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THTR 167: Performing Identities

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### A Matter of Tempests

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a true product of its time, exemplifying European attitudes during the beginning of the colonial era on every page. The protagonist Prospero is the former Duke of Milan. He was betrayed and ousted by his brother, only to be banished to a "savage" island. He is also a very powerful mage, capable of summoning storms and casting mind control spells. He lives on the island with his only daughter Miranda and his slaves Caliban and Ariel. Caliban is the son of the witch Sycorax, who once trapped the spirit Ariel in a tree. Upon arriving on the island, Prospero defeated the witch and freed Ariel from the tree. He takes both of them as slaves, forcing them to carry out his scheme to be reinstated as the Duke.

Aime Césaire was a prominent thinker in the Negritude movement, which was a framework of literary critique created with the goal of raising a unified "Black consciousness" within black people from all over the world. It was heavily intertwined with post-colonialism. Post-colonialism is a school of thought that examines the ways the colonial era has impacted colonized people. Césaire's play *A Tempest* is a post-colonial retelling of the Shakespeare play, in which he allows Ariel and Caliban to speak for themselves. Both plays have the central theme of power. In *The Tempest*, Prospero believes that he is powerless: away from his throne and stranded on an island, he believes he has nothing. However, in reality, he has power over Ariel, Caliban, and his daughter; as well as a wealth of incredible magical abilities. Césaire's play explores this idea more directly by shifting the focus to the characters who are the most

powerless. Caliban and Ariel become the two protagonists of the story, turning Prospero's machinations into a side plot.

From his first moment on stage, Caliban goes directly against Prospero's wishes. He insults him at every opportunity and stubbornly refuses to easily fold to Prospero's commands. Ariel and Caliban represent a sort of duality, both in the original text and in Césaire's interpretation. Caliban is animalistic, ferocious, sexual, and opinionated, while Ariel is acorporeal, docile, asexual, and subservient. Ariel asks to be freed, Caliban demands it. Césaire takes this "light vs dark" dynamic in a different direction: he imagines that Ariel is an over-optimistic assimilationist, while Caliban is a disruptive radical. Ariel references Malcolm Luther King's dream by describing a utopian paradise in which he, Caliban, and Prospero roam the earth as brothers. Caliban takes the Malcolm X approach, going so far as taking the name "X" to symbolize what was taken from him when Prospero named him Caliban. In *The Tempest*, the narrative portrays them as a "good" slave and a "bad" slave: Ariel is rewarded for his calm temperament and his obedience, while Caliban is punished for standing up for himself. Césaire subverts this by presenting Caliban as a passionate radical willing to follow his convictions to the end. Even though his coup against Prospero doesn't succeed, Caliban doesn't back down, saying that his only regret is that he failed.

Césaire uses Ariel's character as an example of dual consciousness. Ariel in *The Tempest* has male and female attributes and straddles between the living realm and the spirit realm. Ariel in *A Tempest* is mixed race and as a result, has a very liminal experience. He both wishes to make peace with Prospero and recognizes that he and Caliban are allies in the fight against Prospero's oppressive force. Ariel also questions the subtle hegemonic ideas Prospero has imposed on the island. He expresses regret at being "freed" from the tree against his will, describing how he

thinks it could actually be nice to lead a life so deeply connected to the island. Prospero forced his ideas of what personhood should look like onto Ariel and expects him to thank him for it.

This divide in belief systems is not explored in *The Tempest*.

While the audience is meant to sympathize with Prospero in *The Tempest*, his actions are frequently cruel and selfish. He murdered the original resident of the island and enslaved her son, he doesn't respect his daughter's autonomy, he's manipulative and he has a very paternalistic attitude towards the island. Prospero's actions aren't demonized by the narrative: instead, he is reinstated as Duke and forgiven for his crimes by the characters and the audience, breaking the fourth wall and asking them to applaud to forgive him. The narrative frames this as him returning to his "rightful place." Again, Césaire subverts the original play by having Prospero choose to stay on the island. After Caliban gives a long monologue about how Prospero is addicted to the power he has over the island, Prospero explains that he believes he is the "conductor of a boundless score" and that only he can "draw music from all that." The final scene of the play shows Prospero desperately trying to maintain some amount of control over the island as Caliban celebrates his own freedom.

Césaire's play places the black characters and the white characters in opposition to each other. By doing this, he invites the audience to examine the complex relationship between the two groups. He is aware that *The Tempest* was written by a white playwright for a white audience. *A Tempest* is fundamentally a retelling for a black audience.

Bibliography

Césaire Aimé, et al. *A Tempest: Based on Shakespeare's The Tempest, Adaptation for a Black Theatre*. TCG Translations, 2018.

Shakespeare, William, and Andy Parker. *The Tempest*. Oxford University Press, 2010.