UNDERGRADUATE PAPER

Conquest of Land and Bodies: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Study of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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In this paper, I study William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) from environmental and postcolonial perspectives. I will analyze Shakespeare's play as a means to discuss such concepts as anthropocentrism, agency, ecophobia, speciesism, and ecological imperialism, which inherently culminate in postcolonial ecocriticism. I argue that *The Tempest* emphasizes the repercussions of colonial endeavors on humans, other beings and nature, by delineating the violent relationships that arise from conflicts, and the risks of controlling the environment. This paper also emphasizes that the play does not simply reflect colonial and environmental anxieties but actively critiques them. While many scholars have explored its engagement with anthropocentrism, speciesism, and ecological imperialism, this study builds on these foundations to emphasize two key aspects: first, the ambiguous identity of Caliban and the implications for both racism and speciesism, and second, the play's nuanced portrayal of nature as not inherently dangerous but manipulated by human intervention for political gain. By foregrounding these aspects, *The Tempest* emerges not only as a commentary on colonial exploitation, but also as a prophetic warning about environmental destruction.

The Tempest offers a commentary on the conquests and discoveries that were becoming increasingly popular at its time, dealing with political themes that reflect its historical context.

Journal of the Wooden O. Vol 24, 171-181

ISSN: 1539-5758

It was written around a time when journeys from England to America, especially Virginia, were taking place. The story of the play bears remarkable similarities to the voyages of explorers in the Renaissance, borrowing many elements from common European narratives of the period, such as shipwreck, ambiguous geographical setting, and the association of newly found lands with magic and savagery. Throughout the text, there are references to the trips of English explorers to new destinations, especially to the American continent. Indeed, historians have found similarities between the text of the play and historical manuscripts written by English explorers in the Renaissance. Charles Frey explains that the play's title and its events, such as the natural disasters are inspired by accounts of real voyages.[1] He also adds that, "there is good reason to believe that Shakespeare had read or heard of Magellan's encounter with the Patagonanians who worshipped Setebos."[2] These similarities manifest in the events that occur in the play such as the storm and shipwreck, as well as in certain linguistic choices. Caliban mentions the god Setebos, and compares Prospero to him: "His art is of such power, / It would control my dam's god Setebos" (1.2.367–368). Ariel also mentions Bermuda, then known as "Bermoothes": "Thou call'dst me up at midnight to fetch dew / From the still-vexed Bermoothes" (1.2.246–247). These details suggest that Shakespeare may have read the manuscripts written by voyagers of the time. Therefore, the play reflects the shift in English awareness and perception of the new world, which was the result of the voyages. This information is crucial since it suggests that the play cannot be read outside of its early colonial context. It might be set in an imaginary place, and it is sometimes performed as a solely magical play. Yet it is very political, as it mirrors the unfolding colonial process at the time.

However, the play transcends a merely descriptive role. It also hints at anxieties about the possible outcome of the discoveries. In "Discourse and the Individual," Meredith Anne Skura declares that, "if the play is 'colonialist,' it must be seen as 'prophetic' rather than descriptive."[3] Indeed, *The Tempest* emphasizes the problematic aspects of discovery and conquest as it points out the conflicts and violence that ensue because of a power struggle over land and property. To state this somewhat differently, while the play does show the adventurous side of the prospect of finding a new land,

it also sheds light on the colonial impact by highlighting the clash of interests between Prospero and Caliban. It is this second aspect of the play that shapes the main arguments of this paper, reflecting the power struggle over possession of land and nature and attitudes towards the nonhuman.

The characterization of Prospero and Caliban, their interactions, and their conversations with one another reveal the nature of their conflict. Both claim to have the right to rule the island. On one hand, Caliban views himself as rightful ruler of the island, which he inherited from his mother. Caliban exclaims, "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother" (1.1.333). On the other hand, Prospero sees himself as the legitimate owner of the island and its creatures because he conquered it after the death of Sycorax. To illustrate, when Prospero plans to leave, he still views the island and Caliban as his: "…This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (5.1.277–278). Thus, from the beginning of the play, the main conflict stirs up a chain of aggression and hatred, revolving around the ownership of nature and land. Nature is seen by both Caliban and Prospero as an object to possess from the moment they set foot in it. If we consider Caliban as human, then we can say that both he and Prospero perceive nature through anthropocentric lenses. They both seek to acquire land and exert control over it, viewing themselves as the centre of the world and the island as a non-agentic body that needs ruling. This raises the issue of human and nonhuman agency in the play.

Much western scholarship considers humans superior. It posits that humans have the right to dominate other beings and parts of the ecosystem because rationality makes them agentic. Other "bodies" are considered irrational and thus inferior because their lack of rational thinking disqualifies them from being "equal" to humans. They do not think, have no intention, and hence no agency. As a result, they become property to humans, who can use them in whatever way they choose. This reasoning is what makes Prospero view himself as the owner of all he encounters. He deems everything on the island, living and non-living as his rightful property, including the island, Caliban, and Ariel. From his perspective, his magic and knowledge give him agency that makes his power legitimate. Although he is aware that the island has powers, he sees them as his to regulate. Therefore, Prospero

never questions his right to rule over the island's natural landscape. This attitude can be seen in his tone and word choice when he speaks to Ariel: "Thou, and thy meaner fellows, your last service / Did worthily perform. And I must use you / In such another trick" (4.1. 35–37). When spirits do his bidding, Prospero takes credit, revelling in his power to control nature. In other words, he sees himself as the center of the "ecosystem" and the puppeteer of the actions of inferior beings.

Caliban is not so different. Prospero may not consider him a real human and therefore not a match for him, as perhaps his mother was. Yet, Caliban's self-awareness leads to his awareness that he is as good as Prospero and that he too has the agency that entitles him to possess the island. Caliban has the "human" qualities that Prospero has, and so he too can possess nature. For instance, he points out that Miranda taught him language: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (1.2. 364–366). This linguistic ability is crucial in terms of agency, which are directly associated with rationality and the right to rule. Stephen Greenblatt explains the power of Caliban's curse: "Ugly, rude, savage, Caliban nevertheless achieves for an instant an absolute if intolerably bitter moral victory."[4] By learning the human colonizer's speech, Caliban proves that he too is capable of agency and exerting power. Hence, Caliban uses his master's tools to rebel.

Caliban learns language from Prospero, but his values and thinking have always aligned with Prospero's in his tendency to conquer nature, a tendency that Sycorax has before Prospero arrives at the island. Although, she is only mentioned a few times in the play, she uses her magic to control the creatures and elements of the island. This underlines that there is little difference between the European colonizer and the indigenous characters in how they treat and perceive nature. Both see it as a space to carry out their political intentions. This breaks the binary of colonizer/colonized by introducing nature as a space to be exploited by both. It also implies an innate tendency of humans (or human-like beings) to dominate other creatures such as animals and plants.

In the play, what the modern reader would classify as the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized creates the

power struggle between Prospero and Caliban. Both aspire to possess the island and its resources. But while Caliban is a colonized character, the play does not present him as indigenous because his mother does not originate from the island. She is Algerian and that in itself introduces colonial undertones to the play because of the Eurocentric view towards Africans. For example, Sebastian criticizes his brother Alonso for marrying his daughter to an African prince: "That would not bless our Europe with your daughter, / But rather lose her to an African" (2.1.119–120). This implies that Sebastian views Africans as inherently inferior and raises the spectre of European hostility toward Africa. However, the relationship between Sycorax, who once ruled the island, and Prospero, the European colonizer, becomes a reminder that none are indigenous to the island. This leaves Caliban and Prospero on an equal footing. Neither strictly belongs on the island, and yet both seek to control it.

The play highlights the atrocities that result from this struggle. The graphic language that Shakespeare uses to describe how Prospero enslaves and tortures Caliban is repulsive. For instance, Prospero threatens Caliban, "I'll rack thee with old cramps / Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar" (1.2.370–371). This word choice calls attention to the gruesome actions of Prospero who would do anything to wield power over Caliban. In retaliation, Caliban tries to rape Miranda, Prospero's daughter. His overtly sexual and aggressive manner makes it hard to sympathize with him. Indeed, there are racist and speciesist implications in his portrayal. Neither Prospero nor Caliban is represented in a good light. This showcases how their conflict over the right to rule makes them act monstrously. Their portrayals show how conquest leads to violent and atrocious clashes with the previous "owners" of newly found lands. This violence starts a vicious circle that harms everyone in the play. Caliban is enslaved, and Miranda lives in fear. In other words, conquest creates hatred that leaves no one safe.

The dynamics of relationships throughout the play also reveal how colonialism works. This involves not only Prospero and Caliban but most of the characters as well. In fact, when Prospero first arrives on the island, he not only enslaves Caliban, but also Ariel. Although he begins by rescuing Ariel from Sycorax, Prospero then uses the spirit as his servant. When Ariel demands liberty, Prospero

threatens him by saying: "If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak / And Peg thee in his knotty entails till / Thou has howled away twelve winters" (1.2.295–297). This incident is significant for two reasons. First, it shows that even though Ariel, who is indigenous to the island, is not tortured by Prospero, he still craves freedom. He seems, in fact, exasperated with constant servitude to Prospero, which could imply that grudge and fear lurk beneath his flattery of Prospero. This hints that there are incentives for a looming conflict between Ariel and Prospero although Prospero deters it through threats. Hence, the relationship between Prospero and Ariel is not one of mutual trust but one of fear and enslavement. Caliban is not the only victim of Prospero's conquest, because Ariel is similarly deprived of free will and self-determination. Second, the dynamics between Ariel and Prospero delineate how Prospero views the beings under his control. He subordinates Ariel, believing he has every right to use this native spirit. Prospero uses similar language with Caliban when he is angry. He does not harm Ariel because he needs his obedience to carry out his revenge scheme. Yet, Prospero sees him as a being lacking agency. No matter how impressive the spirit's magical powers are, they are no match for Prospero's rationality. Thus, like the island, Ariel is property to be used to advance Prospero's political plans.

In the play, speciesism is manifested through Prospero's perception of Ariel. Prospero's readiness to punish Ariel in cruel ways shows how the latter's service constitutes slavery because it demands total obedience. But despite Ariel's fear, Prospero views him as a joyful and lovely spirit as long as the spirit does not demand his rights and follows Prospero's rules. Ariel is like a lapdog despite his powers, and if he decides to start thinking for himself, he will be vilified and punished. This also connotes a hierarchy between humans and other forms of life, be they witch, spirit, animal, or plant. Just like the land itself, spirits also fall into the domain of the nonhuman, so are easily dominated.

Speciesism is even clearer in the play in the representation of Caliban. The characterization of Caliban is infused with nuanced racism and speciesism merged together. Indeed, Caliban's identity is ambiguous. Miranda describes his nature: "But thy vile race, / Though thou didst learn, had that in't which / good natures / Could not abide to be with" (1.2. 358–361). Caliban

is the son of an African witch, not a European. He is also not "human-looking," possibly because of the common belief that witches had relations with devils. Skura explains that Caliban's identity is highly ambivalent; whether he is a human of indigenous origins or a nonhuman demonic being is heavily debated among Shakespeare scholars. She addresses how various adaptations play with Caliban's identity: "[There exist]. . . not only contemporary post-colonial versions in which Caliban is a Virginian Indian but also others in which Caliban is played as a black slave or as "missing link" (in a costume "half monkey, half coco-nut")."[5] Caliban's identity and image thus remain confusing, which opens up discussions about his pejorative portrayal. While the reasons for his nonhuman appearance are unclear, his physical identity certainly contributes to his inferiority in the play, which suggests racism and speciesism. He is represented as neither white nor fully human. If the human, and especially the European, is made the norm and the basis for superiority, Caliban's ambiguous identity places him at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. While he is often framed as an indigenous figure subjugated by Prospero, his characterization also reflects a deeper speciesist bias. Indeed, he is frequently referred to in bestial terms, with his physicality marked as monstrous and nonhuman.

This dehumanization aligns with historical colonial practices, where non-European peoples were often depicted as being closer to animals than to their European colonizers. Caliban is certainly represented as exotic. Trinculo suggests taking him back to Europe for a freak show: "Were I in England now (as once I was), and had but this fish! / painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece / of silver. There would this monster make a man" (2.2.27–29). Indeed, freak shows were part of colonialism as Africans and other indigenous people were represented as abnormal. Many scholars claim that the descriptive language Shakespeare uses for Caliban is a proof that the play has colonial insinuations and perhaps a speciesist agenda. For example, Paul Brown shows how certain details are added in the play to label Caliban as the villainous other, including his sexuality and inability to govern the island. Brown suggests that "the other is here presented to legitimate the seizure of power by civility and to define by antithesis (rape) the proper course of civil courtship."[6] Greenblatt

also describes the "othering" of Caliban. He claims: "Shakespeare does not shrink from the darkest European fantasies about the Wild Man; indeed, he exaggerates them: Caliban is deformed, lecherous, evil-smelling. . ."[7] However, I argue that Caliban is given a voice from the beginning to defend himself and curse Prospero. He is certainly not an angel, nor does the play show him as a complete victim of oppression. Yet, he is not a villain either since his loneliness and legitimate anger over Prospero's enslavement are emphasized. In fact, Caliban's portrayal might carry some positive aspects as well. Skura argues: "Shakespeare was [the] first to show one of *us* mistreating a native, the first to represent the inside, the first to allow a native to complain onstage, and the first to make that New World encounter problematic enough to generate the current attention to the play."[8] Thus, the portrayal of Caliban reveals nuanced racism and speciesism at work in the process of colonialism. He might be villainous, but he is given a space to justify his actions as responses to torture and enslavement. In this way, the play holds a mirror up to the darker aspects of oppression and conquest inherent in the colonial enterprise. In short, the play's nuanced treatment of Caliban suggests a more complex and critical view of colonial dynamics than many critics have acknowledged.

Moreover, the portrayal of nature in *The Tempest* raises questions about ecophobia. Ecophobia in literary works can be seen in the language used to describe nature and in the role nature plays in relation to human characters. The play explores how humans and especially colonizers perceive the environment. Prospero develops his powers by controlling nature, and other characters such as Sebastian and Gonzalo express a desire to possess the island once they land on it. Gonzalo says: "Had I plantation of this isle, my lord–" (2.1.140), and then proceeds to describe a fantasy of ruling over it. Nature is not seen by human characters as an active force but as a commodity for personal gain. Just like Caliban and Ariel are perceived as lacking agency and are therefore available for colonization, so too is nature treated, as its resources are exhausted by the white men who deem agentless and available for exploitation. This implies that colonialism enslaves not only individuals but also the environment: constituting ecological imperialism. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin highlight the ideas of ecofeminist thinker Val Plumwood, arguing that ecological

imperialism becomes "forms of instrumental reason that view nature and the animal 'other' as being either external to human needs, and thus effectively dispensable, or as being in permanent service to them, and thus an endlessly replenishable resource."[9] Consequently, the environment as well as the body of the other are exhausted in colonial pursuits. Similarly, Prospero exploits Ariel, Caliban, other spirits and the land itself to achieve his political schemes. In line with Huggan and Tiffin's discussions, the island is considered to be "meaningful" only when it is populated with humans. Accordingly, Prospero considers it unpopulated after he has subdued Sycorax. He says: "Then was this island / (Save for the son that she did litter here, / A freckled whelp, hag-born) not honored with / A human shape" (1.2. 282–284). Nature is honored by human presence and considered empty when no walks in it. This establishes the power hierarchy in the play, at the bottom of which lies nature in the form of the island.

The Tempest reflects its environmental context, in the same manner that it reflects the political one. Namely, the play uses its context as an inspiration for events, and then it adds nuanced commentary to it. Sophie Chiari explains that the year in which *The Tempest* was performed witnessed dire weather, and the play reflects this, starting with a significant natural event: a tempest.[10] In the play's opening scene, characters express their fear of nature's might, creating a link between nature and suffering. Simon C. Estok argues that "the natural world, however is pictured as dangerous, unpredictable and immoral. Illustrating an ethics of dislocation from the natural world rather than one of connection: a mindset of ecophobia."[11] He suggests that the play reinforces a fear of nature. However, I argue that this is not the case because the storm in this play is not natural. The above statement would have applied to a play such as *King Lear*, where nature is really hostile. Yet, *The Tempest* quickly reveals Prospero's creation of the storm, and thus implies that humans' meddling with nature to use it for their selfish ends brings about destruction. Nature on its own is not a threat, but humans make it so. The play challenges the ecophobic perception that nature is inherently chaotic and threatening. Instead, it suggests that the true danger comes from human ambition and the desire to dominate.

Prospero's actions serve as an early warning about the consequences of ecological imperialism, where the environment is reshaped to fit human needs without consideration of its long-term effects. His control over the island mirrors modern practices of environmental engineering, such as deforestation, climate manipulation, and resource extraction—all of which contribute to climate instability. By repositioning nature as a victim rather than a villain, *The Tempest* offers a critique that remains relevant in today's discussions on environmental ethics. The play ultimately calls for a more balanced relationship between humans and the natural world, one that recognizes the dangers of unchecked exploitation and interference. At the same time, the play does not present nature as entirely benign or passive, for the island itself is imbued with a kind of agency. The play suggests, rather, a more complex and interdependent relationship between humans and the natural world, one where neither side can be fully subjugated or dominated without consequences. Ultimately, *The Tempest*'s portrayal of nature and the storm offers a nuanced commentary on the human-nature relationship. It cautions against the dangers of environmental exploitation and the illusion of complete control, while also acknowledging the inherent power and agency of the natural world.

While the play offers warnings about the outcomes of colonialism and conquest, it also introduces an ecocritical perspective. *The Tempest* is not ecophobic, nor does it celebrate or approve of ecological imperialism. In fact, it counters ecophobia and proposes a progressive idea. By pointing out the risks of interfering in nature, the play issues a warning about humans' ambition to control the environment. Similarly, it underlines the dangerous consequences of trying to use nature for gain. Moreover, the play employs the dire weather conditions of the island to reflect political corruption and entangled issues. As Chiari reminds us, "the climate of the island" can be a reflection of "the geopolitical context of the play."[12] The storm, thus, mirrors the chaotic political situation, which weighs on Prospero and leads him to revenge, creating an important link between politics and the environment. It shows how both affect one another, and indicates that conquests affect nature as humans disrupt it. In other words, political anxieties cause conflicts between powerful individuals, which

leave the environment vulnerable to exploitation. Prospero and Caliban fight over nature for political reasons, which brings about instability. Prospero takes revenge on his brother by using nature. Nature, although powerful, is considered by humans as a tool to advance their interests. This causes destruction and environmental catastrophes, as the play elucidates.

Overall, *The Tempest* illustrates the rising issues of its time and the universal and timeless issue of the relationship between humans and nature. Shakespeare does not preach any moral stance in the play, but his characters, his language and his representation of conflict, suggest that he was making a prophetic commentary about the disastrous consequences of colonialism and exploitation of nature. Since the play is not a tragedy, it does not end in mayhem but rather on a hopeful note that returns the colonizers to Europe. Yet, it leaves Caliban and Ariel in uncertainty, that prefigures the postcolonial reality in the contemporary world where people continue to struggle with climate change.

Notes

1. Charles Frey, "The Tempest and the New World," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30.1 (1979): 29.
2. Frey, "The Tempest and the New World," 33.
3. Meredith Anne Skura, "Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40.1 (1989): 58.
4. Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 41.
5. Skura, "Discourse and the Individual," 47.
6. Paul Brown, "This Thing of Darkness I Acknowledge Mine," in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 63.
7. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, 41.
8. Skura, "Discourse and the Individual," 58.
9. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.
10. Sophie Chiari, *Shakespeare's Representation of Weather, Climate and Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 219.
11. Simon C. Estok, "Simon C. Estok's Talk at TEDU: 'Shakespeare and Ecophobia,'" YouTube video, 3:11:21, August 3, 2022. https://youtu.be/onikW_zXkIc?si=ou5KPIAh5MfgId5E.
12. Chiari, *Shakespeare's Representation of Weather,* 245.