

CALIBAN, The Tempest

*You taught me language, and my profit on 't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!* (act 1, scene 2)

Caliban is a character in *The Tempest*, which begins with a shipwreck off a remote Mediterranean island. Prospero and his fifteen year-old daughter, Miranda, are watching it. He tells her, for the first time, how they came to be on the island. Twelve years before, when he had been Duke of Milan, his brother Antonio, had usurped him, but he had escaped in a small boat with his baby daughter and his library of books about science and magic. They had ended up on the island and Prospero had turned the only inhabitant, Caliban, a deformed and savage creature, into his slave.

Caliban's mother, now dead, was expelled from Algiers for being a witch. Already pregnant, she gave birth to Caliban on the island. He has known nothing else. Caliban is very interesting, in part because his presence in the play gives us insight into Shakespeare's thinking about the fast-moving world in which he lived, which included its breathtaking expansion as the great explorers of the day opened it up.

There are also spirits on the island. One of them, Ariel, had been imprisoned in a tree trunk by Sycorax, who had then died, leaving him there. Prospero used his magic to rescue him and made the spirit swear to serve him. The main story is not about Prospero and Caliban but about the passengers on the ship, who are all figures from Prospero's European past, and the story is worked through among them and Prospero. However, the Caliban subplot is interesting and seems very much informed by the new socio-geography emerging from the expanding British Empire. Shakespeare scholars see Caliban as a representative of the indigenous people the explorers encountered, and of the rebels against the exploitation that followed European occupation of their lands.

The European duke, Prospero, arrives on the island and the local population, composed of only Caliban, appears uncivilised, wild, unattractive, unappealing and savage. Caliban's behaviour is alien to European sensibilities. When Prospero's daughter, Miranda, takes it on herself to educate him his response is to attempt to rape her. In the terms of his native environment, though, he is very well educated. When he encounters two crew members of the wrecked ship, Stephano and Trinculo, he is eager to befriend them and he displays his knowledge, revealing a high level of the education needed for survival on an island.

*"I'll show thee the best springs. I'll pluck thee berries.
I'll fish for thee and get thee wood enough.
.....*

*I prithee, let me bring thee where crabs grow,
And I with my long nails will dig thee pignuts,
Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how*

*To snare the nimble marmoset. I'll bring thee
To clustering filberts, and sometimes I'll get thee
Young scamels from the rock."* (act 1, scene 2)

Caliban is usually seen as a monster and portrayed on the stage as something less than human. He is dangerous and untrustworthy. He is undisciplined and it is impossible to discipline him. He cannot be reasoned with and is in a state of perpetual rebellion. He, therefore, has to be disciplined by force, and Prospero uses magic to control him. Whenever Caliban begins to look dangerous Prospero causes crippling pains throughout his body to stop him.

Before Prospero's arrival, Caliban was free to roam the entire island and when Prospero arrived he took him into his own cell and tried to teach him things, including language, but when Caliban tried to violate Miranda, Prospero confined him to a stone cave and a limited area around it. By the time the play opens Caliban has become angry and bitter and insists "This island's mine!" When he meets two survivors of the shipwreck, Stephano and Trinculo, he persuades the two comic characters to help him stage a coup to overthrow Prospero. The revolutionaries are ridiculous – the scenes relating to that attempt are highly comical – and the plot fails.

It is not difficult to see the similarities between this subplot and the European colonialism that has caused so much trouble and suffering in the world. Exploitation, revolution and countless deaths have been its history since Shakespeare's time. In the hands of an imaginative stage director, Caliban could be seen as a modern freedom fighter, striving to shake off the oppressor.