

Abstract

In *Prospero's Books*, the Peter Greenaway film adaptation of Shakespeare's romance *The Tempest*, the arranged and apparently consummated marriage of Claribel and the African King Tunis is depicted in the most grotesque fashion. A miserable and sexually abused Claribel is shown with a bloody pudendum while nude white slave girls attend to the obviously polygamous Tunis. Since in Shakespeare's play there is no scene set in Tunis, and neither Claribel nor Tunis ever actually appears on stage, can the Greenaway depiction be justified by comments in the text about them and about their marriage made by the other characters? And can this terrible depiction be further supported by references to the negative early modern English stage history of the African, to the comparable stereotypes of Africans presented in travel literature of the time, and by the possibility that Caliban, with all of his negative baggage, is, like Tunis, an African? Probing into these elements, this paper attempts to determine the validity of Greenaway's brutal vision of the marriage, while recognizing that *The Tempest* itself is an indeterminate and uncertain text and, possibly for this reason, the definitive Shakespeare play for the post-modern twenty-first century.

Claribel, Tunis, and Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*

By William Babula

In *Prospero's Books*, the Peter Greenaway film adaptation of Shakespeare's romance *The Tempest*, the arranged and apparently consummated marriage of Claribel and the African King Tunis is depicted in the most grotesque fashion. A miserable and sexually abused Claribel is shown with a bloody pudendum while nude white slave girls attend to the obviously polygamous Tunis. Since in Shakespeare's play there is no scene set in Tunis, and neither Claribel nor Tunis ever actually appears on stage, can the Greenaway depiction be justified by comments in the text about them and about their marriage made by the other characters? And can this terrible depiction be further supported by references to the negative early modern English stage history of the African, to the comparable stereotypes of Africans presented in travel literature of the time, and by the possibility that Caliban, with all of his negative baggage, including the charge of would-be rapist, is, like Tunis, an African?

In the text, Tunis is for Alonso, the king of Naples, a very acceptable groom for his daughter, Claribel. In fact this marriage is one that he promotes and arranges for his reluctant daughter—creating the catalyst for all of the action of the play. In contrast to the African Tunis, a European father's choice for a son-in-law, earlier representations of Africans in Shakespeare's plays did not fare nearly as well: Aaron, the adulterer and evil criminal mastermind in *Titus Andronicus*; the bombastic failed suitor, Morocco, in *The Merchant of Venice*, dismissed by Portia for his dark skin; and the white European father's nightmare, Othello, who despite other virtues ends

up a duped murderer, fulfilling the jealousy stereotype presented by various travel writers of the time. One such traveler, John Leo, records of Africans: "No Nation in the World is so subject to unto Jealousie: for they will rather lose their lives, then put up any disgrace in the behalfe of their women."¹ So, given this stage history for Shakespeare's Africans and the stereotypes of travel literature, what are we to make of the marriage, Alonso's enthusiasm for it, and Greenaway's film vision of it?

After the storm leaves the Italians shipwrecked on the island, Alonso expresses sharp regret for marrying his daughter to Tunis. "Would I had never married my daughter there," (2.1.107–8) he moans.² But the rationale is understandable. He believes he has lost his son, and his daughter is "so far from Italy removed / I ne'er again shall see her" (2.1.110–11). At this point the comments seem racially neutral and not an expression of regret for the marriage to an African. He believes he has lost both of his heirs: Ferdinand, his son, to death by drowning and his daughter to distant Africa. His complaint is a dynastic one. The comments also relate to how Alonso perceives his children. Claribel is dispensable. Treating her like property, she is offered to Tunis, certainly for some dynastic or trade or perhaps strategic design since Naples was described at the time as the European border of the Ottoman Empire.³ After all, this is the aggrandizing Alonso who compacted with Antonio to essentially subjugate Milan and make it a tribute-paying client state, so there must be some underlying motive for the marriage, mercantile or possibly political—or why not an unlikely alliance with an African to protect Naples from the Ottomans? All that it will cost is his daughter.

But at this point, believing himself without his son, Ferdinand, for an heir, he deeply regrets the marriage he arranged for his daughter. As in the earlier romance *Cymbeline*, where the marriage to Posthumous is unacceptable because Imogene is heir to the English throne, the mixed-race descendants of Claribel and Tunis would have a claim on Naples—presumably to Alonso's great dismay. Africans on the throne of Naples was not his dynastic intent. But in the earlier romance when the lost male heirs are discovered by Cymbeline, the marriage to Posthumous is no longer a problem, and Imogene and her prospective progeny are marginalized. Similarly, when Ferdinand is found alive, the marriage of Claribel and whatever dynastic or mercantile or strategic imperative it had recovers its gloss, like the restored garments of the shipwrecked lords. So with Claribel no longer central to the fate of Naples, the marriage is once more acceptable to Alonso who looks forward to a new European heir and is no longer concerned that he will never see his daughter again—nor his African grandchildren, a point supported by his never mentioning her again.

In contrast to Alonso's original attitude, how acceptable was this marriage to Claribel herself? Consider, for example, Claribel's response of "loathness" to the marriage. Specifically the "fair soul herself / Weighed between loathness and obedience at / Which end of the beam should bow" (2.1.129–131). While some critics have interpreted these lines as loathness to marry in general, the implication is clear that she is loath to marry an African—with her father passing up the option of blessing Europe with her marriage to instead "loose her to an African" (2.1.125).

The language sounds and probably is racist. But as in *Othello*, where the racist language belongs to Iago and Roderigo, here the racist language belongs to the unreliable and despicable Sebastian. So how certain are we of this description of Claribel's reaction to the marriage? Alonso's responses of "Prithee, peace" and that he has the "dear'st o'th' loss," are instructive. Neither Alonso nor any of the other lords challenge the accuracy of Sebastian's account, which suggests that Sebastian's description of what passed in Naples is indeed reliable. In fact, the very reliable Gonzalo refers to Sebastian's harsh comments as: "The truth you speak doth lack some gentleness" (2.1.134). The key word here is "truth." Gonzalo finds nothing inaccurate in Sebastian's description of lords kneeling and importuning Alonso to marry the reluctant Claribel to a European instead of losing her to an African.

And other negative considerations are evident concerning the marriage. What of the extended comparison of Claribel to Widow Dido who in Tertullian's and Servius's accounts kills herself to avoid marrying an African king? Again, it is hard not to keep in mind Claribel's reluctance to marry this African despite the source of the information. Clearly she is much more like the disdainful Portia than Desdemona, who sees in her black-white marriage the excitement of forbidden erotic love.

If Africans are being presented in a negative light, should Caliban, whose mother Sycorax is of Algiers, also be seen as representing native African males as I suggested earlier? Ania Loomba in *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* describes Sycorax as of "non-European origins" whose "licentious black femininity" and black magic contrast "to the white, virginal, and obedient Miranda."⁴ That Sycorax gave birth to a human seems clear despite the numerous fish and monster references to Caliban in the play and the frequent directorial tendency to dress him in green scales and webbed hands. Prospero clearly states that the island was "not honored with a human shape" until the birth of Caliban (1.2. 281–284). The fish references are almost certainly olfactory, with the actors on stage holding their noses as they comment on the filthy Caliban as a smelly fish. That he is human despite vague deformities—which on stage may have been a hunched-over back from the slave labor he performs—is made clear by Miranda who says of Ferdinand, "This / Is the third man I e'er saw, the first / That e'er I sigh'd for" (1.2. 445–447). Given her limited experience, for Miranda, Caliban and Prospero have to be the two other men.

As for his African heritage, Caliban is called a "thing of darkness" by Prospero when Alonso first sees him, suggesting a physical description of dark skin to distinguish him from the Europeans Trinculo and Stephano—along with the obvious metaphorical implications. Earlier Caliban is described as "dirt," again a possible reference to skin color. Also, while there are many possible sources for the name Caliban—including an anagram for cannibal, a reference to Caribe Indians, and a reference to the land Caribana shown on maps of the time as northern South America—a strong case can be made for the gypsy word for black: *cauliban*. Historically, gypsies were a serious and disturbing issue in Tudor–Stuart England, and the gypsy language which had flourished in England for a century before 1611 must have been familiar to Shakespeare.⁵ So it is most likely, considering this

evidence, that Caliban, born of a dark African mother, is a dark African male human—despite the monster references. And one that has all of the stereotypical faults ascribed to the African in stage presentations and travelers' reports—and ironically also faults ascribed to gypsies. Caliban is lustful, lazy, and treacherous and, to English ears, speaks no recognizable language until he is taught English by Miranda—another indication of his humanity. Would Prospero and Miranda try to teach a non-human their language?

But if Caliban is to remind the English audience of the African native, then Shakespeare is casting even more irony upon the marriage of Claribel and Tunis. The African, already carrying enough negative baggage on stage and in travel literature, is now given that of the wild creature Caliban, who would populate the island with little dark Calibans by raping the white woman Miranda, another example according to Ania Loomba of the racist notion that sexual violence is part of the black man's inferior nature.⁶ And Miranda's harsh negative reaction to Caliban's appearance parallels the loathing reaction of the white woman Claribel to her proposed African husband. In racial terms, Shakespeare has tied together what the English audience of the time may see as two possible miscegenations.

Like the source of the name, other claims, of course, can be made for the racial identity of Caliban. *The Tempest* has been interpreted by some contemporary critics, who take a culturist rather than a universalist view, as an early colonial play, which, while focused on the native Caliban, is about the European experience in America. This interpretation may seem to move us away from Africa and the marriage of Tunis and Claribel. But as Barbara Fuchs points out, "this [America] perspective . . . runs the risk of obscuring the complicated nuances of colonial discourse in the early seventeenth century."⁷ Fuchs recognizes the America and Indian possibility, but she also argues for parallels to the Irish situation, Europe itself, the Mediterranean, and the threat from the Ottoman Turks and, of course, North Africa. While she makes a strong case for all of these alternatives, it is hard to ignore the specific focus on Tunis and Africa. In fact, as she herself states in condemning the arranged marriage between Claribel and Tunis, "If one focuses on Tunis and the threat it posed to the Christian areas of the Mediterranean, the indecorous marriage that sets the royal party in *The Tempest* on their journey becomes even more outrageous"⁸ unless the marriage is an attempt to remove that threat through the sacrifice of Claribel to gain an unholy alliance.

In post-colonial terms, these negative images of Africans can be used to justify not only the colonizing of the island by Prospero, but also the colonizing of Tunis by Claribel, who may teach Tunis a language and culture as Miranda had sought to teach Caliban. But at what possible personal expense to Claribel? As Marjorie Raley writes of both Caliban and Tunis in her essay "Claribel's Husband," "As convert and as Claribel's husband, Caliban and the king of Tunis testify to the authority of the Europeans' view" of their providential destiny. But she goes on to state that the play, in reference to Claribel's marriage, "masks . . . the sale of its daughters as an alliance of providential blessing."⁹ This means, as she argues, that real differences between the African and Italian worlds are suppressed.

So what to make of this marriage and Greenaway's image of it? In contrast to the negative images of the marriage of Tunis and Claribel, Gonzalo stands alone; Gonzalo sees green grass when Antonio sees brown, dry ground and summarizes the events near the end off the play as follows:

O rejoice

Beyond a common joy! And set it down
 With gold in lasting pillars: in one voyage
 Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis,
 And Ferdinand, her brother, found a wife
 Where he himself was lost, Prospero his dukedom
 In a poor isle, and all of us ourselves
 When no man was his own. (5.1.209–216)

A brief alternative perspective is presented by Gonzalo paralleling the African marriage to the forthcoming marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda. For Gonzalo, both share in the "common joy!" But this parallel does not contradict the initial description of Claribel's response to the proposed marriage to Tunis. Alonso himself is strangely quiet about the marriage of his daughter, offering no confirmation of Gonzalo's description. When Prospero tells Alonso in Act 5 that he has lost a daughter, Alonso makes no mention of Claribel but only wishes that Prospero's daughter and his son, Ferdinand, "were living both in Naples, / The king and queen there!" (5.1. 149–150). And after Gonzalo makes the comments noted above, Alonso only bothers to wish joy to Miranda and the recovered Ferdinand. It is as if, having fulfilled her function, Claribel is of no concern to him, not even enough to mention this daughter to Prospero. Given his apparent uncaring attitude, what concern could he have for her happiness? Thus the harsh vision of the marriage as depicted in the Peter Greenaway film adaptation in which, expanding upon Sebastian's negative language about the marriage, the negative stage history of the African and travelers' stereotypes, and in my interpretation, an African Caliban, a miserable and abused Claribel is depicted with bloody genitals while nude white slave girls attend to Tunis, can be justified by all of the negative imagery and associations attached to the African male within the text itself and in the early modern English culture.

But why in a putative romance raise all of these negative connections between Tunis and Caliban, casting a pall on the marriage? Perhaps Shakespeare is doing some ironic deconstructing of the romance genre in his last play in the form, especially when the sense at the end of the play can be one of loss and uncertainty. Claribel is gone either to happiness or disaster; Miranda and Ferdinand will live in Naples and be lost to Prospero; and unlike most Romance endings where families are reunited, Miranda does not find a mother nor does Prospero recover a wife and instead thinks only on his grave. And the ultimate irony is that as Prospero moves towards his grave, the despicable and unrepentant Antonio is in position to rule in Milan once again, the worst outcome possible in an imagined Milan beyond the play's conclusion. And the envious Sebastian, though weak, is a threat for treason in Naples now that he has recognized his own murderous ambition.

As for Caliban, is he left alone to rule the island again as most commentators

believe, though Shakespeare is silent on the subject? Or after his physical and psychological tortures, his loss of his own language, and his conversion from his god, Setabos, to Christianity, suggested by his promise to seek for "grace" at the end of the play, Caliban has been so thoroughly colonized it makes no difference if he stays or goes. His European colonization is now internalized. It is even possible to imagine him brought back to Italy as a curiosity to be displayed as Trinculo suggests early in the play or to continue in his role as valued slave to Prospero in Milan. The romance genre itself has been to an extent deconstructed through irony, fitting well into our post-modern era, with its emphasis on the indeterminism and complexity of the text.

In conclusion, the king of Tunis and his marriage to the European Claribel, with the somewhat forced or rationalized assistance of Gonzalo, can be interpreted in a positive light, but just barely since he gets no support from Alonso or from the other lords. It is far easier, as I have argued, to characterize Tunis and the marriage in various negative ways. One negative way leads back to Aaron of *Titus Andronicus* and the stereotypes of the English stage that Greenaway employs in his film. Sebastian or Gonzalo? Despite the weight of negative evidence, Claribel's life still hangs in the balance between them, and that is where Shakespeare leaves her, finally giving us two fascinating characters in Tunis and Claribel who never appear on stage. All the better to leave us uncertain how to interpret them, their arranged dynastic marriage, and the conflict and tension implicit in their racial differences. Like the character Caliban, like the name Caliban, like the play *The Tempest* itself, the racially charged marriage of Claribel and Tunis is, while there can be strong feelings either way about it, an indeterminate and uncertain text. Ultimately that may be the reason why *The Tempest* could be the definitive Shakespeare play for the post-modern twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus posthumus: or, Purchas his Pilgrimages: containing a history of the world in sea voyages and lande travells by Englishmen and others* (New York: Imprint AMS Press, 1965), 5: 356.
2. All references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).
3. Richard Knolles, *The General Historie of the Turkes*, 2nd ed. (London, 1610) 210.
4. Ania Loomba, *Gender, race, Renaissance Drama*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1989) in *The Tempest, A Case Study*, ed. Gerald Graff, (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 2000) 328.
5. Alden T. Vaughan & Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 33-34.
6. Loomba, *Gender*, 325
7. Barbara Fuchs, "Conquering Islands: Contextualizing *The Tempest*," *SQ*, 48, no. 1, (1997) : 45.
8. Fuchs, "Conquering Islands," 58.

9. Marjorie Raley, "Claribel's Husband," in *Race, Ethnicity, and Power in the Renaissance*, ed. Joyce Green Macdonald (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997) 116.

William Babula is a prize-winning playwright and novelist. He has had five plays produced, and he is the author of the Jeremiah St. John detective series. He is the author of two books and over two dozen articles on Shakespeare. He is professor of English and dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Sonoma State University in California.