

THE PERMEABILITY OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS:
TEMPESTS IN THE CARIBBEAN

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ABSTRACT: In 2016, the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare has provided opportunities for scholars, who have been working for years on performance and the Caribbean, to present a revision of the Bard's view of colonization. Of all his plays, *The Tempest* is the one that has been most frequently restaged in terms of the colonial/postcolonial relationship. I will explore Caribbean visions of the master-slave relationship in George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) and *Water with Berries* (1971) alongside Aimé Césaire's *Une Têmpete* (1969), and show how these writers reinterpret the political relationships between Prospero and Caliban from a Caribbean Caliban's perspective, as well as the transformation of Prospero into Columbus in the Cuban play *Otra Tempestad (Another Tempest)* by Raquel Carrió and Flora Lauten (1997) and their vision of how the concept of island works.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare. *The Tempest*. Caribbean. Decolonization. Postcolonialism.

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A PLASTICIDADE DAS PEÇAS DE SHAKESPEARE: *TEMPESTADES* NO CARIBE

RESUMO: Em 2016, a celebração dos 400 anos da morte de Shakespeare propiciou oportunidades aos acadêmicos que se dedicam há muito tempo aos estudos da encenação e ao Caribe, para apresentar uma revisão da visão de colonização do bardo. Entre todas as suas peças, *A tempestade* é o texto que tem sido mais frequentemente remontado a partir da relação colonial/póscolonial. Pretendo explorar visões caribenhas da relação senhor-escravo em *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) e *Water with Berries* (1971) de George Lamming em paralelo com *Une Têmpete* (1969) de Aimé Césaire, mostrando como esses autores reinterpretem as relações políticas entre Prospero e Caliban a partir da perspectiva de um Caliban caribenho, bem como a transformação de Prospero em Cólón na peça cubana *Otra Tempestad (Outra tempestade)* de Raquel Carrió e Flora Lauten (1997) e a visão das autoras sobre o conceito de ilha.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Shakespeare. *A tempestade*. Caribe. Descolonização. Póscolonialismo.

In 2016, the 400th anniversary of the death of Shakespeare has provided opportunities for scholars, who have been working for years on performance and the Caribbean, to present a revision of the Bard's view of colonization. Of all his plays, *The Tempest* is the one that has been most frequently restaged in terms of the colonial/postcolonial relationship. The stage has been used as a powerful means of showing a master-slave/Prospero-Caliban dynamic that has evolved and been reanalyzed and reinterpreted depending on each production and director.

This paper will explore the intrinsic permeability of Shakespeare's work. By 'permeability' I mean each production's capacity for telling an alternative story while making it seem as if it

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were the original story. These stories told anew contribute to a re-creation of the history of the Caribbean through the inclusion of indigenous elements which combine with the Shakespearean plot in a process that Antonio Benítez Rojo calls ‘supersyncretism’.

I will explore Caribbean visions of the master-slave relationship in George Lamming’s *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) and *Water with Berries* (1971) alongside Aimé Césaire’s *Une Têmpete* (1969) and show how these writers reinterpret the political relationships between Prospero and Caliban from a Caribbean Caliban’s perspective as well as the transformation of Prospero into Columbus in the Cuban play *Otra Tempestad (Another Tempest)* by Raquel Carrió and Flora Lauten (1997).

Harold Bloom states, in his influential book *The Western Canon* (1994), that Shakespeare is the canon itself and adds: “[perhaps] we can go farther; for Shakespeare we need a more Borgesian term than universality. At once no one and everyone, nothing and everything, Shakespeare is the Western Canon” (BLOOM, 1994, p. 75). Without getting deeper at this point into the Eurocentric stance that has placed Harold Bloom and Shakespeare in this position, it is interesting to analyze what makes it possible. Shakespeare is most of all, permeable, and it is this quality that has made possible appropriation, transformation, and the telling of his stories anew.

The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addresses in a powerful TED talk (2009) the dangers of what she calls the single story, for the writer’s “power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person”. Caribbean artists have worked in order to weave their own stories following the Anansi tradition of storytelling brought from Africa but transformed by the Middle Passage experience. This made Anansi a survivor and thus a hero who is able to get by thanks to the healing power of storytelling. In a way that is not dissimilar, outstanding

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Caribbean writers have used Shakespeare as a model to express their own visions, their own stories and so their sense of history. Despite critical voices, such as Bloom's when he qualifies the African Caribbean identification with Caliban as a total 'misreading' of *The Tempest*, it is important for contemporary performing artists to use and to question the canon. The aim is not only to see better but also to avoid the single story that Adichie refers to and which is usually imposed by those who establish themselves in a social position that does not have anything to do with the writer. That this retelling is possible thanks to the capacity of Shakespeare's work for being permeable. His vision is porous and revels in ambiguity with creative possibilities and interpretations that are dependent on the reader, and most of all, on the audience.

The Tempest has many ingredients that play with this permeability and all its possibilities for being used as a metaphor with new interpretations for 'a new world order' that Caryl Phillips's book of essays uses for its title. *The Tempest* is usually dated 1611 and scholars have traditionally claimed that it is Shakespeare's last play¹. The theme and the format correspond to what has been classified as a 'romance' play where the search for identity is one of the main issues. *The Tempest* deals with the great themes of the Renaissance and is concerned with a philosophical utopia represented by the uninhabited island and man's efforts to conquer that physical world, with its inherent threat to nature.

Although the geography of *The Tempest* is basically Mediterranean (Italy and North Africa) and Prospero's island is somewhere around the Sicilian archipelago, one of the best known sources of the play is a real life shipwreck on the island of Bermuda.

¹ *The Tempest* is certainly one of Shakespeare's last plays, but every now and then there are fresh doubts about whether it was his last. Bearing this in mind, I have used the date given by Laurie Maguire, 2000, 213.

The Mediterranean offered a known environment that was exotic enough for Shakespeare's adventurous contemporaries to indulge their curiosity about the interaction of Europeans with the possibilities that the New World opened up. There are elements of the real story from the 'Bermuda pamphlets' in the play as well as the idea of the island as fertile ground for building Utopia. Thomas More's creation and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* depicted the Renaissance vision of the island as a laboratory for experimenting with nature – represented in *The Tempest* by Caliban – versus art, in the sense of artifice, and the technology of the time – represented by Prospero's prized book of magic rescued from Milan.

For Caribbean artists, *The Tempest* is a play full of the opportunity to create other "tempests" of their own. They have the chance to recreate the Prospero-Caliban dynamic from another angle as revisiting the colonizer/colonized cliché deconstructs anew the framework for this relationship. In Shakespeare's version the fact that Miranda is the only woman on the island makes Caliban think about raping her, so the relationship between Miranda and Caliban is always sexualized. Other interesting elements are: how the absence/presence of other women would affect relationships on the island; the idea of masque/masking as a way of linking the European and Afro-Caribbean relationship, and most of all, the idea of the island itself as a utopian/dystopian place.

The Cuban Antonio Benítez Rojo, in his powerful and influential book *The Repeating Island* (1998), established the Caribbean vision of an archipelago of islands joined by a common past based on the plantation and a history of enslavement which was repeated all over the Caribbean. The reinterpretations of *The Tempest* chosen for this study act, in fact, as visions of the Caribbean artists (Césaire, Lamming and Teatro Buendía) who, somehow, shared the repeating island framework and from the decolonial period to the present moment, considered themselves as new Calibans who would rewrite

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the story from their angle, face-to-face with the colonizer Prospero who deprived them of what belonged to them by right: mother, inheritance, land, freedom, and most important of all – self-esteem:

I must eat my dinner.
This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,
Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give
me
*Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light and how the less,
That burn by day and night; and then I loved thee
And showed thee all the qualities o' th' isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile—
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king, and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' th' island. (1.2.330-344)*

The language of Prospero then becomes English for Lamming, French for Césaire and Spanish for Teatro Buendía using Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a way to reflect kaleidoscopically on their own island stories, creating new *Tempests*.

George Lamming was one of the first Caribbean writers to identify himself with Caliban but also with Prospero. Shakespeare made the Caliban name out of Montaigne's *Of Cannibals* although he did not adopt the essence of the noble savage that Montaigne depicted. In the play, Caliban represents 'a half human of earth and water' versus Ariel (aerial) whose name stands as a kind of anagram for air and who also deals with the element of fire (BLOOM, 1998, p. 666). In a very Shakespearean form of antithesis, both of Prospero's slaves display, because of the elements they represent, two very different attitudes towards life and their enslaved situation.

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In *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), George Lamming writes interrelated essays about his vision as a West Indian writer who lives in London as part of the generation who arrived in the metropolis when they were still British subjects. The encounter with the ‘mother’ island creates a clash that is essential to an understanding of racial and social relationships in the present European context. There is a whole chapter in this book of essays which carries the significant title, “Caliban orders History” (1992, p. 118-150). Exile in his view is a way of alienation, but also a way of rebirth, of being able to develop the artistic side. Lamming pictures himself as a Caribbean man who has both Prospero and Caliban as elements within him. He is what Ania Loomba calls a ‘hybrid’ subject (LOOMBA; ORKIN, 1998, p. 7) just trying to establish a balance between these two opposites by creating his own history.

In *Water with Berries*, Lamming plays continuously with the idea of dream and death as a state that belongs to Prospero, in what Bloom states as the fifth element in the play, consisting of Prospero’s use of magic in bringing the dead back to life. Lamming creates an archipelago of islands that can be part of the dream, part of the world of the dead or of the living dead. For Lamming’s group of artistic young West Indian men seemed to have become spellbound, achieving a zombie-like state, since they left their island home of San Cristóbal for this new island, Britain, where they behave as walking dead in London. Teeton, one of the artists from the Caribbean group in his attempt to get back to his original island will strangely end up by taking refuge, but getting trapped in an even smaller island. The Orkneys in Scotland represent a complex archipelagic geography that diminishes and limits the protagonist even more, forcing him to kill the old Dowager as a way to escape, a way to get back to his island. It is an offering, a libation, which will turn him into a kind of nothingness in a state of limbo:

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The air was rubbing him gently. The island began to drift behind. He was moving away from the cottage. He knew it was there. The island was somewhere behind him, solitary and desolate in its vigil. It was watching his departure. He would soon be out of view, out of its reach, beyond the orbit of its shelter. He didn't want to look there again. The future had come between them. (LAMMING, 1971, p. 248)

However, there is no redemption for the characters that populate the novel either white or black, man or woman, at least in the framework of the living. Silence in the novel is used as a metaphor for these traps that they have woven or have been woven for them: “the city had become a huge and foreign mausoleum where they walked” (LAMMING, 1971, p. 221).

Much more ironical and offering visions of escape for the Caribbean writer is *Une Tempête* (1969). Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet and politician wrote this play as a clearly anticolonial portrait of his society where Prospero is the white master, Ariel represents the racial mix of the mulatto, and Caliban is the black slave. The idea of power as race and decolonization is the part of this play that through theatre changes the roles and gives the writer's own view on the matter. In his interpretation, Césaire stages the story from a ‘black-white’ viewpoint that encompasses – through a triangle with the mulatto in Ariel – what the Cuban writer and theorist Roberto Fernández Retamar saw as the Latin American ‘mestizo’ following Martí.

Caliban chooses violence as a way of freeing himself from Prospero's enslavement and decides to name himself “X” rejecting the name given to him by the colonizer. At the other extreme, Ariel is a pacifist. Taking into account that the play was written in 1969, is not difficult to see the relationship with the civil rights' movement in the United States and understand why some directors have decided to stage Caliban as Malcolm X and Ariel as Martin Luther King. But the play goes beyond that. Aimé Césaire takes full advantage of the theatrical elements inherent in his dramatic format to create a

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tempest that depicts the story from the point of view of a poet who was part of the *Négritude* movement and who, like the Cuban Wilfredo Lam in his paintings, uses surrealism to tell the story through fragments as he tries to order chaos. It is the ‘contrapunteo’ (counterpoint) that Benítez Rojo referred to as a way to explain the synergy of ‘different melodies playing together’ (1996, p. 159).

Césaire’s *Tempête* uses the masque form of the original *Tempest* to display the Afro-Caribbean components through the sacred ritual of masking. The permeability of Shakespeare’s play allows for the masque as a genre to be used to show the syncretization of the pagan deities (the orishas) with the European story telling tradition. Iris, Ceres and Juno will become the ‘Sleeping Beauty fairy godmothers’ who will step back when Eshu, the Yoruba deity appears accusing them of not having been invited. Eshu is the equivalent of Elegua, the orisha of the roads, and is the one first called in the Voodoo and Santeria rituals. He plays the trickster and has the capacity to transform himself into a youth or an old man. His voice acquires a pecong resonance especially in the English translation when he says:

Eshu can play many tricks
Eshu is a merry elf,
And he can whip you with his dick, (1992, p. 48)

Pecong is a verbal battle of insults hurled in rhymed verse that is used profusely in the Trinidad Carnival and taken into the literary arena in some Caribbean-themed plays like Derek Walcott's *The Joker of Seville*, or the North American playwright Steve Carter’s award-winning *Pecong*.

Caliban masks himself as Shangó and takes the fire that is traditionally Ariel’s when he declines the use of violence. Through this African masking he will be able to regain his self-esteem:

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And you lied to me so much,
About the world, about myself,
That you ended up by imposing on me
An image of myself:
Underdeveloped, in your words, undercompetent
That is how you made me see myself.
And I hate that image... and it's false!
But now I know you, you old cancer
And I also know myself. (1992. P. 64)

Prospero decides to stay on the island after all because he cannot see himself outside this dynamic, but the very ending of the play will show his decay through his physical appearance and a state of permanent cold that will drive him to the world of the living dead, echoing even there Caliban's shouted appeal for freedom that can be heard all over the island.

Otra Tempestad uses this idea of the mask as a reference, but pushes it further by creating a different story inspired by Césaire's and other sources such as the *patakis* – sacred stories about the orishas from the Afro Cuban Santeria. The playwright Raquel Carrió and the director Flora Lauten are part of this storytelling tradition, and their stories are also linked to the weaving of stories that in the Anglophone Caribbean is associated with Anansi, the spiderman. In the way they structure the performance on stage, the dramatists adopt the framework of storytellers that weave a spiral web which populates the island with women and gives balance to the story from a Caribbean perspective.

Flora Lauten formed Teatro Buendía with Raquel Carrió in 1986 as a theatre laboratory for experimental drama. As a team, both women have been able to come up with a very different 'Tempest'. Not only do they open up the colonizer-colonized relationship using characters (Juliet, Macbeth, Othello, Shylock, Hamlet ...) from other Shakespearean plays, but they also create musical spaces that include different cultures such as the Jewish, the tradition of the orishas and

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Carnival. In this play it is also noticeable how the absence of Caliban's 'Woman' (Sylvia Wynter, 1990) is reversed by the new inhabitants of the island who have become Sycorax and her daughters.

Lauten and Carrió people the island with women as, in the role of Yoruba deities, Sycorax and her daughters weave a different story when Miranda finally falls for Caliban. These women stage their version of Shakespeare's play and the Cuban story and it is their sense of island that changes. In Shakespeare it is just Miranda. By using the Yoruba deities, Lauten and Carrió enhance the number and the influence of women in the play and they also empower women as an important force in island society. Using women who are of African origin to play Sycorax and the deities, they are able to give presence to women who are put down by their race in white societies. Furthermore, they do it beyond bitterness and resentment, because there is no sense of vengeance. The retelling is as if it were any other story about just another tempest in the Caribbean, from a Caribbean perspective – 'otra tempestad'.

Otra Tempestad is most of all a tapestry of vignettes, fragmented pieces that the audience will have to put in order by opening up to an oneiric world. The world of the dead comes alive thanks to the simultaneous appearance of scenes targeted at the audience's senses and intuition through pictorial images that evoke a tempest, or violence, love, etc. Prospero, for instance, is introduced as a new Columbus who arrives on the island, clearly Cuba this time, because of a tempest. In this sense, special mention must be made of the creative use of props as the dramatists follow Peter Brook's idea of the theatre as an empty space that reduces stage elements to a minimum. Teatro Buendía also adopts the anthropological views of the Odin Teatret and emphasizes the body as part of nature's elemental and creative force on the island which works in opposition to the artifice that Prospero represented later by the technology of the wheel in the fifth vignette. Some of the natural elements that are

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depicted solely through the movement of the actors' bodies are the storm, a palm tree or the impressive birth of Sycorax's daughters as the show opens.

Within this spiral web of island life, Prospero's bearded face, his bad temper, as well as his determination to create the Republic as a sort of Utopia in the eighth vignette provide through him a portrait easily identifiable with Fidel Castro. Some of the reports about the play in the news of the time – 1997 – show that the play escaped censorship thanks to the fact that it was only performed before small audiences in Cuba. However, *Otra Tempestad* is a play that has toured all over the world – through South America, Asia and Europe. Even more to the point, it was performed in 1997 at the heart of Shakespearean London where it was successfully staged in Spanish for a non-Spanish speaking audience, metamorphosing the famous pillars of The Globe theatre into symbolic palm trees and creating a multiplied vision of what Adichie called 'the single story'.

The fact that in this play Miranda is emphatically a Moor and that Prospero her father wants to marry her to Othello, is a significant turning point that not only makes a link to Sycorax's African origins, but also emphasizes the supersyncretism of their Spanish European ancestry. In this retelling, Miranda will fall for Caliban whom she desires sexually and she declares, "I want this island full of Calibans". The presence of Ophelia alongside Lady Macbeth, who is in fact the orisha Oyá, gives voice to Shakespeare's female characters who, in the context of this island, are able to develop and express their true selves. The final part of the play with all the characters playing Mas is a perfect canvas ordered by Carnival – a feast linked to the reversal of roles – and presents a powerful picture of the Caribbean artist's sense of a new world order based in chaos.

The question that lies beneath the spectacle of *Otra Tempestad* from the beginning is, What is the essence of this island identity? (*¿Qué es isla?*) The answer has to be worked out through the action of

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the play, but it is the ending that leaves the audience with a deep sense of catharsis with the triumphant entrance of Caliban Rex. His appearance in a form of African attire shows his restored origins and the holding of the masks of the different personae shows Caliban as the one and only, the definitive king of his island. As the play builds to a climax, the characters unmask as if they were emerging from a trance and lie on the floor in the presence of Caliban the king, who has claimed the birthright that was legitimately his through Sycorax, his mother. The way he carries himself shows total confidence and the exhausted characters lie scattered on the floor shouting a single word in their agony – ‘Isla’ (Island).

It is the essential quality of permeability of Shakespeare’s plays that has guaranteed both his artistic survival and the possibility of using his plays as re-creation and metaphor within our contemporary world. How that metaphor is interpreted and transformed becomes an issue that contains complexities arising out of the process of entanglement between artist and audience. Caribbean writers use the permeability of Shakespeare’s work to explore their own realities through their own appropriations and stories. They have been able to interpret this new world order not just by trying to put the pieces together, but by highlighting the fragments that the reader or the audience will have to grapple with personally through a cathartic experience as a way of disentangling their own reality. As these Caribbean artists have succeeded in creating an aesthetics of syncretism – avoiding the ‘single’ story – they are not just Calibans, but new Shakespeares.

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