

DEREK COHEN

## The Culture of Slavery: Caliban and Ariel

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CALIBAN as a colonized native has become a truism of contemporary criticism of *The Tempest*. Meredith Skura and Alden and Virginia Vaughan have traced the history of Caliban and the way in which he has been constructed from monster to villain to victim. Caliban has become a cultural icon, a means and touchstone of the culture from which he derives and of those cultures which have appropriated him. Skura argues that new historicism is one element of that large body of work which attempts to account for the exploitation of the New World by the project of economic adventurism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Prospero, according to this view, far from being the divine orderer of more traditional interpretations, is the embodiment of European, Old World cultural domination. Power over the New World Other, not the rehabilitation of Italian (or, of course, English) political turbulence, is seen as the essential part of his political mandate within the play.

Leslie Fiedler, writing in 1972, made the point: "thanks to such political commentators as Fran[t]z Fanon, as well as certain more adventurous literary critics like Frank Kermode, no respectable production of the play these days can afford to ignore the sense in which [the play] is a parable of transatlantic imperialism,

---

<sup>1</sup>Meredith Anne Skura, "Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989): 42-69; Alden T. and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993).

the colonization of the West."<sup>2</sup> The usually tragic history of the collision of the European and the "barbaric" worlds emerges through an exploration of the inner dynamics of the play, its psychological, cultural and linguistic constructions. The relations of Prospero to his two servants, Caliban and Ariel, fall squarely into the pattern of typical and traditional master-slave relations. Prospero's so-called "servants" are more properly described as his slaves, complete with the connotations, both old and modern, which the term carries. Servants are waged labourers with rights, sometimes those of citizenship and sometimes of access to the legal system. Clearly no part of this description fits the case of *The Tempest*.

The institution of slavery has always been sustained by the fact and the omnipresent threat of violence. Nevertheless, it remains disturbingly true that slavery has been justified in the past by some leading intellectual figures including the likes of Aristotle, Grotius—who saw slavery as harmonious with natural justice—and Hobbes. To Hobbes as, clearly, to Prospero and a host of Shakespearean despots, political and social obligation are modelled on the subordination of the vanquished subject who gives obedience to the victor in exchange for his life, thus producing a rationale for obedience as a *desideratum* of social stability.<sup>3</sup> Slavery is practised successfully only in those societies where, Orlando Patterson argues, it does *not* completely dominate the society. "A truly vibrant slave culture, if it is to avoid the crisis of honour and recognition, must have a substantial free population."<sup>4</sup> This certainly was the situation of which Aristotle wrote and which then, as subsequently, called for such justifications as that provided in *The Politics*.

G.W.F. Hegel's famous discussion of slavery—his terminology is of "lordship and bondage"—supplies an intriguing imaginative recreation of the beginning of history in order to explain the advent of social classes: the discussion also provides an analysis of

---

<sup>2</sup>Leslie Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 208–9.

<sup>3</sup>See David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 133–37.

<sup>4</sup>Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 100.

slavery and self-consciousness. Hegel proposes this beginning as the moment when men were locked in mortal combat in the primal pursuit of the basic human need for recognition (Aristotle's *thymos*). The outcome of the battle was the division of society into two classes: a class of masters who had risked their lives for victory and a class of "slaves" who surrendered because of their fear of death. The master's need for recognition, however, could not finally be fulfilled because the recognition of a slave could never be sufficient, coming as it did from a defeated subject: the slave was not acknowledged as fully human and could not thus satisfy what Hegel saw as the primary need of the human being. The slave, on the other hand, totally lacked recognition or the possibility of recognition and thus sought evidence of his humanity outside the narrow limit of recognition. To Hegel, the slave was able to recover the humanity which he had forfeited—on account of his fear of death—through work. Paradoxically, then, the slave could recover a kind of freedom through the exercise of his own labour which became a form of self-expression and a form of freedom in itself. Work, in other words, could free the slave and replace recognition of another person as a basic need, and thereby supply the slave with the condition of humanity which the master, because of his mastery, could never obtain.<sup>5</sup> Patterson's refutation of Hegel takes force from the fact that Hegel's argument depends upon a version of slave-owning societies which probably never existed. In *The Tempest*, which also predicated an imaginary society, dreamed up for the purposes of drama, precisely half of the initial inhabitants are slaves and half slave-owners. The play is a curious anticipation of Hegel in its revelation of slave and slave-owner achieving self-consciousness through the experiences of "lordship and bondage." Caliban and Ariel experience the process of enslavement.

In his justification of slavery, Aristotle may well have been responding to the presence, in fifth-century Athens, of ideological resistance that the institution of slavery may have provoked—presumably among the slaves themselves (slave revolts were known

---

<sup>5</sup>G. W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 228–40. See also Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

to have occurred) and among his non-slave-owning fellow citizens. Slavery on Prospero's island is unusual in that it is not institutionalized; that is, one of the essential elements of slavery is missing. According to Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, "slavery is a legal or customary institution, which necessarily implies its subordination as a partial form to a larger structure of socio-political relations. Slavery is—as colonization is not—a legal form of property which gives to an owner certain rights over the person of a human subject. But this form and these rights only exist *within* a distinct form of state or community." Prospero has, in these terms, imported the the ideology of the ownership of a human subject to the island he calls his, but not the institutional structures by which it is controlled. The slave, Hindess and Hirst continue, "is neither a subject nor a subordinate, he is a form of property; the master is ... his *owner*."<sup>6</sup> With Prospero's notion of owning human subjects have come to the island what A.E. Voss lists as the essential coordinates of slavery, "power, property, deracination, non-personhood, dependent labour, physical suffering and psychological damage, prejudice."<sup>7</sup> Deracination of the human subject and non-personhood are two features of slavery which distinguish it from colonialism with its concomitant missionary project which implies the (inferior, but real) "personhood" or humanity of its subject people. Although colonization often, perhaps usually, implied slavery—its centuries-older sibling—the connection is not automatic. Yet on Prospero's island we note the presence of forms of slavery which are differentiated by the unequal and different treatment of Caliban and Ariel, and the difference of the origins of their enslavement. Ariel is enslaved by Prospero from the moment he is released from his bondage in the cloven pine. Caliban, on the other hand, moves from a position of servitude (to an apparently benign master) to one of absolute slavery enforced by violence.

Though it is not unknown for slaves to appear to enjoy their slavery, it is always hard to credit that appearance as a true reflection of feeling in an institutional system where the use of violence

---

<sup>6</sup>Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London: Routledge, 1977) 113.

<sup>7</sup>A.E. Voss, "'The Slaves Must Be Heard': Thomas Pringle and the Dialogue of South African Servitude," *English Studies in Africa* 17.1 (May 1990): 64.

is a normal means of instilling cooperation and obedience or compliance. The very means by which the institution is sustained is evidence of the constant potential resistance which it implies, almost by definition. If slaves have to be bludgeoned, raped and brutalized into submission and kept submissive by the constant fact and threat of more and greater violence, it follows that their resistance is constantly presumed to be imminent. Their powerlessness and their masters' power over them require persistent reinforcement as facts of life. The slave, who survives only at the behest and by the permission of his masters, lives on the edge of death. His life belongs to another who can take it away at will. To remain alive requires the presence of a vital irony: the slave must be made to want to live despite the misery of his state. The master must make the slave believe that actual death is worse than the tortured existence he presently enjoys. Thus, while the master recognizes the presence of discontent and potential resistance in his slave, he needs to foster that resistance sufficiently to allow the illusion of freedom in the slave, and he needs to suppress it sufficiently to render it unthreatening to himself. Patterson is convincing on this feature of the practice of slave-owning. He writes that the slave-owner, by "holding out the promise of redemption ... provides himself with a motivating force more powerful than any whip. Slavery in this way was a self-correcting institution: what it denied the slave it utilized as the major means of motivating him."<sup>8</sup> Thus the appearance of compliance in the slave is produced out of a deliberately created hope for freedom which can be offered and withdrawn by the master as a condition of obedience and subservience. The psychological damage to the slave may be imagined: but, more relevantly, the effects of this kind of mental torture upon the slave are intended to demoralize and render him more and more dependent upon the power of his master. Ariel, as I shall later argue, being subjected to this kind of treatment, is this kind of slave-victim.

Caliban is the opposite: he is an example of a slave who hates and who, through his hatred, lends validity to the Hegelian argument. To Hegel the phenomenon of the subordination of one

---

<sup>8</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 101.

self to another, enforced by all forms of servitude including, most egregiously, the servitude of slavery, is a condition of the consciousness of self.<sup>9</sup> In Ariel the consciousness of self has been blunted by and subordinated to the prospect of freedom, while in Caliban, the thoughts of rebellion and the fact of his hatred keep that consciousness in sharp focus. Caliban's hatred fulfils the function which Hegel ascribes to work or labour in supplying the slave's awareness of himself: "Thus precisely in labour where there seemed to be merely some outsider's mind and ideals involved, the bondsman [slave] becomes aware, through this re-discovery of himself by himself, of having and being a 'mind of his own'."<sup>10</sup> Caliban's hatred is a kind of mediate discursive strategy which locates and identifies his social and emotional distance from his master. In a sense, his hatred keeps Caliban honest and self-aware and places Prospero at a safe—i.e. uncontaminating—distance from himself. It helps Caliban to locate the 'other' and thus to defer his self by its difference.

Prospero's hatred of Caliban, on the other hand, is much less self-aware than its opposite, very largely because it is suffused with moral indignation by which it is justified and thus clouded, and also because it arises out of a fear of the hatred which oppression naturally induces. Prospero needs and uses Ariel to protect himself from the hatred, anger and violence of Caliban. The word 'monster' carried for the Renaissance the modern meaning of an unnatural creature, while it retained the idea of its Latin root, *monere* (to warn), thus suggesting a portent or menace. Caliban is, in the sense of the word by which he is constantly known, a living threat.

Prospero does not kill Caliban or Ariel, but that is partly because they are entirely under his power and therefore offer no immediate danger to him. Being his slaves, by definition and despite the paternalistic sentimentalism with which literature has endowed slave-history, they are his enemies. Caliban is allowed to live because he is fearful of his master and, more, because he is useful

---

<sup>9</sup>Hindess and Hirst, it must be noted, declare that Hegel's argument, though justly famous, "has nothing to do with slavery and establishes no special relation of domination between master and slave. Hegel's object is the genesis of self-consciousness not the dynamics of slave systems" (*Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* 114).

<sup>10</sup>Hegel, *Phenomenology* 239.

to him. Prospero hates Caliban for apparently good reason. Ariel is a more ambiguous case, but his absolute subservience to and fear of Prospero are never in doubt.

Hatred is regarded as virtually synonymous with anger. But, while all anger is not informed with hatred, all hatred is informed with anger. Indeed, Ralph Berry opines that anger “has long been banished from the Deadly Sins. The anger of Prospero,” he continues, “hints at a moral under-pinning to his emotions. Who can admit to unrighteous anger? Since no one is angry without cause, Prospero is making the case for himself in the most vehement way. He is tapping one of the mysterious themes of our time, the legitimization of anger.”<sup>11</sup>

## 2

Caliban has learned from his enslavement. His hatred of Prospero, intestinal and direct though it may be, is represented as a learned emotion. It is viewed by the magician and his daughter as a perversion of normal human emotional impulses that have been forced into the forms and structures of hatred by an irredeemable nature. It is directed outwardly towards his master as an almost liberating or empowering form of self-expression. Though his body is entirely under the control—even the remote control—of Prospero, his mind remains free to hate the master who controls that body. Caliban’s sole power under the circumstances of his slave condition is his power to hate and his desire to kill his master. So that, although he is Prospero’s slave physically, he is never his emotional slave. Successful enslavement of another human being, Patterson argues, is the fusion of the slave’s identity with that of his master; it entails the violent loss of any social sense of belonging to a community or society outside that which lies under the control and aegis of his master. Slavery itself, Patterson suggests, is a relationship of power and domination originating in and sustained by violence. The slave’s “social death” is a substitution for a commuted physical death from war, execution, starvation or exposure.

---

<sup>11</sup>Ralph Berry, *Shakespeare in Performance: Castings and Metamorphoses* (London: Macmillan, 1993) 135–36.

A major aspect of this social death is “natal alienation” from ancestors, relatives, and community in general.<sup>12</sup> Caliban’s anger keeps alive in him the desire to resist, to fight, and to kill Prospero: he refuses to accept his social death by insisting that Prospero has stolen his birthright and by attempting to recover it. His memory keeps alive an instinct for familial identity. The passion that prompts him to clamour for “justice” gives him the desire for freedom that has generated the many identifications of Caliban with oppressed peoples of the world.<sup>13</sup>

Ariel, who has submitted unequivocally to Prospero’s rule, is a more successful slave, willing even to participate in the torture of his fellow slave in obedience to his master. Ariel has no known natal origin and he refers to no ancestors or relatives to whom he feels tied. In his yearning for freedom he reveals no desire for community. Unlike Caliban he seems to desire no offspring or descendants. His social death and natal alienation are complete. Patterson notes that one of the most subtle and brutal features of slavery is the master’s response to the slave’s yearning for dignity, itself part of his wider yearning for disalienation and relief from the master’s all-embracing power. In almost every case the master exploits this very yearning for his own benefit. Prospero’s apparently affectionate or benign treatment of Ariel are among the means he uses to motivate his sprite-slave to virtuoso levels of performance.

## 3

Earl Miner’s description of the antithesis represented by Caliban-Ariel is typical of much writing on the play: “There are other creatures on the island, one of them the good spirit Ariel, who is so far a creature of the element of air that he has no human feelings, and

---

<sup>12</sup>Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 1–14.

<sup>13</sup>These readings are numerous; a comprehensive list is provided by Skura. Of historic interest are two books in particular: O. Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, trans. Pamela Powesland (New York: Praeger, 1964) and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), especially pages 83–109 which constitute a radical’s rebuttal of Mannoni’s ‘conservative’ position.



another is Caliban, who is so much a creature of the earth that his passions are monstrous."<sup>14</sup> Reading these two characters as non-human is an established practice which tends to remove from the reader the responsibility of moral judgement and from the characters the responsibility of and connection to motive. There are few feelings more intense than the desire for freedom, a feeling which motivates Ariel almost entirely through his narrow emotional range. Unlike Caliban, however, he has been educated to understand his freedom only in terms of a gift. Rebellion is not part of his thinking. The distinction is crucial: for the freedom which Ariel imagines has become compromised by being merely the other side of slavery. Ariel's freedom in imagination and in fact at the end of the play ties him forever to the magician who gives it to him. Patterson makes the point that manumission as an intrinsic part of the process of slavery reinforced the master-slave relationship. Caliban's freedom is the purer for having, even in the end, been associated in his mind with anger and hatred and resistance. Caliban's submission to Prospero is always costly to himself, and yet he always attempts not to submit. While Ariel's submission is complete in both body and mind, Caliban submits only physically to his tormentor. Ariel has learned to believe that he possesses an essential self and that that self is defined by servitude and enslavement. While Ariel is manifestly discontented, he has learned how to flatter his master as Caliban has not. Prospero has promised him freedom on condition that he behave and remain faithful, and this promise supplies Ariel with the motive to please his master.

## 4

The histories of Caliban and Ariel, while somewhat vague and partially drawn, supply some indications of their relations to their slave status. The word 'slave' is used eight times in *The Tempest*. Seven of these uses occur in Act One, Scene Two and all but one of these

---

<sup>14</sup>Earl Miner, "The Wild Man Through the Looking Glass," *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Edward Dudley and Maximillian E. Novak (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1972) 95.

refer to Caliban abusively. The first use of the word in the play, however, is a reference to Ariel by Prospero, who says:

This blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child,  
And here was left by th' sailors. Thou, my slave,  
As thou report'st thyself, was then her servant.<sup>15</sup>

While Ariel has called Prospero “master,” he has not in our hearing referred to himself as a slave, although he certainly doesn’t demur when so described by Prospero. Most curious about Prospero’s words, however, is the phrase, “As thou report’st thyself.” Why does Prospero hang the responsibility for Ariel’s identity on Ariel himself? By asserting that Ariel reported himself a slave in some pre-play moments, Prospero is tacitly acknowledging the moral ambiguity of his position as one who has enslaved another. For, as Caliban has, according to Prospero, brought his enslavement upon himself, Ariel’s slavehood has been purchased by his release from a horrible bondage. By making Ariel the namer of his own state, Prospero seems to be trying to absolve himself from a dilemma. Ariel is, after all, an entirely obedient, occasionally craven servant who seems to receive no wages for his Herculean labours and who longs for the day when Prospero will release him. Yet at no time during the play does he report himself Prospero’s slave though there is no ambiguity about his status; indeed, he even seems to take occasional pride in his accomplishments in his service. In the meantime it is Prospero’s pleasure to remind Ariel of his debt to himself for releasing him from the cloven pine in which he had been imprisoned by Sycorax. Because Ariel has lost or suppressed anger and hatred, he has also been robbed of the capacity for rebellion against his master/owner. It is he, Prospero notes, who has designated himself slave. He has taken upon himself one of Shakespeare’s most degrading epithets. He has been shown his place and, if Prospero is to be believed in this regard, has virtually embraced it. For it is, clearly, by loyal and unquestioning slavery to the will and whim of his master, that Ariel will recover his freedom.

---

<sup>15</sup>*The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Orgel, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 1.2.269–71. Subsequent references are to this edition.

If one might project forward into an imagined future that lies beyond the play one might well imagine that Ariel in retrospect has envied Caliban's continued resistance to tyranny. For Caliban's integrity remains intact at the end, while Ariel's is compromised by unwilling compliance and cooperation with his tyrant. Ironically, the outcome of enslavement is the same for both. Having served the purposes of the magician-slaveowner, both receive manumission.

The word 'slave,' though sometimes capable of a neutral usage in Shakespeare, is overwhelmingly a term of abuse and is quite comfortably coupled with other abusive terms of which I here supply a random sampling: "drunken" (*Comedy of Errors*), "mindless" (*Winter's Tale*), "cold-blooded" (*King John*), "rascally" (*2 Henry IV*), "devilish" (*Richard III*), "unhallowed" (*Titus Andronicus*) and so on. In *The Tempest*, the adjectives which precede 'slave' and which are applied to Caliban conform to the pattern: they are, "poisonous" (1.2.319), "lying" (1.2.344), and "Abhorred" (1.2.350). This fact is in itself of interest. Having forcibly created an economic situation in which dependence on slavery formed a substantial part, and having then perpetuated the situation by the absolute suppression in physical, emotional, and mental terms of the enslaved individual or group, such slave-owners as Prospero turn the victims of their suppression into the *culpable* villains of their invectives. Thus, in the cultural lexis of the English world from which Shakespeare's slave-owners derive, the term slave is used of a person who is cowardly enough to prefer a life of slavery to an honourable death; when the word does not refer in Shakespeare to a condition of virtual imprisonment and servitude, it is a term of abuse. What occurs, then, is a situation which requires and comes to rely upon the subservience of this underclass of human beings who are defined as lacking the true accoutrements of humanity. Simultaneously slaves are then constructed as the appropriate victims of abuse because they have been compelled, usually under pain of death, to accept the position of slavery which the economic system into which they have been absorbed requires them to occupy and upon which, often enough, that economy has come to rely.

Caliban's resistance to slavery takes the form of a constant rage against the authority which oppresses him. The history of his enslavement has a pragmatic as well as a moral slant. It is never definitively established that he actually attempted to rape Miranda. Partly the mystery of this history exists because of the complicating problem of acquired language. Caliban has no choice but to accept Prospero and Miranda's constructions of events because they control the all-powerful tool of interpretation. Because they taught him language they are the arbiters of the translation of events into history. If they say that Caliban's attempt on Miranda's virtue was an attempt at rape, then 'rape' it was. Caliban simply lacks the words to interpret what happened in any other way. Caliban appears to accept Prospero's version by his gleeful acknowledgment:

O ho, O ho! Would't had been done!  
 Thou didst prevent me—I had peopled else  
 This isle with Calibans. (1.2.347–49)

Paul Brown notes that "Prospero's narrative demands of its subjects that they should accede to *his* version of the past" although that narrative "reveals internal contradictions which strain its ostensible project and ... produces the possibility of sites of resistance in the other precisely at the moment when it seeks to impose its captivating power."<sup>16</sup> One such "internal contradiction" is produced by the apparent absence of a permissible challenge to the version of the truth of "the right Duke of Milan."

The history of the relationship among these three island inhabitants is, perhaps, less clear than it usually is made to seem. Caliban states that when Prospero and Miranda first came to the island they stroked and made much of him and taught him to name things. In return for this kind treatment he loved them and taught them to understand the island.

---

<sup>16</sup>Paul Brown, "'This Thing of Darkness I Acknowledge Mine': *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 59.

Cursed be I that I 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. (1.2.339–44)

The apparent straightforwardness of all this is challenged by Prospero's angry response—"Thou most lying slave" (1.2.345)—but it is not precisely clear which aspect or part of Caliban's version is being described as a lie. A clue to Prospero's motive, however, may reside in the remainder of his speech, which invokes the hugely charged image of the violation of a daughter:

Thou most lying slave,  
 Whom stripes may move, not kindness, I have used thee—  
 Filth as thou art—with humane care, and lodged thee  
 In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate  
 The honour of my child. (1.2.345–49)

The options available for the punishment of this alleged virgin violator are multifarious and copiously precedented. Prospero could have killed Caliban, or sexually mutilated him (as appears to have been done in Peter Greenaway's film, *Prospero's Books*), or imprisoned him in a cloven pine. Instead, however, Prospero decided to make practical use of him: simply, he enslaved him and, as we vividly see here and in his next speech a few lines further on, taunts him with his slave status—"Abhorrèd slave, / Which any print of goodness wilt not take" (1.2.350–51). Thus enslaved, Caliban has become part of the economy of the island:

He does make our fire,  
 Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices  
 That profit us. (1.2.311–13)

Who fetched fuel, hewed wood or drew water before the enslavement of Caliban is not explained. But, now that Caliban has disqualified himself as a friend and proven his fitness only for slavery, Prospero has given himself both the moral and the practical edge.

Not only must Caliban now work off his debt to Prospero's society, but he must do so willingly or suffer serious penalties. He must strive, in truth, to be like Ariel:

shrug'st thou, malice?  
 If thou neglect'st, or dost unwillingly  
 What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps,  
 Fill all thy bones with achës, make thee roar,  
 That beasts shall tremble at thy din. (1.2.366-70)

It is this "malice," variously translatable as one motivated by rage, rebelliousness, hatred, or resistance that marks Prospero's failure to transform Caliban into a docile slave. But, perhaps, the most mystifying element of the speech is Prospero's apparent desire to transform Caliban into a slave who performs his master's tasks willingly. The example of Ariel indicates that the mere appearance of willingness would satisfy the master; the question that remains is which desire in Prospero would be satisfied by this appearance of willing servitude. The relationship of Prospero to Ariel indicates that his desire to understand himself as a kind master would be fulfilled by a compliant and grateful slave. While Caliban is not precisely a 'wild man' he possesses, for Prospero, some of the menace with which the wild man threatens civilization and which ceases to seem threatening when it is shaped by gratitude and 'willingness.'

Caliban threatens Prospero's lineage by what Hayden White calls "species corruption," a form of miscegenation that has been constructed by dominant cultures as a degradation of God's plan and which explains, in part, the universal demonization of the slave's group of origin:

Since at the Creation God fashioned the world and placed in it the various species, each perfect of its kind, the ideal natural order would therefore be characterized by a perfect species purity. Natural disorder, by contrast, has its extreme form in species corruption, the mixing of kinds ... the joining together of what God in his wisdom had, at the beginning, decreed should remain asunder.

The mixing of the kinds is, therefore, much worse than any struggle, even to the death, between or among them.<sup>17</sup>

Because he has been identified as a savage, Caliban is historically a valid subject of colonization. Normally, colonization was initiated because the sheer numbers of native inhabitants represented a threat to the adventuring colonizers as well as, for the more far-sighted, an illimitable source of cheap labour.<sup>18</sup> The 'primitivity'—one important component of which was their technological and military inferiority—of the native peoples made them subjugable. Enslavement of such people was merely an extension of the colonialist project when conditions indicated their unwillingness to comply with the subordination being forced upon them by their invaders. This process of moving from a state of dependency and subordination to one of absolute slavery describes precisely the history of Caliban's relations with Prospero. His enslavement through what the invaders—Prospero and Miranda—in their official history call kindness has apparently failed, as such enslavements must, while suppression has succeeded at least in controlling his access to the means of rebellion. It has not, crucially, succeeded in controlling his urge to rebel. Ariel, whose magical powers have been recognized as usable by Prospero, seems, oddly enough, never to have been subjected to domestication in the way that Caliban was before his sexual crime.

Caliban's curse affirms more than anything else that he is undefeated if bowed:

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. (1.2.362–64)

---

<sup>17</sup>Hayden White, "The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," *The Wild Man Within* 15.

<sup>18</sup>One of the reasons for the importation of African slaves to the northern hemisphere was their physical hardiness, relative to the native populations. These, usually 'Indian' peoples, proved susceptible to diseases and died in such numbers as to render them uneconomical. Transportation from Africa proved to be the more efficient method of acquiring and keeping slaves. See Richard Nelson Bean, *The British Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade 1650–1775* (New York: Arno, 1975) 8–20.

The words are spat at Prospero. Cursing is Caliban's emotional salvation; it contains and advances his wrath. Through cursing Caliban is able to express his resistance to Prospero—he has no other means. However, the second sentence carries with it the heavy freight of bondage. Caliban curses Prospero for teaching him his language. In learning Prospero's language Caliban has become enslaved to Prospero. In being compelled to communicate with Prospero and Miranda in their language Caliban tacitly acknowledges his dependence on them. He recognizes a greater previous freedom in not formerly having known their language. This is part of the lot of the slave: his being forced to absorb the language and, concomitantly, the values and cultural norms of the master. Choice has been removed. Caliban knows that he has been outsmarted by his own compliance in learning the language of his masters. He feels cheated and tricked.

We do not know what language Caliban spoke before the advent of Prospero and Miranda, but it seems possible, if not likely, that there was a language, for he was able to communicate with his mother, who in turn was able to communicate with Ariel. And yet, to Miranda, the noise that Caliban made was not language:

I pitied thee,  
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,  
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like  
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes  
With words that made them known. (1.2.352–57)

Any perception of the social arrogance of the position from which the speech emanates is a decidedly modern one, having to do with modern perceptions of colonialism and imperialism and the discourses which have sustained their political practice for centuries. More simply, European civilizations have historically justified the rape and plunder of non-European societies by the stated missions of Christianizing them and the heuristic project of providing them with some of the 'gifts' of more advanced civilization. Interestingly, however, Caliban's response is a bitter agreement with the sense of what Miranda is saying, and concomitantly a marker of the success of the discursive didacticism of Prospero and Miranda. But, of course,



it is only now, through the language he has been taught, that he can think of language at all since he regards it not as a means of perception but as a means of communication. Was his “gabble” language or mere noise? Was he capable of perception without language before the arrival of Prospero and Miranda? It does seem that the only language he now knows is *their* language. And he is utterly imprisoned within it.

The crucial absence of an article or pronoun before Caliban’s “language”(1.2.362) is a powerful reminder of the extent to which he is trapped into understanding in terms defined by his owners who possess him and possess his speech. Caliban does not accuse Prospero and Miranda of teaching him *their* language or *a* language, but language itself. Yet he may have known language before they arrived; clearly he possessed memory, by which he was able to distinguish between the sweet and the bitter parts of the island, “the fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile” (1.2.338). The sun was to him “the bigger light,” the moon “the less” (1.2.335). It could, of course, be argued that a dog would have known as much. It is curious, though, that with his remarkable mastery of English, Caliban does not here use the words ‘moon’ and ‘sun,’ a lack attributable, possibly, to the dramatist’s wish to represent his basic primitivity; but there is also something atavistic about these ways of naming sun and moon, as if they refer to a more primitive, older, and un-European way of speaking. Later in the play he refers to the sun in the curse, “All the infections that the sun sucks up” (2.2.1). The enslavement of Caliban is reified by his enslavement to the language of his masters.

## 6

The debasement of the slave takes a number of conventional but interesting forms. Prospero seems to have a stake in demonstrating Caliban’s slave-worthiness. He constantly adverts to the justice of Caliban’s low social position on the island by reference to his unfitness for human company. Caliban’s antecedents, for example, form part of the structure of invective by which the monster is devalued. He is, for example, “Hag-seed” (1.2.364). And Prospero first greets him with a related aspersion—“got by the devil himself

/ Upon thy wicked dam" (1.2.318–19). He belongs, like most slaves in history, to a defeated tribe, race, nation or people whose defeat is a cruelly syllogistic index of its inferiority. Indeed, *The Tempest* goes farther than many enslaving societies have done by insisting that Caliban belongs to a different species than his enslavers. This species difference, which has historically been the means of describing mere racial difference, has been one of the most powerful weapons of the oppressive group's demonstration of its superiority. By virtue of visible racial difference, the dominant group has been able to explain oppression as earned and the inferiority of the enslaved or oppressed group as just, often by reference to a divine plan that visibly and historically has valorized difference in terms of superiority and inferiority.

The evidence of that inferiority suffuses the slave's entire existence. Often (but not always) physically or racially different from their masters, the slaves' difference is translated into a physical or racial inferiority by the master group who, as masters, get to determine and construct such values as superior and inferior. The slave's normally presumed intellectual inferiority is a product of his having to learn and hence to acknowledge the discursive power of the slaveholder. The thingness of the slave, his or her innate capacity to be bought, sold or traded, enforced in both the slave and the master class the conviction of the slave's inferiority. The absolutism of Prospero's rule supplies a literary example of a situation that, according to Hindess and Hirst, never exists in reality—pure chattel slavery: "In Rome and elsewhere," they assert, "*pure* chattel slavery never existed in fact, for the law recognised the elements of personality in the slave and corresponding limitations on his master's rights.... These meliorations of the slave's legal condition on the part of enlightened Roman jurists, or, later in the Anglo-Saxon Americas ... reveal ... the nature of the slave's legal status and the social position following from it."<sup>19</sup> Caliban, however, as an isolated subject whose subjection is sustained by magic, is a fantasy slave: he has no legal rights or sanctioned expectations. He has been taught and has learned to accept his own inferiority to his masters. He never sees himself as other than a slave, one born to serve the race of Prospero. Thus, when he meets Stefano and

---

<sup>19</sup>Hindess and Hirst *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* 112.

Trinculo, he sees them not as liberators but as substitute masters who will treat him kindly:

'Ban, 'Ban, Ca-Caliban  
Has a new master—get a new man! (2.2.179–80)

## 7

Caliban's body, like the bodies of all slaves, is the site upon which his slave status is most vividly proven. It is the violence done to his body that is the source of Caliban's most bitter and excruciating rages. His physical enslavement is the root of his rebelliousness. It is not political freedom that he seeks, nor precisely liberation from servitude, but, simply, freedom from pain. Prospero is Caliban's torturer. The cramps and stitches and pinches and bone-aches and stripes are a Jacobean equivalent of electrical shocks and straws-under-the-fingernails treatment of the prisoner that Caliban truly is. And the fear of madness that Prospero has instilled into Caliban is a kind of psychological torture with all too many horrible analogues in the modern world:

His spirits hear me,  
And yet I needs must curse. But they'll not pinch,  
Fright me with urchin-shows, pitch me i'th' mire,  
Nor lead me like a firebrand in the dark  
Out of my way, unless he bid 'em; but  
For every trifle are they set upon me,  
Sometime like apes that mow and chatter at me,  
And after bite me; then like hedgehogs, which  
Lie tumbling in my barefoot way, and mount  
Their pricks at my footfall; sometime am I  
All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues  
Do hiss me into madness—(2.2.3–14)

The anguish and fear of madness and the loathing contained in the speech are compensated for (partially) in the mind of the reader who is sympathetic to Caliban by the spontaneous, instinctual impulse to reject tyranny contained in the single phrase, "And yet I

needs must curse.” That Caliban’s desire to resist is so deeply ingrained in him that the curses come almost by themselves is the only cheering thing in this dark misery that defines his life. We cannot simply extend historical imagination backward as, *perhaps*, Shakespeare’s audiences did, and see in all of this cruelty a just punishment for attempted rape. There have been four centuries of theory and practice of penology and jurisprudence to make us know that this is immoral and violent and unjust and we cannot merely cancel out this experience at will. Skura, reflecting on the political element in Prospero’s rage against Caliban, points to the “conjunction of psychological as well as political passion” motivating that rage. She notes that while a colonial politics informs the discourse by which Prospero rules, he still needs, at the moment when he erupts into anger (as he does when he has just bestowed Miranda on Ferdinand), “to repress his desire for power and for revenge at home, as well as any sexual desire he feels towards Miranda. Both desires are easily projected onto the fishily phallic Caliban, a walking version of Prospero’s own ‘thing’ of darkness.”<sup>20</sup> Prospero’s fear of Caliban and the rage by which it is expressed can be understood in part as a fear of his own illicit desire.

The complicating factor of this slave narrative is that Caliban is *not* the Spartacus of myth and history. Nor is he, to use a more familiar example, Uncle Tom. Indeed, his story is a challenging counter-example to that of Stowe’s hero. Where the beloved Uncle Tom’s whole personality is suffused with spiritual and physical beauty and Christian muscularity, Caliban is the slave it has been easy and usual to hate. He is angry, nasty, ugly and ungrateful. He has turned away—if Miranda is to be believed—love and affectionate treatment and repaid it with opportunism and violence.

Caliban, for all his physical and political bondage to his master, remains, in the end, outside the category of what Patterson calls “the ultimate slave.” His anger, destructive and violent though it is, sets him apart from the world that has attempted to contain him. The ultimate slave, Patterson contends, “is best represented in the anomalous person of the eunuch.”<sup>21</sup> In Ariel we find that ultimate

---

<sup>20</sup>Skura, “Discourse and the Individual” 60.

<sup>21</sup>Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 315.

slave. Patterson refers to the position of utter subservience and remarkable power enjoyed by Byzantine and ancient Chinese slaves among whom and their masters there was a frequent inversion of the power relationship. Part of the reason for the power of the eunuchs and their closeness to their masters, he argues, had to do with their “genealogical isolation, in other words their incapacity to reproduce themselves.”<sup>22</sup> Eunuch slaves were subject to contempt in all societies but, partly because of their social unassimilability, were able occasionally to garner power and influence with rulers simply because they were eunuchs. We note Caliban’s gleefully expressed wish for an island peopled with Calibans. The fantasy, represented and given voice as a vicious threat to Prospero and as an index of Caliban’s desire for power, is also strongly expressive of Caliban’s desire for community, for assimilation in a group or community other than the one in which he is enslaved. It is a desire given form in his sudden allegiance to Stephano and Trinculo. It is, additionally, a wild and wrathful expression of how little his spirit is tamed, how reluctant a slave he is and how unsuccessfully he has been reduced to slavery; the fires of rebellion still burn in him. The eunuch—and his analogue, Ariel—being incapable of reproduction, cannot realistically contemplate being reassimilated into the community from which he has been wrenched. His social function has been radically curtailed; his isolation has been entrenched by the mutilation of his body. Ariel, who labours so arduously in behalf of Prospero and who willingly, even gratuitously, betrays Caliban, his fellow slave, has no hankering for community. He is remarkably like those isolated characters in Shakespeare—Feste comes to mind—whose lack of direct connection to a community seems to be the source of a melancholy yearning for freedom without community. He is also depressingly like the eunuchs described in Patterson’s history, whose cruel social marginalization made it safe for their cynical owners to entrust them with unusual powers. Stephen Orgel describes Ariel’s “Where the bee sucks” (5.1.88) song as a “proleptic celebration of freedom.”<sup>23</sup> It is, indeed, a version of freedom, but it is also an image of a solitary, noncommunal existence.

---

<sup>22</sup>Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 319.

<sup>23</sup>*The Tempest*, ed. Orgel 193n.

Ariel's ethereality, together with the cooing affection his virtuosity occasionally elicits from Prospero, provides his readers and audiences with a notion of him that supports such descriptions of him as Earl Miner's (quoted above). Being of the air and not of the earth, he seems to be endued with bodilessness, spirituality, and immitigable delicacy. The magic he practises is supernatural and exquisite. The physical pain and suffering he causes others is represented as largely earned, and inflicted, anyway, at the behest of his master. In the cases of Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban, the agonies and sufferings they feel are neutralized by comedy and farce. The suffering which Prospero inflicts on the other survivors of the storm is cathartic and morally improving. But Ariel is a slave, a thing of use, and as such his will and desire have no currency except as a cruelly used incentive to perform. Prospero, the slave-master, determines what Ariel will do. Ariel's plight is to do these things as best he can; his only satisfaction must be his artistry, though Ariel, like Hegel's bondsman, seems to discover in his labour a form of self-expression and, in this narrow sense, of freedom. But, sadly, there is only one critic or arbiter whose evaluation of Ariel's artistry matters; that is, of course, Prospero. Ariel is a magician himself, the limits on whose practice are strictly circumscribed by the pleasure he gives to the man who owns him and the increased capacity for freedom that that pleasure may—or may not—supply. He is a reluctant, forced prostitute of his great gifts. The idea of the violation of Miranda is harsh and ugly and Caliban's part in such action is wicked and horrible. But rape and physical violation are, in different ways, political acts. They almost always are a means of hurting someone other than the actual victim. The rape of Miranda could also have been a direct attack on the tyranny of her father. His response of fear, hatred, and increased repression and violence against the would-be perpetrator indicates the extent to which Prospero would have felt himself damaged and hurt by it. The violent enslavement of Caliban is one effect of the would-be rape. But the enslavement of Ariel, even more complete in a way, possesses no such justification. It is an enslavement that is brought about by something simpler—the fact that slavery was possible and precedented. It is not revenge, after all, which motivates Prospero to enslave, use and control Ariel—it is a perceived need for a slave. And Prospero's need for a socially de-

stroyed, enslaved creature to carry out his program of punishment and public forgiveness outweighs the necessary obliteration of that creature's own social or individual freedom only because he has the power to make it happen.