal characters in the play, compensating for the lack of textual space accorded them by making their presence felt in critical responses to the play. While the colonial implications embedded in Shakespeare's The Tempest have been widely established, opinions vary on the play's ideological stand on the colonialism. One of the central questions regarding the text is the portrayal of Caliban. Critical perspectives seem divided on the issue, and the text itself seems to complicate any simplistic understanding. Peter Hulme, in his essay "Prospero and Caliban" claims that even though the play seems to belong overwhelmingly to Prospero, the text does incorporate a counter-perspective. The absolute nature of Prospero's power is undercut in the play with suggestions that his magic was effective only on the island. There are several instances which highlight this- Prospero tells Miranda that it was "divine providence" that brought his enemies to him; also the fact that he was unable to protect his Dukedom from being usurped in the first place. Moreover, his dependence on Ariel and Caliban for survival is explicitly mentioned, as are his maneuvers to continue his reign on the island, which range from promises of freedom and reminders of his favors to Ariel and threats of physical punishment and adopting an accusatory, dehumanizing vocabulary with Caliban. These two characters, furthermore, are given a space, however marginalized, to voice their dissent. Hulme claims that Shakespeare presents Prospero as a colonial historian and his version though dominant, is not absolute.

> "Ariel and Caliban constantly act as reminders that Prospero's is not the only perspective…right from the beginning his narrative is distinguished from that of the play." (Hulme, 241)

The exploitative nature of Prospero's relationship with these two characters, and the material ambitions behind it are highlighted in Caliban's short narrative. Caliban's accusations reveal the deceitful methods that Prospero resorted to in order to gain knowledge

about the island. Caliban's version also highlights the role that language plays in cultural colonization, and Prospero's justification of Caliban's rape attempt on Miranda (a charge never proved) being the reason for the treatment meted out to him reveals the disturbing paradox on which colonial exploitation was justified: the idea of the "white man's burden", which was based on an internalized sense of racial superiority, as well as an inherent fear of the sexual power of the "other". Caliban's perspective, the subaltern narrative, though allowed articulation, is sidetracked as the play progresses, and the play's representation of him becomes increasingly cruel. The ending of the play reduces him to a figure of ridicule, whose intellectual inferiority is established by his folly in mistaking the drunken Stephano for a God, and who ultimately has to accept the European Prospero's supremacy after being punished. This final caricaturing of Caliban within colonial stereotypes has been the cause of major anxiety for post-colonial theorists. In this context, Aime Cesiare's play A Tempest can be seen as a deeply political response to Shakespeare's Tempest, which attempts to reconcile the loose ends of the Bard's last play.Aime Cesaire has been one of the most influential post-colonial thinkers of the 20th century, and one of the founders of the literary and social ideology of Negritude, which attempted to create a distinct black subjectivity through a rediscovery of a shared African heritage, and a conscious move away from the Western image of the Negro. Coined by Cesaire in 1935 in his journal L'Etudiant Noir, Negritude opposed black attempts of cultural assimilation within a predominantly white society, stressing on the need to keep the "negritude" (which literally translates into blackness) intact. He claimed-

"If we break with all that we have been taught, if we plumb the depths, then what we will find is essentially black". (Kelley, x)

Cesaire's sustained engagement with post-colonial politics finally led to A Tempest, which was his last direct comment on the issue. Robin D.G. Kelley, in his Introduction to A Tempest claims that A Tempest marks Cesaire's move away from history to literature, which had hitherto been his principle source for post-colonial commentary. This move also highlights the tremendous cultural and political impact of Shakespeare's works. Cesaire's A Tempest radically changes many aspects of Shakespeare's play, to firmly establish it within the fabric of post-colonial criticism. The most noticeable of these is the change in the Setting and the Title. Instead of the unnamed island of Shakespeare's Tempest, Cesaire's play is set in Haiti, a territory which has a long history of colonial exploitation. By replacing the article the in the title with an A, Cesaire aptly represents his position vis-à-vis Shakespeare's text: it is a simultaneous distancing from and acknowledgement of Shakespeare's play. The change in title also undercuts the latter's pretentions to universality, emphasizing that his is only one of multiple perspectives. It also hints at the possibility of an alternative resolution of the play. A similar trope has been adopted by Charles Marowitz in his adaptation of Othello, titled An Othello. Indeed, many similarities can be drawn between these two adaptations, both of which are based on Shakespearean plays which deal with the character of the racial "other". Marowitz's An Othello also advocates the ideological perspective of Negritude, where a black Iago openly criticizes Othello for his attempts at becoming accepted in white society by following their traditions. Marowitz retains the Shakespearean dialogue for most characters, but gives Iago a Harlem dialect replete with slangs, in order to create a distinct black subjectivity. A similar trope is adopted by Cesaire in the banquet scene of A Tempest, where he introduces Eshu, an indigenous African God, to bless the couple. Eshu's distinct ethnicity is highlighted through his language and use of expletives, and his success in ruining Prospero's theatricals becomes a strong reminder of Africa's potential power. Both A Tempest and An Othello also invest the traditionally marginalized character with dignity, subverting traditional responses. Iago, like Caliban, becomes much more than a malcontent. His motivations are contextualized through his racial identity, offering both a chance at redemption to his character, as well as a critique of the play's politics of race. While Shakespeare's Tempest only hints at colonial racism, Cesaire's play categorically establishes its presence. A comparison of the primary description of characters of the two plays explicates this: in The Tempest, Caliban's race was never directly revealed, but was hinted at through the mention of Sycorax belonging to Algiers, and by Prospero's addressing him as "Thou darkness". The primary description mentions him as a "savage, deformed slave". Ariel also, is called "an airy spirit". Both characters are thus dehumanized, without making their racial identities explicit. In contrast, Cesaire begins the play by presenting his Caliban as a black, and Ariel as a mulatto. He thus provides the audience with an understanding of the determinism of their positions due to their race, at the same time ensuring that the colonial element in the play cannot be overlooked. It also explains the difference in their political standpoints. Cesaire presents Caliban as an outspoken critic of colonization, a revolutionary extremist, who would rather bomb the island his mother left him than bear to be ruled by Prospero. In Caliban, Cesaire has also created an advocate for

Negritude. Caliban refuses to greet Prospero in the latter's language, saying "Uhuru" instead; he argues that Prospero did not give him language, but only taught him his own, and never imparted any knowledge; he even rejects the name Caliban which Prospero had given, claiming that-

"It's the name given by your hatred, and every time it's spoken it is an insult….Call me X, like a man without a name. Or to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen…you talk about history, well that's history and everyone knows it! That you've stolen everything from me, even my identity!"
(Cesaire, 20)

Cesaire's Caliban is more outspoken and politically conscious than Shakespeare's. While both criticized the colonizer's language as a tool for domination, Cesaire's Caliban recognizes the importance of his own culture in creating an independent subjectivity, and actually makes an effort to resist this domination by rejecting the name given to him. Cesaire's Caliban also effectively resists Prospero's attempts at dehumanizing him, by retorting-

"You think I'm ugly! Well I don't think you're so handsome yourself! With that big, hooked nose, you look just like some old vulture!" (Cesaire, 17)

The ambivalence regarding Caliban's intellectual abilities in the end of Shakespeare's Tempest are dispelled in Cesaire's version, where the failure of his attempts is attributed to the inadequacy of the white men assisting him. Unlike The Tempset, Cesaire's Caliban does not become a ridiculous figure, and instead of treating the drunkards as his masters, he recognizes their stupidity and attempts to use them to his benefit, establishing a deal with them on an equal footing, addressing them not as "My Lords", but "My friends". Cesaire allows Caliban the opportunity to confront Prospero and present an informed critique of his exploitation- thus revealing his acute understanding of the intricacies of the colonial rhetoric, which in turn overturns the stereotypical image of the colored "other" as intellectually inferior. Cesaire also reveals the human side of the "savage", when he desists from killing an unarmed Prospero. Ariel's less extreme political position and his unwilling obedience to Prospero is attributed to the position of relative privilege that he enjoys due to his race. The one major change that Cesaire makes in his play is in the relationship between Ariel and Caliban. Shakespeare's Tempest rarely shows the two directly conversing, and their relationship, as such, seems to be one of antagonism. Cesaire's play however presents solidarity amongst the two, borne out of a shared cultural and racial heritage, with each trying to help the other, despite Prospero's attempts at dividing them, and their own political disagreements. The representation of the colonizer, Prospero, is also unique. Cesiare's Prospero is egotistical, power-hungry, insecure, yet vulnerable. Cesaire avoids making Prospero a stock-figure, and instead presents the complexities of colonization from both perspectives. In his "Discourse on Colonialism", Cesaire writes about the way colonialism awakens the savage, inhuman side of the colonizer, which is shown towards the end of the play, when Prospero realizes his helpless dependence on colonial power. Caliban's assertion-

"On the stake on which you have sharpened yourself, you'll have impaled yourself…you can't live anywhere else. You're just an old addict, that's what you are!"
(Cesaire, 61-62)

Highlights the moral and spiritual destruction that colonialism causes, and prefigures Prospero's decision to stay back on the island. Prospero's final self-doubt and his attempts to make amends with Caliban present a complex relationship between the two, showing that A Tempest is not a one-sided critique of the European, but is an informed comment on the colonial process and the violence it entailed. Cesaire's play thus serves in extending the colonial debate that had begun with Shakespeare's The Tempest, and showcases its evolution in terms of the post-colonial discourse. In transforming the character of Caliban from a monster-figure to a victimized but spirited revolutionary, Cesaire is intertwining his political ideologies into the work. The subtitle of the play, "Adaptation for a Back Theatre" echoes Orson Welles' stage adaptation of Macbeth with an all-black cast, titled Voodoo Macbeth, which was incidentally also set in Haiti, and like A Tempest, incorporated elements of African culture into an otherwise Eurocentric scenario. Like Cesaire's A Tempest, Voodoo Macbeth al so attempts to bring the question of race to the forefront in Shakespeare criticism, as well as to revolutionize black theatre. These works therefore present a thematic as well as performative evolution of Shakespeare.

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