What’s past is prologue: the Age of Caliban

Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik

ABSTRACT

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The article provides a brief comparative study of the reception history of Shakespeare's Caliban in the early modern period and in the contemporary literary criticism. The analysis aims to delineate a fundamental difference in the reception of the character of Caliban throughout the ages which I attribute to a historical shift in the understanding of the notions of humanity and monstrosity.

The first part of the article concentrates on the description of the historical and social circumstances of the Elizabethan discourse of monstrosity and draws a link between them and the literary and political context of the time, while engaging into a close reading of The Tempest that brings to the fore the origin and nature of the “servant-monster”. The second part of the paper focuses on the gradual change in the interpretations of Caliban who ceased to be seen as a monstrosity and with time acquired undeniably human characteristics.

That shift has been observable since the 19th century and has found its culmination in the postcolonial strain of Caliban’s contemporary interpretations, in which Prospero’s slave becomes a native trying to find a language for himself in a colonial regime his body and mind are subjugated to. The postcolonial project of the unfinished monstrous humanity of Sycorax’s son is congruous with the postmodern condition that can be dubbed, to use Harold Bloom’s phrase, “the Age of Caliban”. It is exactly that liminal and paradoxical notion of monstrous humanity that resides at the core of the contemporary fascination with “Monsieur Monster”.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Caliban, Prospero, monstrosity, bestial man, reception history, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, Renaissance literature, English drama
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The poor monster’s my subject, and he shall not suffer indignity.

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Abstract

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“What’s past is prologue”

What is Caliban? Or, as the contemporary critical idiom has it, who is Caliban? In-between these two questions lies the vast territory of theoretical reflection, readerly fancy and theatrical performance that spans almost four centuries of ontological guesswork. Attempts at locating Caliban’s origin have been repeatedly reflected in the plethora of performances and critical readings of *The Tempest*, as that after all minor character has gradually become the object of query for literary critics, writers, artists and theatre directors alike, ultimately assuming a crucial role in the contemporary interpretations of the play. Numerous literary allusions point to the fact that he has started to live a life of his own, as a cultural icon imbued with a peculiar significance of a character that embodies bestial humanity on the one hand and human monstrosity on the other. Such an elevation of the “puppy-headed” monster that has taken place within the realm of literary *imaginatio* seems rather unexpected considering the fact that Shakespeare’s creation is not a true *rerum avis*, as even his ontological ambiguity does not render him more appallingly monstrous or threatening than, say, the unholy offspring of Bram Stoker or the rotten fruit of Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley’s imagination. Historically speaking, there has even been a tendency to sentimentalize the whole of the play and ignore its ambiguities, with Caliban at the lead. The interest in this particular character has not been continuous: it waned around the eighteenth century when the figure of the “poor monster” was removed from adaptations of the play as not altogether matching its sweetened content, to rekindle almost a century later and continue with added strength to this day.

We might say that the visible proof of the nineteenth and twentieth century recurrence of the interest in the figure of Caliban is that, to put the matter in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan’s words, “none of these characters, nor any other in Shakespeare’s canon, has undergone the extreme range of metamorphoses that have marked Caliban’s tumultuous career.” A tortoise; a fish; a most abominable monster; a missing link in the history of the human species; a pre-allegorical form of a psychic process; a (de)humanized representative of colonized nations subjugated to the will of cruel Prosperos; a socio-political allegory – Caliban has become the core of post-Romantic, Darwinian, psychoanalytic, allegorical, biographic, and postcolonial interpretations of *The Tempest* (to name only a few), and ultimately a graceful subject of such passionate comparative cultural studies as *Shakespeare’s Caliban. A Cultural History* or *Constellation Caliban. Figuration of a Character*. At the same time the “moon-calf” has made his way to

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3 Ibid., 2.2.148, p. 216.
4 Ibid., 3.2.35, p. 226.
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a number of major literary works of the twentieth century,7 and started to serve as a synecdoche for virtually human (dis)order. Although precise attitudes towards monstrosity in the early seventeenth century are not easily recoverable, The Tempest and its various con-texts allow us a glimpse of what constituted the Renaissance notion of the monstrous, at least with respect to Caliban.

The purpose of this paper is to look at a small part of the intersection of history, stage history, literature and the shifting critical attention that Caliban has been endowed with in order to offer a brief introductory account of his place and role in Shakespearean Tempest and in literary criticism that has grown around the play. A reading through such historical lens should bring out basic differences in the interpretive treatment of the “abhorred slave”8: ultimately it will serve me to problematize the notions of humanity and monstrosity prevalent both in the Renaissance England and in the contemporary Western culture. However, the scope of the present paper allows me to consider only chosen seventeenth century intertexts in order to explain the sources of Caliban’s monstrosity and provide a generalized comment on the twentieth century approaches to this figure. The paper will be concluded with a preemptive argument on the reasons for a qualitative change in the approach towards that “poor monster” which we can observe in (post)modern culture in general and in postcolonial criticism of Shakespeare’s play in particular.

Caliban’s Monstropomorphosis: Monster Transformed; or, the Artificial Changeling Historically Presented9

The Tempest is a text that has long intrigued its readers and audiences alike with its ambivalent and antithetical interpretative potential. A broad range of approaches towards the play certifies to the fact that its very nature is arguable, as generically it can be ascribed to an experiment in a mixed mode of drama, tragicomedy, or a romance, whereas its content has been described as an amalgam of diverse stories, or as a textual hybrid. As A.D. Nuttall puts it:

One of the reasons why The Tempest is hard to classify lies in its parentage. It has two sets of sources, first a body of romantic, fairy-tale literature and second a collection of travelers’ reports. If its mother was a mermaid, its father was a sailor.10

This peculiar marriage of the fantastic and the circumstantial well professes to the ambivalences that surround the interpretations of the context of The Tempest, its text, and every single of its characters, with the notable example of Caliban.

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8 W. Shakespeare, op. cit., 1.2.353, p. 175.
9 The title of the section alludes to John Bulwer’s Anthropometamorphosis, “Man Transformed; or, the Artificial Changeling Historically Presented” (London, 1654) that is discussed in such studies as D. Hillman and C. Mazzio’s Body in Parts, New York: Routledge, 1997.