

Ágnes Benkő:**Caliban's ambiguous character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest***

The Tempest is one of the shortest plays of Shakespeare. Nevertheless, it contains all the ingredients that make a successful play. Among many other elements there is love, struggle, and power in it. These matters are always the subjects of human interest; furthermore, the characters are complex personalities, very close to human nature. These features all contribute to the play's unceasing popularity and absolute relevance that have been preserved through ages.

The protagonist of the play is Prospero since he is the one who triggers most of the events. In fact, he creates the tempest with which the plot starts. His decisions have an effect on the further life of nearly all the characters in the play. Nevertheless, there are other significant characters that have essential roles in the play. Caliban also appears in 5 scenes from the total of 9, and contributes to the plot to a great extent. He is an important and interesting person in the play, since he differs from all the other human beings both in appearance and in character. However, there is no exact definition given, it does not become clear what kind of creature Caliban is.

Though there are no exact references to Caliban's appearance, from the other character's remarks one has the impression that he must look really strange. Prospero often comments on his form, using rather offensive expressions. For instance, once he refers to Caliban as a person "not honour'd with / A human shape" (I. 2. 283–284).¹ However, not only Prospero marks his weird appearance. When Trinculo casts a glance at the lying shape of Caliban, first he thinks he may be "a strange fish", and he exclaims: "What have we here, a man, or a fish?" (II. 2. 24–25), then a few lines later he declares that Caliban is "legg'd like a man; and his fins like arms" (II. 2. 34–35). Consequently, he must look really scruffy. These remarks all contribute to the impression of his being uncivilized.

Caliban's appearance is not clearly defined, but his origin is mentioned repeatedly. He is the son of a witch called Sycorax, who was exiled from "Argier" and was left on the uninhabited island to give birth to her child. There is clear reference to Caliban's father as

¹ All references to *The Tempest* in this essay are to the Pelican Edition. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. (London: Penguin Books, 1948).

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well, but its truth is not so evident. In Prospero's view he was "got by the devil himself" (I. 2. 321). It is not clear whether his words should be taken literally or not. On the one hand, considering Caliban's nature, his lack of qualities, one may have the impression that he is really the devil's son. His general behaviour truly implies that, since he is always cursing, has no "kind answer", he even looks for allies and attempts to destroy Prospero. In fact, there is no sign of positive features in his character. Furthermore, as there are many appearances of spirits and shapes, it seems quite probable that Caliban's ancestor is the devil himself. On the other hand, however, Prospero's harsh treatment has to be considered. He treats Caliban with contempt and constantly curses him. Caliban is not his servant but rather his slave who is forced to fulfil his master's orders. Thus, it also seems possible that Prospero's statement concerning his father is just a reference to his lack of noble qualities.

Shakespeare uses rich vocabulary when naming Caliban. He is called different names throughout the drama; the only common thing in these names is that they are all negative, disapproving, and offensive. One part of them refers to Caliban's appearance. For example, Stephano and Trinculo both call him "monster", but using various adjectives such as "well drawn", "a most perfidious", or "abominable". He is also referred to as "mooncalf". There are other names related to his nature, or general behaviour. Miranda declares that he is a "villain" while Prospero often calls him "devil" or "slave". These examples all show that most of the time he is not taken into account as a human being.

Miranda's opinion of him reflects a similar thing, though she seems rather inconsistent. At times she refers to Caliban as a man, at others she does not take him into consideration. When Miranda first has a glance at Ferdinand, she declares that he "[i]s the third man that e'er [she] saw" (I. 2. 448). The first two persons must be her father and Caliban as she has not met anyone else among the shipwrecked people. Hence, this time she takes Caliban into account. Later, speaking to Ferdinand, Miranda says: "nor have I seen / More that I may call men, than you good friend, / And my dear father" (III. 1. 50–52). This seems to be contradictory, but in that context the first statement may express that Ferdinand has the same human shape as a man has, while in the second declaration Miranda excludes Caliban as he does not have the necessary qualities that make a civilized man. Both Ferdinand and her father appear to be loveable persons, whereas Caliban is not of much value in her opinion.

When Prospero and Miranda reach the island, Caliban is surely like a beast. He has not been taught to speak; in fact, there is hardly anyone to whom he could speak on the desert

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island. Therefore, Prospero and Miranda take pains to educate and civilize him. The significance of language use has to be emphasized since the ability to communicate one's own ideas is one of the most important milestones a human being has to reach in order to become a proper member of society. Without this crucial element one is not able to fulfil social requirements since communication and cooperation cannot take place. Language provides a kind of self-definition as well. As language distinguishes humans from animals, mastering this new skill must mean a huge step towards being socially accepted. Still, language is just a tool; the ideas expressed have to match social expectations, too.

Caliban's language use is especially interesting from this aspect. It seems that he has no mental problems; he is not less able than anyone else in the play as he expresses his thoughts in fully grammatical sentences, uses a wide range of vocabulary, and it appears that he perfectly mastered the ability to speak. However, he mostly uses language to curse his master and say ugly things to the others. As a critic pointed out, "Prospero taught him language, but Caliban's use of it is his own, and the surprising thing about this is the extent to which Caliban's language matches that of Prospero; Caliban's curses against Prospero are as rich and inventive as Prospero's invective and threats against him".² Nonetheless, there are some remarkable parts of the text when Caliban speaks about the beauty and richness of the island, showing his ability to notice and express beauty as well as revealing his feelings about the island.

Caliban is not only uneducated, but also uncivilized. Being alone on the deserted island, he could not experience social life. Since he is not used to the presence of other people, he has no knowledge of the right behaviour in society. He has not been taught to follow any socially accepted norm. Thus, he seems rather unsure in his relationship to the others. On the one hand, he desires domination; he proudly declares himself to be the king of the uninhabited island before the arrival of Prospero and Miranda. Later, he would like to dispose of Prospero, but falls into the same trap when he starts to praise Stephano as a god. He makes himself quite ridiculous when abasing himself and asking for permission to lick his shoe. It seems that he readily serves anyone and submits himself to humiliation as long as he gets something in return. These facts show that he has not come to self-consciousness yet.

² R. A. Foakes, *Shakespeare: the dark comedies to the last plays: from satire to celebration*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971) 153.

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Not having been taught the right social behaviour had important further consequences concerning his treatment. His attempt to rape Miranda is a sign of animal behaviour. In the animal world it is natural that they try to transmit their genes. However, this behaviour is not accepted in human relationships. Mutuality is missing: Caliban does not take emotions and Miranda's consent into consideration. This attempt is indeed a turning point concerning his education and self-improvement. He is not given any more opportunities to learn and improve himself, he is merely treated as a slave.

Besides Caliban's attempt to rape Miranda, there are other deeds that seem to be evidence for Prospero that Caliban is not worth bothering with. After Ariel gives him the information that Caliban is to betray him, Prospero bitterly declares:

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick: on whom my pains
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost,
And, as with age, his body uglier grows,
So his mind cankers: (IV. 1. 188–192)

In this passage Prospero gives a really harsh and critical description of Caliban. He seems to think that there is no improvement ahead of Caliban. His education is just a waste of time and energy. In fact, he does not take further pains to civilize him. He foresees Caliban's physical and mental degradation; nevertheless, this prediction does not seem to come true at the end.

Caliban changes a lot through the drama. His development becomes evident especially towards the end of the play. After he fails to kill Prospero and probably the delusion caused by wine is over, Caliban seems to realise his mistake. He confesses his fault:

I'll be wise hereafter,
And seek for grace: what a thrice-double ass
Was I to take this drunkard for a god?
And worship this dull fool? (V. 1. 294–297)

He seems to realise that his former master is worthier and has more authority; thus, he returns to Prospero, showing penitence. He learns from his fault and becomes a wiser man. He appears to be more conscious of his situation and seems to realise that he is equal with Stephano, who is actually no better than him. As a critic observed, "He has undergone a trial and lost all his illusions. He has to make a fresh start once more."³

³ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare our Contemporary*. (London: Routledge, 1991) 274.

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However, his future remains an open question. “But what is to become of him after this? [...] Does he depart with the others to Milan, risking the humiliating ‘shows’ the lesser characters see him fit for? Or does he too have his rightful rule restored, remaining as king on a now totally uninhabited island?”⁴ He may follow his master and keep serving him in Milan. The other option is that he may regain his “kingdom” as he declared the island his own, and may live there alone in freedom, as he desired earlier. The latter is more possible, since Prospero’s last order is to go and tidy up his cell and there is no mention of his travel. However, one cannot decide exactly on the basis of the text.

An interesting question is raised by some critics who suppose that Caliban’s name cannot be accidental. They suspect some meaning, since there are a number of Shakespeare comedies that contain telling names, too. Though most critics agree that the name conveys some meaning, they cannot agree on what it is. “The most popular explanation has been that ‘Caliban’ is an intentional anagram of ‘can[n]ibal’. [...] A simple rearrangement of the letters – an anagram or its close linguistic counterpart, a metathesis – produces ‘Caliban’.”⁵ However, there are other assumptions as well. “A close alternative explanation is that ‘Caliban,’ as an extended anagram of ‘Carib,’ suggests that Shakespeare meant the monster to be a New World native but not necessarily a man-eater.”⁶

This has been a popular view for centuries. Caliban’s character has been connected with colonialism. “Shakespeare wrote the character of Caliban as a mixture of different types of native, and showed his audience the native whose land has been taken away. This would tie in with the colonizing that was going on at the time he was writing.”⁷ In this reading Prospero represents the colonialist while both Ariel and Caliban are considered colonised. However, they represent two different levels. Ariel’s slavery is much more abstract than Caliban’s, on the grounds that he does not have to suffer physical pain when he is reluctant to carry out Prospero’s commands. Though Ariel is also called slave, he is rather like a servant. Ariel willingly serves Prospero and is promised freedom, whereas in the case of Caliban there is no

⁴ Diana Devlin, “Caliban – monster, servant, king.” *Critical Essays on The Tempest*. Eds. Linda Cookson and Bryan Loughrey. (London: Longman Group, 1988) 28.

⁵ Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare’s Caliban: A Cultural History*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 26.

⁶ Vaughan 27.

⁷ David Suchet, “Caliban in The Tempest.” *Players of Shakespeare 1*. Ed. Philip Brockbank. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 173.

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prospect of that. He is hopeless in his slavery and is forced to obey. Moreover, his disobedience is severely retaliated.

It also has to be taken into consideration that the play was written to be performed. When setting this drama to stage, directors have to decide on the scenery, costumes and other visual elements that influence the audience's perception. Their decision may create very different plays. The choice of Caliban's representation may determine the essence of the interpretation. Caliban may be presented as a native, or a fish-like creature with fins, but these are only the traditional representations. Modern ones are also possible that are not so closely following the text.

The play inspired further works, in which Caliban is a central character. They belong to different genres but are all connected with him. Some of these works describe his future, others have only a few common features with his character. One of these examples is Robert Browning's poem called "Caliban upon Setebos". But there are other works as well; Rachel Ingalls published a novel called "Mrs. Caliban" and Tad Williams wrote a book whose title is "Caliban's hour". Besides literary works, paintings have also been created that portray Caliban. All in all, Caliban has indisputably had a great influence not only on contemporaries but on later authors as well, who made reference to him. This fact shows that Caliban has an extraordinary character that has caught our imagination through centuries.