

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Shakespeare

## **CALIBAN** (In *Tempest*) (Unconscientious)

**Overview** *The Tempest* (1610) is one of Shakespeare's great fancy and fantasy plays—cf. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1590)—in which elements of human ambitious and conflict are worked out in terms of philosophically complex imaginations. Caliban himself is the product of rumination on the nature of slavery, and of the untutored minimally human, and he requites his master, Prospero, with every kind of obloquy, reserving special loathing for the gift of language,

**Character** 'A savage and deformed slave,' the grotesque hired hand of Prospero, the 'right Duke of Milan,' who has been abandoned on an island—to get him out of the way of inheriting the dukeship of Milan, which his brother is cheating him out of. When we first see Caliban he is busy cursing the usurper of the island, Prospero, for having taken away the island which by rights belongs to Sycorax, the deformed mother of Caliban. The backstory, of this long tale of grotesque colonization, which pervades the play, is that Caliban, upon being subdued, quickly attempted to rape Miranda, the lovely young daughter of Prospero.

**Grumbling** Trinculo and Stephano—jester and butler—tread across Prospero's island, part of the imaginative décor. Caliban, immensely grumbling, addresses them, complaining about his master, Prospero. At first the new arrivals scorn the monster—'a most scurvy monster'—but then Caliban cozies up to them: 'I'll show thee the best springs, I'll pluck thee berries, I'll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough. A plague upon the tyrant that I serve!' Caliban goes on to promise the rare edible lore of the island which he alone is familiar with—pignuts, the nimble marmoset, clustering filberts, young scamels from the rock. (What those are nobody knows!)

**Rebellious** There is much talk in this play, especially on the part of 'the wise Gonzalo,' about the beauties of the 'state of nature.' Caliban hearkens to that talk, proclaiming whenever he can that his natural island has been taken over by a sorcerer—which in a way Prospero is. 'As I told thee before,' he proclaims to the drunken butler, Stephano, 'I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer, that by his cunning has cheated me of the island.' Caliban goes on to conspire with Stephano to kill Prospero, and to provide instructions for killing the tyrant in his sleep. Caliban's thinking is ruthless, and yet his new allies are buffoons, so the danger resulting from this plot is limited.

**Plot** Caliban instructs his allies in the best way to kill Prospero, and to take over the island. He goes right to the point: 'tis a custom with him I' the afternoon to sleep. There thou mayst brain him, having first seized his books, for without them he's but a sot.' He goes on to praise the noble plans Prospero has, to build himself a fine house, where he can house his showpiece, his daughter. In the course of recommending this assassination, Caliban shows his envy of the noble colonizer, and his admiration of the beautiful Miranda, who 'surpasseth Sycorax (Caliban's mother) as great'st does least.'

**Sentient** Caliban is more aware than he seems. We see this as his relation to his rebellious allies matures, and they plan to work as a (grotesque) team. He confesses to hearing 'sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not, sometimes a thousand twangling instruments will hum about my ears, and sometimes voices that will make me sleep again.' The magic is ferried in by an 'aery spirit,' Ariel, who is the hench person of Prospero, and carries out much of the magic on the island. In dreams, says Caliban, he will imagine riches so splendid that upon waking 'I cried to dream again.' As he speaks, the whole band of conspirators remains enchanted by the music of Ariel.

**Parallels** Circe, in Homer's *Odyssey*, transforms Odysseus' men into swine, and threatens even Odysseus with this fate. (Odysseus is finally too clever for her.) Caliban could have been one of the Circean breed. Two modern works of fiction deal masterfully with the theme of 'bestialization of the human,' or if not that with the place of primitive developmental instinct in humanity. One thinks of Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955) which tracks the interior path from the Neanderthal to the pre-human

condition. Ernest Gaines' wonderful *A Lesson before Dying* (1993) probes the legal process of transforming a 'hog' into a human, thus into an appropriate candidate for capital punishment.

### **Discussion questions**

What is Shakespeare's attitude toward Caliban? Does he scorn him, or view him as a promising source of earthly energy?

How do the figures of Caliban and Sycorax help to define the uniquely fantasy-filled world Ariel (and Prospero) inhabit?

In Act II, sc. 1, Gonzalo expatiates on the virtues of the state of nature. Does Caliban represent part of the world that Gonzalo fantasizes about?