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Literary Reinvention

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“Caliban as a Protagonist in *A Tempest*”

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* was first performed in 1611, just four years after England first began colonizing North America. Being that colonization of the New World was at such a critical point during Shakespeare’s time, the societal climate that this created is inevitably reflected in his writing – particularly in *The Tempest*. Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest*, a reimagination of *The Tempest* written under a postcolonial lens, both juxtaposes and converses with Shakespeare’s original script. Although Césaire keeps the original characters and premise of the story, he makes a key change in perspective in his writing, shifting from the voice of the colonizer to that of the colonized by making Caliban his protagonist. Caliban’s character is the main vehicle through which any anti-colonial points are conveyed in both stories; his point of view taking the adaptation’s foreground recontextualizes Shakespeare’s original work.

In handing the stage to Caliban, Césaire not only creates an illuminating conversation between *A Tempest* and *The Tempest*, but also brings the audience’s attention and a new depth to a more pinpointed conversation already taking place between Prospero and Caliban. With a protagonist like Prospero, who is busy with vengeful plans and his daughter’s future, this dynamic is unable to take center stage. Shakespeare staticizes Caliban’s character in such a way,

however, that he sets the stage for Césaire to truly bring his character to life and amplify his voice.

The story of *A Tempest* is deeply bound up in the history of control. In narratives which speak about oppression, “the voice” is often a focal point – how it’s taken away from the oppressed by the oppressor. What allows *A Tempest* to stray from this narrative pattern is that within Caliban the audience has a character who is defined in his story by his powerlessness, and yet in both Césaire’s and Shakespeare’s writing, his voice is not only present, but captivating. Caliban is uniquely strong – at no point does he truly lack power. He shows the audience that strength is a matter of discovery as he continually stands up to Prospero. Shakespeare simply scrapes the surface of this character. But even in his most shallow presence, in spite of how little space he is given in Shakespeare’s script, Caliban has a fundamental strength which Césaire perceives and adds great depth to in writing him as a protagonist.

From the moment Césaire introduces Caliban, he is bluntly voicing his desire for freedom: “Uhuru,” he says upon entering the stage, which is Swahili for “freedom”. Césaire also kicks off the play using a Master of Ceremonies. This voice animates the characters. It is a nod to traditional playwriting, and is in keeping with his use of a classic play to tell a story of colonialism and power dynamics, but this choice makes another, more profound implication. The Master of Ceremonies says “To each his character, to each his mask” (Césaire). The masks that Césaire employs play their own part in the show’s social commentary: these masks that the cast wears over their faces allude to traditional Yoruba culture.

Yoruba masks are meant to link the physical world with the spiritual one. Traditionally, they are used to communicate with a more powerful realm and harness their strengths. Taking this into account reveals a deeper level to Césaire’s use of magic in *A Tempest*. Compared to

Shakespeare, whose writing is fantastical, Césaire takes a more grounded approach, toning down the magic and thus immersing the audience in a more real story of oppression. Anything remotely magical that appears in his adaptation is deployed very carefully, and realistically. For instance, Prospero's original powers are translated into an invasive force that overpowers the island's pre-existing culture which Caliban refers to as "white magic". This is a pretty blatant comment that Césaire is making, especially considering Prospero's "white magic" is barely supernatural. He also changes Ariel's character from a shapeless, intangible spirit to a mixed-race slave, sucking the magic out of this character and replacing it with transparent criticism. Simultaneously Césaire, outside of the contexts of the script, applies these masks to his cast which create a common ground between living humans and their ancestors.

The masks aren't the only reference that the play makes to Yoruba traditions. Eshu, the only character that Césaire adds to the script entirely, is a Yoruba deity. This presence is a part of the few magical aspects of the play. It's made clear that these aspects are applied calculatedly; Césaire's magic has a deep cultural significance which is pertinent to the message he is sending through Caliban's voice.

Caliban's voice is of great importance: his freedom is something he speaks into existence, making it his most powerful tool. This is a message that should not go unnoticed. Prospero, too, empowers himself through speech by belittling the indigenous people of the island and fabricating a new, inferior identity for them. As soon as Caliban recognizes this, Prospero's work is undone. Caliban says to Prospero, "you are the master of illusion. Lying is your trademark...you have ended by imposing on me an image of myself. Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior, that is the way you have forced me to see myself. I detest that image! What more, it's a lie!" (Césaire). It is at this point that Caliban is able to effectively deconstruct the world that

Prospero has built around himself. This is where he recognizes his own authority and capacity to rebuild his personal identity. Rather than endorsing violence as a means to impose change, Césaire is emphasizing the power of speech through Caliban's character and direct references to Yoruba culture, insisting that even silenced voices can still be heard, if only with persistence.

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