

## The *Tempest* and Early Modern Conceptions of Race

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Although *The Tempest* is set on an uninhabited island located implicitly but unmistakably between Italy and North Africa, it is often considered Shakespeare's American play.<sup>1</sup> The opening scene's tumultuous storm recalls William Strachey's description of a 1609 hurricane that battered a fleet taking settlers and supplies to England's beleaguered colony in Virginia. The flagship *Sea Venture*, carrying a new governor and colonists from a cross section of English society, barely survived "A most dreadfull Tempest" and lodged upright on an outcrop of the uninhabited Bermuda Islands. Presumed dead, the castaways remained on Bermuda for nearly ten months while they constructed two small ships and completed the voyage to Virginia. News of their miraculous "wracke, and redemption" reached England in the autumn of 1610 and was widely celebrated.<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare's *Tempest* begins with a terrifying storm and calamitous shipwreck, and, like the English settlers aboard *Sea Venture*, the crew and passengers all survive. In the ensuing action, they wander about the island, fomenting conspiracies and schisms that roughly parallel Strachey's account of events on Bermuda. Like many of the castaways who returned to England soon after their Bermuda adventure, in *The Tempest*'s final moments the Europeans plan their voyage back to Italy.

The island's chief inhabitant, Prospero, the deposed duke of Milan, is not there to establish a colony, but in essential ways he resembles a European imperialist. Twelve years before the play commences, Prospero and his three-year-old daughter were marooned on the uncharted island where they encountered two inhabitants, Ariel, a "spirit" with some human characteristics, and Caliban, the son of an African woman who arrived on the island shortly before she gave birth. Prospero's settlement of the island and his interactions with Ariel and Caliban fit the colonial paradigm: he appropriates the island's natural resources and makes Ariel his servant, Caliban his slave.

Prospero's daughter Miranda, who has lived most of her life on the island, is astounded when she sees the king of Naples and his companions at the

play's finale. "O brave new world," she cries, "that has such people in't" (5.1.183–84). The "people" are all Europeans, but Miranda unwittingly echoes more than a century of Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, and English reactions to newly discovered lands and peoples across the seas. Ominously for natives of these new worlds, Europeans rarely considered them as equals. Unlike Miranda, explorers and colonists routinely disparaged and exploited newly encountered peoples of the Americas, Africa, and Asia.

An exchange between King Alonso and his brother Sebastian underscores the Europeans' distinction between themselves and indigenous Africans, such as Caliban's ancestors. Sebastian blames Alonso for the loss of Alonso's son Ferdinand, who is presumed drowned in the storm. If Alonso hadn't arranged the marriage of his daughter Claribel to the king of Tunis, there would have been no journey to her wedding and no shipwreck:

Sir, you may thank yourself for this great loss,  
That would not bless our Europe with your daughter  
But rather loose her to an African.

(2.1.124–26)

Shakespeare's spelling – "loose" – has sexual undertones, as if Alonso had pandered his daughter for financial or political gain. Sebastian reminds Alonso that he was "kneeled to and importuned otherwise / By all of us" (2.1.129–30), who argued against the union of a white European with an African. Claribel herself, Sebastian recalls, was torn "between loathness and obedience" at the prospect of such a marriage (131).

Prospero, too, deplors miscegenation. He wants an appropriate marriage for Miranda and contrives the shipwreck partly to provide his daughter with a suitable mate in Ferdinand and to thwart Caliban, the island's only alternative. Prospero explains in 1.2 that Caliban's mother Sycorax, a "witch" who was banished from Algiers for an unspecified crime, had twelve years before Prospero and Miranda's arrival landed on the island and given birth to Caliban. According to Prospero, he was fathered by the devil (1.2.320). His name, an anagram of "cannibal," may highlight his African origins, as rumors circulated in Europe of the continent's repugnant man-eaters.

Prospero claims to have treated Caliban humanely, lodging him "In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate / The honour of my child" (1.2.348–49). Miranda shares Prospero's sense of betrayal:

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 wouldst gabble like  
 A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes  
 With words that made them known. But thy vile race  
 (Though thou didst learn) had that in't which good natures  
 Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou  
 Deservedly confined into this rock,  
 Who hadst deserved more than a prison.

(1.2.354–63)

Initially, then, the native and the newcomers enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. Caliban introduced the father and daughter to “all the qualities o’th’ isle” (1.2.338); they taught him their language and rudiments of astronomy. But Caliban’s sexual attack on Miranda shattered European standards of decorum and, more portentously, raised the specter of mixed-race descendants. “Oh, ho!” Caliban boasts, “Would’t had been done; / Thou didst prevent me, I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans” (1.2.350–52).

This essay looks behind and beyond Shakespeare’s text of *The Tempest* to reveal how it reflects his era’s understanding of race, especially the impact of Europe’s encounter with America. Race had numerous meanings then as it does now, depending partly on rhetorical contexts, partly on regional customs, and partly on the word’s evolution from long before Shakespeare’s time to, presumably, long beyond our own. The task at hand is to examine how Shakespeare’s last solo play evokes notions of race that had evolved in Europe over several centuries and, after 1492, were further complicated by the complex and expanding encounter with the western hemisphere, as well as, after 1554, by an influx of Africans into the British Isles.

We have already discussed the very revealing banter about Claribel, who has no further role in the play. Most of the remaining racial markers appear in the several pejorative categories into which Shakespeare thrusts Caliban, the island’s only native: savage, slave, cannibal, pagan, and monster. Collectively those identifications condemn him to a distinctly separate and inferior human category from the Europeans who berate and abuse him.

### Caliban’s Perceived Defects

Miranda’s choice of “vile race” to describe Caliban’s character is striking. Shakespeare infrequently uses “race” in his texts, but when he does, it usually refers to a family relationship, past or future, in accord with the

*OED*'s first definition of its use as a noun: "A group of persons, animals or plants connected by common descent or origin." Most often, the term is combined with a modifier that establishes its meaning. The adjective can be positive: The duke of Suffolk refers to the Neville family's "noble race" in *3 Henry 6* (3.2.215), and Antony regrets that he has his "pillow left unpressed in Rome / [and] Forborne the getting of a lawful race" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.13.107–08). But the modifier can also be negative. Miranda asserts that Caliban deserves to be enslaved because his inherent nature – his "vile race" – is ineluctably deficient, making him inferior, even repugnant, to "civilized" Europeans.

Caliban's otherness is not, of course, solely a matter of his ill-defined identity. Most of the text's descriptors of Caliban suggest a physical anomaly. "Names of the Actors," a cast list in the First Folio (1623), describes Caliban as "a salvage and deformed slaue" (TLN 2329). Alonso declares that he is as "strange a thing as e're I looked on" (5.1.290). The hyperbolic Trinculo and Stephano call Caliban a "mooncalf," implying to English audiences some physical and/or behavioral abnormality caused by birth under the full moon. The two shipwrecked Europeans refer to Caliban as a monster some forty times, modified by "shallow," "weak," "poor," "perfidious," "ridiculous," "puppy-headed," "scurvy," "abominable," "bully," "ignorant," and (in the seventeenth-century sense of foolhardy or blustery) "brave." On first encountering Caliban under the gabardine, Trinculo says he smells like a fish, but on further inspection concludes that "this is no fish, but an islander that hath lately suffered by a thunderbolt" (2.1.25, 34–36). In the play's final scene, Antonio calls Caliban "a plain fish" (5.1.266), which again likely refers to his smell, for he and his co-conspirators have just emerged from a "filthy-mantled pool" (4.1.181–84). Nevertheless, in illustrations and stage productions Caliban is often given fins, scales, webbed feet and hands, and other aquatic or animal appurtenances, such as floppy ears or apish fur. However Caliban is imagined, the text insists that he differs in one or more significant ways from European anatomical norms.

At the same time Shakespeare's text asserts that Caliban has an essentially human figure. Hasty readers often cite Prospero's phrase, "A freckled whelp, hag-born, not honoured with / A human shape" (1.2.283–84) to prove Caliban's non-human form, but when read in the context of the First Folio's parentheses – "Then was this Island / (Saeue for the Son that [s]he did littour heere, / A frekll'ed whelp, hag-borne) not honour'd with / A humane shape" (TLN 408–11) – it is clear that Caliban is the only human-shaped islander. Miranda seems to challenge that image when she

assures Ferdinand that she has seen no more than she “may call men than you, good friend, / And my dear father” (3.1.51–52), but at 1.2.446, she calls Ferdinand “the third man that e’er I saw,” presumably in addition to her father and Caliban. Prospero concurs when he chides Miranda for her sudden infatuation with Ferdinand, “Having seen but him and Caliban” (1.2.480). Despite his unspecified anomaly, Caliban is clearly human.

### Caliban as Slave

More important to this discussion, Caliban is a slave. As punishment for his sexual assault on Miranda, Prospero has stowed him in a cave, forced him to perform manual labor, and physically tormented him with cramps and pinches when he failed to please. In Act 1, scene 2, Prospero initially addresses Caliban, “What, ho, slave!” (314), and subsequently calls him “poisonous slave” (320) and “most lying slave” (345). To Miranda, he is “Abhorred slave” (352).

This use of “slave” lends Caliban’s status an unusual resonance in the Shakespeare canon. Romantic comedies such as *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Twelfth Night* feature men who claim to be enslaved by love. *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* include actual slaves as existed in ancient Rome. More often Shakespeare’s characters use “slave” to demean another character and to underscore social inferiority. In *King Lear*, for example, Oswald is Goneril’s steward, but Lear repeatedly refers to him as “slave,” even coupling it with pejoratives, such as “dog, you slave, you cur” (1.4.80). In *The Tempest* slavery is literal, and Prospero is a slavemaster. True, Prospero forces Prince Ferdinand to pile heavy logs as a kind of “wooden slavery” (3.1.62), but only briefly and to show his power. Aaron, the black Moor who serves the queen of the Goths in *Titus Andronicus*, and Caliban are the two enslaved servants in Shakespeare who appear to be, in modern terminology, racially distinct.

The First Folio’s description of Caliban as “a savage and deformed slave” invokes two of the criteria often associated with racial slavery in early modern Europe and America. His perceived deformities, whatever they may be, signal in exaggerated terms the way enslaved persons were commonly characterized. His sexual assault on Miranda, not to mention his surly attitude toward Prospero and his unintelligible (to them) language demonstrate his savagery – a failure to meet European standards of social and ethical civility. Prospero links the two slavish criteria when he complains that Caliban “is as disproportioned in his manners / As in his shape” (5.1.291–92).

Caliban's paganism fulfills a third customary criterion for enslavement. Rarely did Europeans make slaves of fellow Christians; people of other faiths were fair game. While the play largely ignores Caliban's religious beliefs, two clues suggest that he shared his mother's worship of the Patagonian deity Setebos, first mentioned in an Italian account of Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigating expedition of 1519–22, translated into English in 1555. When Prospero threatens to punish Caliban in 1.2., the slave laments, "I must obey; his art is of such power / It would control my dam's god Setebos, / And make a vassal of him" (1.2.373–75). In the final scene, Caliban reacts to his first sight of the shipwrecked noblemen: "O Setebos, these be brave spirits indeed" (5.1.261). These lines and Prospero's insistence that Caliban's father was the devil put Caliban beyond the Christian pale in Prospero's imagination.

But nothing demonstrated savagery to Europeans so emphatically as cannibalism. Reports that some Africans, and after 1492, indigenous Americans ate human flesh either in their regular diets or in pagan ceremonies appalled Europeans. While *The Tempest* does not accuse Caliban of practicing cannibalism, numerous Shakespeare critics since at least the late eighteenth century have insisted that Shakespeare's choice of the name Caliban was intentional on the grounds that the early modern English delighted in wordplay, including the use of anagrams. Shakespeare, it can plausibly be argued, meant Caliban to be a cannibal, figuratively if not literally. In sum, Caliban's physical irregularity, savagery, heathenism, and perhaps cannibalism, justified, in Prospero's eyes, his perpetual bondage.

### Ariel's Contrasting Status

The "Names of the Actors" describes Ariel as an "ayrie [airy] spirit" (TLN 2336). In contrast to Caliban, a creature associated with the earth who lives in a subterranean cave, Ariel lives in the air. He (or she – Ariel is genderless, but the sole textual descriptor is "his," 1.2.192) had freely enjoyed the island's natural wonders until Sycorax arrived. Ariel became her servant but was "a spirit too delicate / To act her earthy and abhorred commands" (1.2.172–73). Unlike Caliban, Ariel recognizes and eschews evil. Soon after her arrival, Sycorax pinioned the airy spirit in a cloven pine, where he remained in agonizing pain for twelve years until Prospero arrived and freed him. In return, Ariel serves Prospero with the promise of eventual freedom. Until then, Ariel, invisible, acts as Prospero's eyes and ears. He flits from one area of the island and one group of characters to

another, then reports back to his master. Ariel also intervenes on Prospero's behalf. He wakens Gonzalo in 2.1 (preventing his murder by Sebastian), appears in 3.3 as a vengeful harpy, stage-manages the masque of goddesses in 4.1, and, at the beginning of 5.1, empathizes with Prospero's victims and urges the magician to show mercy toward his enemies. Seeing their suffering, Ariel says his affections would become tender "were I human" (5.1.20). Ariel is also the instrument of Prospero's magic. Besides producing the opening scene's tempest, through song he creates the island's haunting noises and through stagecraft he creates its wondrous spectacles.

Prospero calls Ariel a slave only once, and that is in response to the servant's demand for freedom (1.2. 270). Thereafter, the relationship is between affectionate master and faithful servant. When Ariel asks, "Do you love me, master? No?" the reply is, "Dearly, my delicate Ariel" (4.1.48–49.) Prospero fondly addresses Ariel as "my industrious servant" (4.1.33), "my bird" (4.1.184), "my dainty Ariel" (5.1.95), "My tricky spirit" (5.1.226), "my diligence" (5.1.241), and "my chick" (5.1.314). At the play's conclusion Prospero frees Ariel to fly and sing as he pleases. In the context of early modern social structure (if one overlooks his ethereal form), Ariel is an indentured servant.

### Servitude in Early Modern England

Shakespeare was surely familiar with indentured servitude for people of various European ethnicities and backgrounds and slavery for people of African (and often indigenous American) ancestry. Servants bound for terms ranging from a few years to more than a decade were common throughout England, especially in the form of apprenticeship for learning a trade, mostly for males, and of household service, mostly for females. When *The Tempest* was first staged in 1611, the Virginia colony, England's only American outpost, had many European servants – German, Italian, Polish, as well as English, Irish, and Scottish – working for the colony or for individual masters.

Some people of African ancestry had lived in the British Isles from the Roman occupation of approximately 55 BC to approximately AD 450, but not until the 1550s did English ships bring black slaves directly from Africa. In the late sixteenth century, many more arrived, especially through England's expanding involvement in the international slave trade. Although Africans did not appear in English America until the second decade of the seventeenth century, slavery's widespread practice in Europe and Iberian America was by then common knowledge.

English writers often denied that England permitted slavery within its borders, but a variety of legal, religious, and personal documents of the early modern period attest to England's many black "servants" (the generic term for people bound to service, including slaves) and an undeterminable number of "slaves" (the specific term for lifetime servitude, though sometimes – as in Caliban's case – partly or entirely as punishment for serious crimes).<sup>3</sup> By the 1590s Queen Elizabeth's government, alarmed by "the great number of Negroes and blackamoors brought into this realme," issued proclamations for their expulsion. Her orders were largely ignored.<sup>4</sup> The black population, most of it apparently enslaved, enlarged the nation's extensive category of bound labor. Sometime before his death in 1617, a prominent Cambridge preacher explained that "servants are either more slavish, or else more free and liberall: the first are such whose bodies are perpetually put under the power of the Master, as Blackmoors with us . . . [and] the children of [such] servants are borne the slaves of their Masters." The other category ("more free and liberall"), the preacher noted, "are upon certaine termes or conditions for a certaine time onely under the power of a man: such are our Apprentises, Journeymen, maide-servants, etc."<sup>5</sup> Long before Shakespeare died in 1616, the year African laborers first reached the English colony in Bermuda, and three years before the arrival of captives from a Portuguese slave ship inaugurated black slavery in Virginia, imported Africans and their progeny occupied a variety of roles in England. Especially in London but also in port towns and occasionally in the hinterland, "blackamoors" appear in the records, mostly as domestic servants such as cooks, footmen, and laundresses; entertainers, such as drummers, dancers, and actors; or laborers, such as sailors, carters, and roustabouts.<sup>6</sup> When Shakespeare crafted *The Tempest* in 1610–11, he was surely familiar with the categories and conditions of servitude and slavery practiced daily in London and elsewhere in the British Isles.

### The Early Modern Rationale for Racism

Underlying the nascent British Empire's adoption of slave labor was an assumption of African inferiority. It first appeared prominently in English writings on Africa that informed English readers about the hazards and opportunities of commerce with the continent, especially the western coast. Such writings frequently distinguished African commercial partners, whom they generally admired, from African slaves at home or abroad, whom the writers customarily portrayed as barely-human commodities.<sup>7</sup>



Stage performances reinforced the message conveyed by travel accounts. A Swiss visitor observed in 1599 that English men and women “pass their time” at theatres, “learning at the play what is happening abroad,” and presumably about the people abroad.<sup>8</sup> Surely the pejoratives about black skin in *Titus Andronicus* (1594) and *Othello* (1604)<sup>9</sup>, for example, reveal English conceptions of race as much as the tracts reprinted by Richard Eden (1555, 1577) or Richard Hakluyt (1582, 1589, 1599–1600).<sup>10</sup> And, as several authorities on early modern England’s racial perceptions have repeatedly demonstrated, English assumptions about Africans’ shortcomings appeared not only in narratives and plays, but also in a wide range of literary genres, in art and artifacts, and in everyday actions.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare’s audiences would have recognized Caliban’s compatibility with prevailing characterizations of dark-hued strangers.

Some English writers were preoccupied with the darkness of African skin. A few texts deprecated “black” people, as in a poem published separately in 1568 and reprinted in Hakluyt’s *Principall Navigations . . . of the English Nation*, that dubbed Africans “blacker beast[s],” “brutish blacke people,” and “black burnt men.”<sup>12</sup> Most English texts were more concerned with the reasons for Africans’ dark hue. The standard explanation for it in the early sixteenth century was proximity to the sun: sub-Saharan Africans were the nearest and therefore the darkest. Virginia’s Captain John Smith articulated that notion in the year of Shakespeare’s death when he described, in deeply pejorative terms, a portion of western Africa as “those fryed Regions of blacke brutish Negers.”<sup>13</sup>

Some English observers noticed that the children of Africans who moved, willingly or not, to temperate climates favored an alternative to the geographic theory. Captain George Best’s description of equatorial Africans was especially persuasive. (Best did not originate the theory, but he disseminated it widely in his pamphlet of 1578 and Hakluyt’s partial reprint in 1600.) The Africans’ “blacknesse,” Best proposed, “preceedeth of some naturall infection of the first inhabitants of that Countrey, and so all the whole progenie . . . are still poluted with the same blot of infection.” Best located the source of that infection in Noah’s curse on his son Cham (Ham) for impregnating his wife on the Ark, in disobedience of Noah’s orders. As punishment, Cham’s son Chus and his descendants “should be so blacke & lothsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the World. And of this blacke & cursed *Chus* came al these blacke *Moores* . . .”<sup>14</sup>

For more than a century this explanation flourished, especially in preached or printed sermons. A London sermon of 1607, the year the

Virginia colony was founded, insisted that through “the accursed seed of *Cham*, the Egyptians, Moores & Ethiopians had for a stamp of their fathers sinne, the colour of hell set upon their faces.”<sup>15</sup> In 1615, George Sandys of the Virginia Company denied that the Ethiopians’ complexion came from their seed, climate, or soil, “but rather from the curse of *Noe* upon *Cham* in the posterity of *Chus*.”<sup>16</sup> And, along with the curse of color came the curse of slavery. The Geneva Bible of 1560, widely used in England and the colonies, defined the “servant of servantes” that Ham’s son would be to his brethren in the very words that Miranda would later invoke for Caliban – a “vile slave” (Genesis 9:25). The conviction that dark-skinned Africans were eternally cursed by God and divinely ordained to serve people of light pigmentation (George Best had insisted that Noah’s sons were “white and their wives also”) thus had widespread currency in England before the first enslaved Africans arrived in English America. In persistent, though inconsistent, association with other imagined African shortcomings, the myth of “God’s curse” contributed profoundly to England’s categorical debasement of Africans at home and abroad. When in *The Tempest*’s final moments Prospero addresses Caliban as “this thing of darkness,” Shakespeare’s word choice likely applies to his hue as well as his character. If we accept Prospero’s charge that Caliban’s father was the devil, who in Christian iconography was always black, Caliban is doubly cursed. Unsurprisingly, from the second half of the twentieth century to the present, Caliban has frequently been portrayed onstage and in non-dramatic appropriations as a black man.

### Caliban as an American Indian

That Caliban was simultaneously, or alternatively, an American Indian is grounded in both text and context. The textual basis lies partly in the Names of the Actors’ description of Caliban as “saluage” [savage], the predominant English label for an indigenous American in Shakespeare’s era, and partly in Caliban’s claim to be the island’s legitimate heir: “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak’st from me” (1.2.332–33). Caliban also resembles American Indians in his intimate knowledge of the island’s flora and fauna (see Figure 10.1). Like natives of Caribbean islands and elsewhere in Iberian America, Caliban’s sharing of that knowledge permitted clueless newcomers to survive. When Prospero and Miranda first arrived, Caliban showed them “The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile” (1.2.338–39). Later he boasts to Stephano that he will

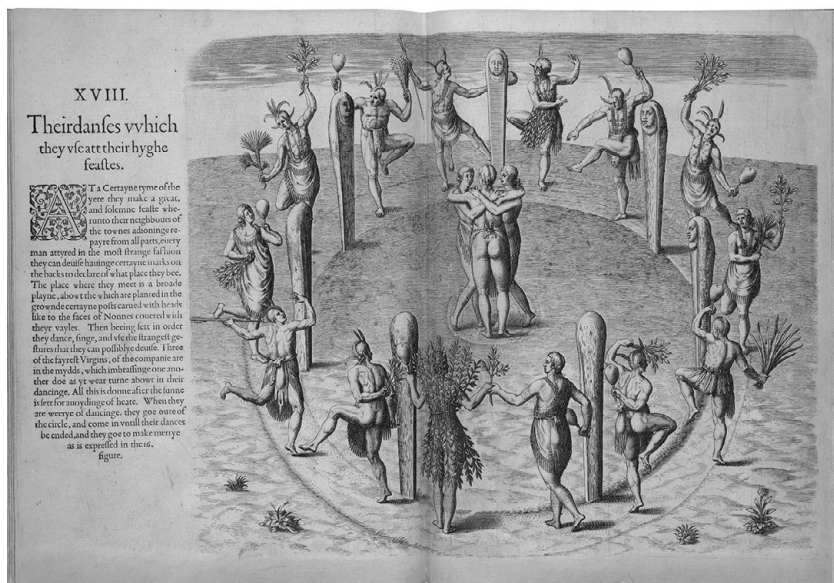


Figure 10.1 Thomas Hariot's 1590 book, *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* . . . contains many early modern English depictions of Native Americans.

Show thee a jay's nest, and instruct thee how  
To snare the nimble marmoset. I'll bring thee  
To clust'ring filberts, and sometimes I'll get thee  
Young scamels from the rock.

(2.2.166–69)

Caliban's name also strongly suggests American roots. Although some Africans reputedly ate human flesh, the customary term for them was “anthropophagi,” of Greek derivation. The etymology of “cannibal”, however, is strictly American. In the Taino language it designates the Caribes of the Lesser Antilles islands encountered by Christopher Columbus in 1492 – the first Americans to be accused of eating other humans' flesh. Early European illustrations of New World natives often featured scenes of them dismembering and devouring their captives. By the early sixteenth century, “cannibal” (*canibal* in Spanish) was the nearly universal term for consumers of human flesh.

In 2.1 Shakespeare drew on Michel de Montaigne's essay, “Of the Caniballes,” composed after a visit to Rouen by Brazilian Indians who were thought to be man-eaters, and translated into English in 1603. The French philosopher wryly suggested that there was little moral distinction

between New World cannibals and Europeans who devour each other through war and starvation.<sup>17</sup> In a passage closely adapted from Montaigne, King Alonso's councilor Gonzalo speculates on what he would do if he had "the plantation of this isle" (2.1.148–65). His settlement would become a new golden world, a community whose inhabitants could live well and simply off nature's bounty, where there would be no king or constable and the inhabitants were innocent and pure. But Antonio's and Sebastian's cynical interruptions undercut the aged councilor's idealism. Later, when Antonio and Sebastian secretly plan to assassinate the king and his councilor, they prove Montaigne's point. In any case, Shakespeare's use of Montaigne's relatively benign attitude toward cannibalism in the New World may have encouraged readers and viewers of *The Tempest* to recognize "Caliban" as an intentional anagram, a damning nominal emblem.

Prospero's subsequent enslavement of Caliban reinforces *The Tempest's* Indian parallels. Although early European explorers clearly distinguished indigenous Americans from Africans in appearance and culture, on their suitability to forced labor, it was a distinction without much difference. One of Columbus's first impressions of the Caribbean islanders he encountered in 1492 was "how easy it would be to convert these people – and to make them work for us."<sup>18</sup> During his four expeditions to the western hemisphere, Columbus shipped home hundreds of natives. Many died en route; most of the survivors became slaves in Spain or Portugal. After waves of Iberian colonists sequestered large swathes of Central and South America in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, they brazenly enslaved the local peoples, using a variety of European legal and quasi-legal justifications. When American natives died in droves from imported diseases or from overwork in the fields and mines, Iberian landlords filled the void with African slaves – about 250,000 by the early seventeenth century. In 1610, when *The Tempest* began to form in Shakespeare's mind, dark-hued people in regions under European control were overwhelmingly the property of light-hued Euro-Americans, for a term of years or, usually, for life.

### Caliban and England's American Colonies

English colonists did not immediately follow suit. Several perceived differences between their own imperial posture and Spain's kept the Virginia colony from attempting to enslave nearby natives. Initially, of course, Indians held the upper hand, in numbers and in resources, especially food.

Just as Caliban knew how to snare the nimble marmoset and find clear water, Virginia Indians knew how to plant and harvest maize, catch seafood, and stalk wild animals. Until the English settlements grew larger, stronger, and wiser, they relied for their very survival on native crops acquired by trade or seizure. Moreover, a major justification for the creation of English settlements was the prospect of converting American “heathens” into Protestant Christians through theological reasoning and gentle encouragement, in contrast to Catholic Spain’s allegedly coercive and superstitious methods. Despite frequent assaults and occasional atrocities by both sides, the Virginia colony’s lesson for Shakespeare and his contemporaries was that conflict with American Indians should be avoided: Conversion, not conquest, would eventually create a harmonious biracial society, albeit on English terms.

That goal partly explains why many English explorers in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries brought home one or more Indians – by capture or persuasion – for a few months or many years. Some of them, Trinculo reminds us, became posthumous curiosities. When English folk would not give a small coin “to relieve a lame beggar,” he laments, “they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian” (2.2.27–32). Live Indians were usually trained as guides and interpreters for future voyages or settlements and exposed to English customs and English forms of Christianity. Shakespeare himself must have seen, perhaps spoken with, some of the dozens of Indians in London during his long residence. Near the end of his life, he may also have heard of the impending visit to England by “princess” Pocahontas of the Powhatan tribe, recently married to a colonist and christened Rebecca, living proof that Virginia’s natives could become civil and Christian.

An even more immediate and applicable Indian connection surfaced at the very moment Shakespeare began *The Tempest*. Although contemporaneous narratives of *Sea Venture*’s crash on Bermuda in 1609 did not mention Indians among the castaways, other evidence confirms the presence of two young Powhatan men returning to Virginia from a diplomatic mission to London. One reached his homeland with the English survivors in the spring of 1610; the other, slain by his countryman, lay in a shallow grave on the islands. That autumn, Shakespeare could have mined oral reports of the episode for some of Caliban’s characteristics and lines in Trinculo’s and Stephano’s reactions to Caliban under his gabardine.<sup>19</sup>

Caliban’s negative qualities may also reflect the skepticism of the many colonists and their backers at home who insisted that Indians differed from themselves in crucial ways. During Shakespeare’s life those differences

rarely included skin color. The earliest European explorers, beginning with Columbus, were surprised to find that in latitudes parallel to sub-Saharan Africa, indigenous Americans were not “black” but brown, olive, or tawny. A century later, observers in the temperate latitudes of English settlement shared the European fascination with pigmentation but added a new twist. The natives in areas of English settlement were innately white, eyewitnesses insisted; the prevailing tawny hue came from nurture rather than nature. Captain John Smith, for example, reported in 1607 (orally at first and in print by 1612) that indigenous Virginians are “of a colour browne when they are of any age, but they are born white.”<sup>20</sup> They were quickly darkened by protective stains and ointments applied at infancy and renewed as needed. William Strachey described American natives in 1610–11 as “generally of a Colour browne, or rather tawnye which the Mothers cast them into . . . with red tempered oyntements of earth, and juyce of certayne scrused [twisted] rootes, so soon as they ar born.”<sup>21</sup> Leading colonists in New England and neighboring provinces would report similar findings in the 1620s and 1630s.

English belief in the Indians’ congenital whiteness helped to shield them from Noah’s curse on Cham, thereby enhancing the likelihood of peaceful assimilation into colonial society. It did not, however, protect them from accusations of savagery on other grounds, such as the long-held belief among English explorers and settlers that Indians were incorrigibly treacherous and under Satan’s thrall. But encounters with Indians along the North Atlantic coast in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries ameliorated most derogatory images. Indigenous Americans in areas of English settlement appeared to be less numerous, less fierce, and less hostile than those the Iberians had subdued in many of the hemisphere’s southerly regions.

At about the same time, English hopes for the conversion to civility and Christianity of indigenous Americans were also boosted by a growing conviction that they were analogous to England’s British ancestors. When Roman occupiers introduced them to civility and Christianity, the argument went, the ancient Britons shed their barbarity and paganism in favor of new ways and beliefs. That idea circulated in many publications and in illustrations of nearly naked, heavily tattooed figures. A caption in 1590 explained “how . . . the inhabitants of great Britannie have bin in times past as sauage as those of Virginia.”<sup>22</sup> The Reverend William Crashaw elaborated in a sermon of 1610 to the Virginia Company of London: “time was when wee were as savage and uncivill, and worshipped the divell, as now they [the Indians] do, then God sent some to make us



civill, others to make us Christians . . . [S]hall we not be sensible of those that are still as we were then?"<sup>23</sup> Many Virginia colonists opened their doors to neighboring Indians in tacit acceptance of that challenge.

A sudden Powhatan uprising in 1622 shattered English optimism. The massacre of nearly 350 colonial men, women, and children, nearly a third of the Europeans in Virginia, convinced the Virginia Company to call for such a thorough retaliation that the enemy would no longer be "a people upon the face of the Earth."<sup>24</sup> Colonial troops should seize the Indians' land and kill resisters; the rest "may now most justly be compelled to servitude and drudgery," especially, the writer insisted soon after the slaughter, on "inferiour workes of digging in mynes, and the like."<sup>25</sup> The Iberian model was vindicated. English colonists' subsequent enslavement of indigenous Americans would reinforce the point.

Shakespeare in 1610–11 could not have foreseen these changes of perception and policy. An emerging but far from universal English view of Virginia's natives in the *Tempest's* moment of creation was of rough but redeemable savages, as susceptible to civility and conversion as their own ancestors had been. That is arguably what Shakespeare had in mind when in the play's closing moments a chastised Caliban forswears his prior misdeeds and vows to "be wise hereafter / and seek for grace" (5.1.295–96). But after the 1622 massacre, commentators berated American Indians, especially Virginia's, as incorrigibly savage and immune for the foreseeable future to social and religious redemption. Readers of the 1623 Folio and audiences at London playhouses thereafter may have doubted Caliban's prospects for grace. Some critics of Virginia natives even stripped them of whiteness's protective (non)coloration. A longtime booster of the Virginia enterprise complained in 1623 that conversion of "the Infidels" was now impossible, "they being descended of the cursed race of Cham."<sup>26</sup>

If English readers and viewers saw Caliban as an American Indian, an African, or a fusion of the two ancestries, he reflected the widely held conviction on both sides of the Atlantic that those people were inherently dark, savage, and eminently suitable for slavery. Certain strands of English thought seem pervasive: that God, according to the Old Testament, had darkened and demeaned most Africans; that indigenous Americans were perhaps similarly cursed and innately savage and thus inferior to white Europeans; and that the insatiable demand for cheap labor in the Americas justified the exploitation, even enslavement, of vulnerable people.

Not everyone in the anglophone world shared those beliefs; racial thought was never monolithic. Individual ideas about race adjusted to

changing local and national experiences, new information, and a host of other variables. That instability of perception is reflected in Caliban. He is the most abusive character in the play, determined to rape Miranda and murder Prospero, and yet he is the most egregiously abused in word and deed by the Europeans. He is the most savage and seemingly “uncivilized” character, and yet he speaks some of the play’s most moving poetic lines. He appears unredeemable through much of the play, and yet in the end, he promises to reform. Mostly in his complex portrait of Caliban but also in Antonio’s and Sebastian’s revealing banter about Claribel’s marriage, Shakespeare appears to have drawn a rough template for the racial conceptions of his time.

### *The Tempest’s Afterlife*

Unlike most of the colonists who founded Virginia, Prospero abandons his overseas settlement and resumes his role as duke of Milan. The other Europeans also return to Italy, and presumably stay there. Miranda will marry Ferdinand, uniting Milan with the kingdom of Naples. On the island, after Ariel assures the ship’s safe passage home, he will be free. Caliban has the island to himself again.

For three centuries readers and viewers took this happy ending for granted and ignored the text’s colonial resonance. In William Dryden and William Davenant’s popular adaptation (1667), transformed soon after into a musical by Thomas Shadwell, *The Tempest: The Enchanted Island* was a comic opera, with a fairy-like female Ariel trilling embellished arias and Caliban parodied as a monstrous buffoon. Although Shakespeare’s text, albeit drastically cut, was revived on the stage in 1838 and after, the publication of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theories later in the nineteenth century often led directors to make Caliban into a “missing link” in apish costumes. As late as 1892, the comprehensive variorum edition of *The Tempest* by Horace Howard Furness ignored what might be called Caliban’s racial roots. In that year, however, the biographer-critic Sidney Lee proposed that Shakespeare had American natives in mind when he fashioned Caliban. Six years later in his biography of Shakespeare, Lee declared that “Caliban is an imaginary portrait, conceived with matchless vigor and vividness, of the aboriginal savage of the New World,” a theme he expounded in many publications until his death in 1926.<sup>27</sup>

Lee’s Americanization of *The Tempest* was prescient. During the twentieth century, as Europe’s colonies in Africa and the Americas struggled



for, and eventually gained, independence, commentators increasingly saw Prospero as a prototype of a European colonist, Caliban as a black man of African or mixed origins, Ariel as a light-skinned mulatto or an indigenous American. In 1969, for example, Aimé Césaire was inspired by his native Martinique's colonial past and the American Civil Rights Movement to adapt Shakespeare's *Tempest* to contemporary concerns. All of Shakespeare's characters remain the same, except Ariel is now "a mulatto slave", Caliban, "a black slave." In Césaire's adaptation, Caliban's and Ariel's interactions pose two ways of dealing with the white man's (i.e., Prospero's) oppression. Ariel argues for peaceful accommodation in the mode of Martin Luther King, Jr., while Caliban, like Malcolm X, asks to be called, simply, X, and promises to resist violently if necessary.<sup>28</sup> In the same year the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite used African rhythms to express Caliban's heritage and traced his journey to the Americas through the torments of the Middle Passage.<sup>29</sup> Also in the 1960s and 1970s, the Cuban writer Roberto Fernández Retamar hailed Caliban as the symbol of mestizo Latin Americans: "Prospero invaded the islands, killed our ancestors, enslaved Caliban, and taught him his language . . . What is our history, what is our culture, if not the history and culture of Caliban?"<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Marina Warner's fictional appropriation, *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992), made Sycorax a wise woman, native to the island of St. Kitts. When she discovers a black baby among a pile of corpses, detritus from a slave ship, she raises him: "he was the first African to arrive in the islands, and he came to be known later, to the settlers from Europe, as Caliban."<sup>31</sup> Sycorax also adopts a homeless girl, Ariel, an Arawak Indian brought to the Caribbean island by European settlers.

Numerous examples could be cited of the ways writers, from the late nineteenth century to the present, have reimagined Caliban and Ariel as racially distinct victims of Prospero's (i.e., European and American) imperialist expropriation and exploitation. Some early modern scholars now consider *The Tempest* to be one of Shakespeare's "race plays." Although contemporary critics and artists inevitably see *The Tempest* in light of their own preferences and circumstances, the seeds of many modern interpretations, as this essay demonstrates, are embedded in Shakespeare's original language. He, too, was shaped by England's substantial African and indigenous American presence, by England's growing involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, by Europe's devastating conquest of the brave new world, and by the increasingly racialized discourse of his own time.

## Notes

- 1 Quotations from *The Tempest* are taken from the Third Arden Series, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), except for quotations from the First Folio, which are from *The Norton Facsimile of the First of Folio of Shakespeare*, ed. Charlton Hinman (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), which uses “through line numbers” (TLN) instead of act, scene, and line numbers. We have adhered to the spelling used in the sources we cite except where they reverse “u” and “v”, “i” and “j”, which we have modernized, the First Folio excepted.
- 2 Quoted in Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas his Pilgrimes*, 20 vols. (1625; New York: AMS Press, 1965), vol. XIX, 5.
- 3 See Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1667: Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008); Paul Baynes, *An entire Commentary upon the Whole Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians* (London: R. Milbourne and I. Bartlett, 1643), 695.
- 4 *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin, 3 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964–69), vol. III, 221–22. See also Habib, 112–17.
- 5 Baynes, 695.
- 6 Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain since 1504* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1984), 1–6. See also, Habib, 302–41.
- 7 April Lee Hatfield “A ‘very wary people in their bargaining’ or ‘very good merchandise’: English Traders’ Views of Free and Enslaved Africans, 1550–1650,” *Slavery and Abolition* 25/3 (2004): 1–17.
- 8 Thomas Platter, *Thomas Platter’s Travels in England, 1599*, ed. Clare Williams (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), 170.
- 9 Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 10 Richard Eden, *The decades of the Newe Worlde or West India* (London: William Powell, 1555); Richard Eden and Richard Willes, *The History of Travayle in the West and East Indies* (London: Richard Iugge, 1577); Richard Hakluyt, *The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London: George Bishop and Ralph Newberie, 1589); Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 12 vols. (1598–1600; New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969).
- 11 See Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 211–53; David Bindman, “The Black Presence in British Art: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. III: *From the “Age of Discovery” to the Age of Abolition*, Part 1: *Artists of the Renaissance and Baroque*, gen. ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 235–70.
- 12 Hakluyt (1589), 130–35.

- 13 John Smith, *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1581–1631)*, ed. Philip L. Barbour. 3 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), vol. 1, 327.
- 14 George Best, *A true discourse of the late Voyages of Discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya by the Northwest, under the conduct of Martin Forbisher Generall: Divided into three Bookes* (London: Henry Bynnyman, 1578), 30–32.
- 15 Richard Wilkinson, *Lot's Wife. A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse ...* (London: John Flasket, 1607), 42.
- 16 George Sandys, *A Relation of a Journey Begun An. Dom: 1610*, 2nd edn (London: W. Barrett, 1615), 136.
- 17 Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. John Florio (1603), intro. L.G. Harmer, 3 vols. (London: J.M. Dent, 1910), vol. 1, 215–29.
- 18 Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages, 1492–1616* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 67.
- 19 See Alden T. Vaughan, *Transatlantic Encounters: American Indians in Britain, 1500–1776* (Cambridge University Press, 2006, rev. 2008), chaps. 2–4; Alden T. Vaughan, “Namontack’s Itinerant Life and Mysterious Death: Sources and Speculations,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (2018): 170–209.
- 20 Smith, vol. 1, 160–61.
- 21 William Strachey, *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* (1612), ed. Louis B. Wright and Virginia Freund (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953), 70.
- 22 Thomas Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia: The Complete 1590 Theodore de Bry Edition* (New York: Dover, 1972), 75.
- 23 William Crashaw, *A Sermon Preached in London before the Right Honourable the Lord La Warre ...* (London: William Welby, 1610), sig. C4<sup>v</sup>.
- 24 Quoted in *The Records of the Virginia Company of London*, ed. Susan Myra Kingsbury, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1906–34), vol. III, 683.
- 25 Quoted in *Records of the Virginia Company*, vol. III, 558–59.
- 26 Quoted in *Records of the Virginia Company*, vol. II, 397.
- 27 Sidney Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Smith, Elder, 1898), 257.
- 28 Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest* (1969), trans. Richard Miller (New York: TCG, 1992), 20–21.
- 29 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Islands* (Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 30 Roberto Fernández Retamar, “‘Caliban’: Notes towards a Discussion of Culture in Our America,” *Massachusetts Review* 15 (1973–74): 21–32 (at 24).
- 31 Marina Warner, *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 85.