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SHAKESPEARE'S THE TEMPEST: AN ALTERNATIVE READING

Abstract

This paper intends to offer an alternative reading of Shakespeare's theatre by considering the ambiguous position of this dramatist regarding the relationship that he presents, between the world of "civilization" which supposedly characterizes the West and the periphery of this world, where "barbarity", ignorance and brutality prevail. Shakespeare indeed never reveals a clear position regarding what is now commonly called the "North- South" relationship. Viewpoints that have emerged from "the margins" do revise this position by emphasizing Shakespeare's slighting of the humanity that has developed outside the Western boundaries. For the sake of comparison, I would like to introduce Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, and how it has been "rewritten" and restyled as *Une Tempête* by the well-known Martiniquan Négritude writer Aimé Césaire, so as to offer a new voice to his Caliban, as a rebel against the hegemonic attitude of the master Prospero.

Keywords: Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; North-South relationship; hegemony; rebellion; Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*.

1. Introduction

The theatre of Shakespeare introduces a variety of situations where the exercise of power and the dramatization of conflicting interests constitute the prevalent subject-matter, whether the issues dramatized focus on recognizable historical realities, or belong to the world of fantasy. The purpose of this paper is to show how Shakespeare, in *The Tempest*, deals with inter-cultural exchanges on the basis of clashes of interests, since the seizing of an island from its rightful occupiers is in sight. It also studies the literary response of the well-known Martiniquan Négritude writer Aimé Césaire, as dramatised in his play *Une Tempête*. Indeed, despite opinions minimizing Césaire's hostility towards the Europeans' hegemonic practices, the latter's intent is clearly to "white back" to Shakespeare by pastiching his text. His aim is indeed to restore dignity and agency in the black man, the Caliban who represents his Caribbean ancestry, in the face of the brutal and demeaning attitude of the white Prospero.

Quite markedly, the ambiguity with which Shakespeare considers the relationship between his "civilized" world and the confines of "barbarity" is a cause for concern in parts of his drama, notably in plots where one can note his unease to take a definite position. Apparently, he reveals some pondering over such an issue, as witness the presence, in some of his plays, of characters who represent non-European cultures. We cannot deny the fact that this "universal" dramatist is sensitive to the North- South human interchange, and perhaps to the

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hegemonic position openly taken by the West towards people with lesser power. But the position is that these characters are made peripheral in substance and in conduct, and they are short of articulating their sensibilities and worldviews through him. In *the Tempest*, which was completed in 1611, we see the role of the non-white Caliban confined to a peripheral claim for existence, and dispossessed of his island by Prospero, the white nobleman who then also becomes his master.

2. Foregrounding the Issues: Caliban as Side Actor in the Drama.

The central subject of the play is not so much about the issue of territorial dispossession of Caliban with the use of force by a better armed invader as it is about a rivalry over the duchy of Milan, a dispute which is “exported” to an island of the South Seas and settled in this place. The scenario of an island occupation is itself inspired from pastorals of the Italian *Commedia Dell’Arte*, and supplemented by the story of a shipwreck that took place in 1601, during a passage on a ship owned by a George Somer, bound for the New World, whereupon her passengers were safely landed on an island of the Bermudas.

In the play, there is also a shipwreck, which is provoked by Prospero, the rightful duke of Milan, who is gifted with magical powers. The fact is that Prospero had been wrongly accused of practicing sorcery in Milan for evil purposes and condemned to live in exile in a distant tropical island. The plotting against him had been masterminded by Antonio, his brother, so that he could replace him as Duke of Milan, with the support of Alonso, King of Naples. Marooned in this island with his daughter Miranda for twelve years, Prospero decides to use his magic to attract his tormentors to his island by provoking a shipwreck. He is helped in so doing by Ariel, an airy spirit that he has delivered from the tree where Caliban’s mother, Sycorax, had held him prisoner by a spell. Antonio, the “usurping Duke of Milan“, is onboard the ship that is brought to sink. He is in the company of other authorities, i.e. Alonso, the King of Naples, with Sebastian, his brother, and Ferdinand, his son, as well as Gonzalo, an “honest old counselor”. All have safely escaped and been cast upon Prospero’s island, and settled in different parts of this place.

Shakespeare adds the figure of Caliban, an inhabitant of the island, enslaved by Prospero, and whose origins are located in Argier (to be understood as Algiers). As said, the island that he had inherited from his mother Sycorax, is now under Prospero’s control. In the second scene of act 1, Prospero reveals to Miranda why he provoked the shipwreck and why he wanted to take his revenge against his brother by attracting to the island such company of noblemen. Other people, Trinculo, a jester and Stephano, a drunken butler, are also introduced as men who wanted to betray Prospero by planning to end his possession of the island, with Caliban’s help. We suspect here that Shakespeare is vilifying his non-white character, who then becomes a character to be condemned just because he dreams of recovering his sovereignty over the island. The project is foiled by Prospero, who nonetheless appears later as an all-forgiving master. Besides, Prospero even allows his daughter Miranda to choose Ferdinand as future husband, so that Alonso in the end regrets having supported Antonio in taking the dukedom of Milan. Thanks to Prospero’s magic manipulations,

Alonso recognizes that the Duchy of Milan should be returned to Prospero. And so, as Alfred Rotschild (in Campbell et al., 1964, p. 4) writes, the wedding brings in “the reunion of the Prince with his father, the forgiveness of his enemies and Prospero’s recovery of his Duchy.

However, as said, Shakespeare produces no compelling portrait of the “peripheral” figure of Caliban; the latter is characterized by an unshapely body and a language made up of babbling; as the Kenyan writer and scholar Ngugi Wa Thiong’o declares in an essay: “Note the assumption that Caliban’s language was mere gabble. Caliban, if you remember, answers not by reminding Prospero that he too had a language, but by showing him the usage to which he has put his knowledge of Prospero’s tongue.

You taught me language; and my profit on’t it
Is, I know how to curse. The Red Plague rid you
For learning me your language” (Ngugi, 1998, p. 15).

Such a statement is evidence of Shakespeare’s awareness of the need to put into play inter-cultural relations, and to analyse the possible perversion that can accompany the colonizer’s language. Even if *The Tempest* is mostly considered as a piece of entertainment to cater for different audiences coming from different layers of Elizabethan society, Shakespeare’s sense of cosmopolitanism is brought to general attention. This dramatist was responding to the growing popular need for exotica, a salient feature of the collective consciousness of the early seventeenth century in England. For the common people, Algiers and Algeria were not locations which connoted civilization; the play conveys effectively this common feeling, and furthermore, it introduces another North African spot, Tunis, as a strange place where uncivilized people live; but the fact is that Claribel, Alonso’s daughter, is “Queen of Tunis, married to its king; so she is heir of Naples”, as Sebastian exclaims, and this makes Antonio echo in pejorative terms: “How shall that Claribel measure us back to Naples? Keep in Tunis and let Sebastian wake” (line 257-269).

As a man clearly Euro centered, and unwilling to accept intercultural alliances, Sebastian is clearly dubbed to be the rightful successor to the throne of Naples. Whether such xenophobic remarks convey also the opinion of Shakespeare in such matters is open to question; nevertheless, one can observe that the playwright is not insensitive to the tensions arising out of vying intercultural relationships. This can be seen in other plays by him, such as *The Merchant of Venice* where Shylok, the Jewish merchant, is portrayed as a pitiless usurer who seeks revenge from the racist humiliation he suffers from Antonio; or *Othello* in the eponymous play, where the drama is around the Moor, characterized by sanguine and “primitive” instincts that lead him to kill his Christian wife, Desdemona, following the slandering of this young lady by the malignant Iago, who has accused her of deceiving him.

3. The Prospero/Caliban Dichotomy

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* brings us to consider the non-white “other” as being mostly patronized and dehumanized by European civilization, at least in the way he is treated by white characters. The Prospero-Caliban dichotomy has

been widely debated by academia, particularly within the framework of “deconstruction” and revision of positions, as seen in various studies. In Oscar James Campbell’s introduction to the play, Caliban is presented as a kind of satyr, or “ravisher of women”, and given “a monstrous shape”. But he adds that “this spirit of the earth”, with his “brutish matter”, is not devoid of all civilized impulses. The music with which Ariel fills the island to overflowing amazes him” (Campbell et al., 1964, p. 10). At the same time, he is also “a fragment of popular superstition- a moon-calf, the offspring of a witch like Sycorax and the devil” (ibid, p. 10).

Taking clearly a clearly different standpoint, the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong’o analyses *The Tempest* as follows:

The play is interesting in that it has all the images that are later to be reworked into a racist tradition particularly in popular European literature about the colonized peoples: the savage as a rapist, lazy, a lover of whisky, stupid, cannibalistic. But the main thing is that Shakespeare does give the capacity to say ‘no’. Caliban is invested with energy (Ngugi, 1993, p. 15).

This is quite apparent in the dialogue in which Caliban expresses his revolt and his recriminations towards his “master”:

This island is mine, by Sycorax my mother
Which you takest from me. When you camest
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me (lines 331-333).

Caliban keeps repeating that this island has been unduly taken from him by Prospero, though the latter brutally reminds him of his savage ‘condition’, and as Ngugi aptly reminds us, is made consistent with popular culture in Europe. Prospero answers Caliban’s recriminations with the following:

Abhorred slave,
Which any spirit of goodness will 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 would gabble like a thing
Most brutish...(lines 352-358).

The cliché of the savage blighted by uncontrollable sensuousness and evil impulses is not to be missed in this play. It reflects a conscious shelving of some human beings of distant lands as uncontrollable and prone to viciousness. Another non-white character introduced, Ariel, who represents a more pliable and obedient subject, since he does not question the white man’s authority. He indeed accepts Prospero’s domination under the light and evasive promise that he will be liberated by his master in due course. This psychological disposition could give a preview of the future period of colonization in which some colonized subjects accept their condition and collaborate with the master, as denounced in so many creative works by Caribbean and African writers. Edward Said, following George Lamming, would tell us for his part that “Caliban has a history capable of development, as part of a process of work, growth and maturity to which only Europeans seemed entitled” (Said, 1993, p. 257). But I doubt whether this capacity for development is granted by Shakespeare to this

alien slave in *The Tempest*. One can remember such demeaning words as “thing”, “savage” and “brutish” affixed to the black man, and notably taken up by Joseph Conrad in his novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1902). And even when Caliban is granted forgiveness by Alonso for plotting against him, still no humanity is recognized in him:

ALONSO (pointing to Caliban)

This is a strange thing as e'er I looked on.

PROSPERO

He is as disproportioned in his manners

As in his shape

(To Caliban) Go, sirrah, to my cell;

Take with you your companions; as you look

To have my pardon, trim it handsomely.

Prospero's attitude towards Caliban is to admonish him as a child who would have meddled in mischievous actions, but who is forgiven after expressing his regret, and who would behave properly henceforth.

The attitude of the white *doxa*, through the characters' discourse put on stage here, is duly analysed by the Martiniquan poet, dramatist and essayist Aimé Césaire. It has made him “rewrite” and “revise” Shakespeare's play as *Une Tempête*, later translated into English as *A Tempest* by Richard Miller (2002). Césaire indeed “writes back” to Shakespeare with Caliban given a sense of justice and rebellion, and refusing the white man's xenophobic clichés. His dialogues with Prospero reveal a more assertive posture of the latter. When the master asks: “what would you be without me?”, the slave answers: “Without you? I'd be the king of this island given me by my mother Sycorax”(Césaire, 2002,p. 17). Consistent with his rebellion and his desire to reject the name he was given, the Caliban of Césaire wants his master to simply call him X: “That would be best. Like a man without a name. Or, to be precise, a man whose name has been stolen (...) Every time you summon me, it reminds me of a basic fact, the fact that you have stolen everything from me, even my identity! Uhuru!” (ibid. p. 12). The Swahili term “uhuru”, imported into Césaire's play, is to remind the audience of the need to grant freedom to all the people enslaved and/or colonized as part of his agenda.

Thus, far from Shakespeare's portrait of Caliban as a brutish savage, Aimé Césaire connects his ‘revision’ of the play to a militant programme of the ‘Négritude’ movement. As he claims in other works by him, including his long poem *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) and his essay *Discourse on Colonialism*(1955) the black man is to retrieve his aura, his worth and dignity, and he will not accept any subaltern position as in the posture of an Ariel who remains subjugated. When the latter comes to ask him to end his rebellion against his powerful master Prospero, Caliban rejects the warning and refuses obedience. This is to demonstrate clearly where Césaire stands: he intends to deconstruct the well-meaning program of help and instruction that Europe purports to dispense to so-called ‘backward’ peoples.

Perhaps one could agree with Edward Said when he says that “the core of Aimé Césaire's Caribbean *Une Tempête* is not *ressentiment*, but an affectionate

contention with Shakespeare for the right to represent the Caribbean. That impulse to contend is part of a grander effort to discover the basis of an integral identity that is different from the formerly dependent, derivative one” (Said, 1993, p. 256). In clearer terms, Césaire’s Caliban should be considered as a man, not just a Caribbean, as Said writes, in fact any man subjected to racism and exploitation. Césaire belongs to the militant branch of the ‘Négritude’ cultural movement, and his intention of terminating the slave- and- master relationship is clearly articulated by his Caliban. Césaire indeed has in mind to break Hegel’s theory that each one-both the slave and the master- needs the other one while remaining in the fixity of his status (one dominant and one dominated).

Even when his protagonist’s plan to revolt against his master is discovered and the man gets captured with the other rebels, the discourse of liberation is still proffered by him:

For years I took it, all of it-
Your insults, your ingratiated—
And worst of all, more degrading than all the rest
Your condescension
But now it’s all over (Césaire, 2002, p. 62).

This is in line with what Césaire wrote in his famous Cahiers, *Return to my native land*, asking black men to stand

Upright in the cabins
Upright on the bridge
Upright in the wind
Upright under the sun
Upright in the Blood (Césaire, 1939, p. 148).

One can surely agree with Edward Said’s warnings against the dangers of “chauvinism and xenophobia” in expressing commitment to the renaissance of the black race, adding that “it is best when Caliban sees his own history as a history of all subjugated men and women, and comprehend the complex truth of his own social and historical situation” (Said, 1993, p. 258). And this appears to be Césaire’s policy in his project to “write back” to the “metropolitan centre”.

4. Conclusion

As seen, the Prospero-Caliban dichotomy has led to various responses and interpretations, because of the ambiguity and “in-between-ness” with which Shakespeare presents it. The postcolonial scholarship and readership has actually responded by examining the interstices of Western creative works which present characters in elision or in absentia. For instance, J. M. Coetzee’s novel, *Foe*, revises Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and makes the slave Friday a man whose tongue has been cut by his master, so that he can express no feelings or ideas. Let us mention also the novel of the Dominican Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where a mulatto girl is unhappily married to an English nobleman. She happens to be in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, the “madwoman in the attic”, the strange lady locked up by Rochester, and whom he won’t allow to see anyone.

Those are instances of “revisions” of canonical works where marginalized characters are brought to “centre- stage” by other texts.

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, as in his other plays, the concern is mostly about providing entertainment to different kinds of spectators of the Elizabethan period, and keeping the promise of dramatizing unusual situations. So the element of fantasy is indeed important in this play, with the supplement of magic and the presence of spiritual beings. On the other hand, the issues raised by him exhibit his awareness of a changing world, and imply the need to examine relations globally in terms of trade and politics, this being induced by an increase in navigation routes. It is in this way that Shakespeare attempted to sensitize his contemporaries to the existence of other cultures and modes of life, even if this mode of representation remains perfunctory and Euro-centred. Aimé Césaire has judiciously remedied the "lack of informative elements" of Shakespeare's play by revising it as *Une Tempête*.

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