Prospero in Africa: *The Tempest* as colonialist text and pretext

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No part of the house was stamped more clearly with his individual taste than was his library.

(Lochhart and Woodhouse, 1963, on Cecil Rhodes)

Most literate arts graduates are likely to understand what Secretary of State Shultz means when he asserts, in respect to America’s policy towards Nicaragua, that America will not become “the Hamlet of nations,” since most presumably share his well-worn reading of Hamlet as a character who (with fatal consequences) “could not make up his mind.”1 Remembrance of the ruined bodies scattered across the stage at play’s end feeds into familiarity with present-day Latin American political events to suggest that if a more aggressive Fortinbras is required to put Denmark back together, America is well-qualified to play that role. Shakespeare functions in such political transactions as an unassailable source of moral wisdom and common sense, as a touchstone not only of what is right and just but also of what is necessary and practical. His name lends both respectability and moral probity to the positions his appropriators wish to advance.

I digress at such length at the beginning of a paper on *The Tempest* because

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I will in the following be concerned with other, less conspicuous “rewritings” of Shakespeare and the consequences of such practices, and because I wish to emphasize from the start the ideological ramifications of producing readings and misreadings of Shakespearean texts. I borrow my working definition of ideology from Louis Althusser who writes that “it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that men ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there” (1971, 164). Viewed from such a perspective, Secretary Shultz’s statement about Hamlet can be construed as a representation of what he has brought to his reading of the play; as the product of what he associates (or thinks Shakespeare associates) with its title character, e.g. cowardice, indecisiveness. The political success of his reading depends upon its consonance with the way in which the play is generally read, which, in turn, can be traced to the way in which it has been taught or transmitted to its readers. And it depends as well on the compatibility of the literary prescriptions of British and American educational institutions with prevailing political views regarding American intervention in the internal affairs of Third World countries. His reading is not, in short, exclusively identifiable with the text of Hamlet itself, much less with Shakespeare’s own disputable intentions regarding his play. It is, instead, symptomatic of the ideological assumptions which produce it.

Clearly, a Hamlet who cannot make up his mind is very different from a Hamlet who has, for very good reasons, decided not to do what his ghostly father urges him to do and what, presumably, the less introspective Fortinbras would do were he in Hamlet’s position. Approached from this direction, Hamlet may be said to be about an understandably alienated individual’s attempt at self-determination in the face of a paternal imposition that presents revenge as a “natural” response to his dilemma and delay as an “unnatural” deviation from a social obligation which has taken on the force of a moral imperative. This latter Hamlet swims against an ideological tide that, oddly enough, appears not to have changed greatly in the 386 years since his play’s making. Were he the Hamlet authoritatively transmitted to a younger George Shultz and his far-flung interpretive community, it is at least imaginable that today’s Secretary of State might be affirming America’s ties to a Hamlet who chooses not to play the protagonist in a bloody vendetta, in the name of an America that chooses not to intervene in the internal affairs of another nation.

The scenario I have concocted clearly overstates the effect of art on those in high places. But it is not fanciful to contend that the reading and transmission of culturally privileged texts (and there are no western texts that are as privileged as Shakespeare’s) play influential roles in the development of those imaginary representations of the real world Althusser identifies as ideologies. This is not to suggest that texts like Hamlet are themselves free of ideology and, hence, bear no responsibility for the uses to which they are put. Indeed, Hamlet protests far too much against his own indecisiveness for one to deny the dramatic significance of so salient a characteristic. In a similar vein, I shall argue in the following that The Tempest is a responsible party to its successive readings and re rewritings insofar as it has made seminal contributions to the development of the colonialist ideology through which it is read.

There are, of course, many who would quarrel with the notion of a Tempest that speaks the predatory language of colonialism on behalf of the governing structures of western power and ideals. But there is another, nonwestern interpretive community for whom The Tempest has long served as the embodiment of colonial presumption. The development of “new literatures,” both critical and creative, in the newly independent nations of Africa and the West Indies has witnessed the repeated use of The Tempest as a site on which the age-old conflicts between colonizer and colonized continue to be played out and rehearsed. In most of these works, recent British and American attempts to problematize the traditionally stereotyped critical estimate of the relationship of Prospero and Caliban are resisted in favor of recuperating the starkness of the master/slave configuration, thus making it appear to function as a foundational paradigm in the history of European colonialism. In this process, writers such as the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and the West Indian George Lamming regenerate out of their own first-hand experience of colonization a conception of Shakespeare as a formative producer and purveyor of a paternalistic ideology that is basic to the material aims of western imperialism. Thus Ngugi, in A Grain of Wheat (1967), has a brutal but (in his own eyes) “well-meaning” British colonial functionalist plan to write a book on his experiences in Kenya entitled “Prospero in Africa.” The character’s movement towards this resolve is worth following in detail:

After the war he returned to his interrupted studies in Oxford. It was there that he found himself interested in the development of the British Empire. At first this was a historian’s interest without personal involvement. But, drifting into the poems of Rudyard Kipling, he experienced a swift flicker, a flame awakened. He saw himself as a man with destiny, a man poised for great things in the future. He studied the work and life of Lord Lugard. And then a casual meeting with two African students crystallized his longings into a concrete conviction. They talked literature, history, and the war; they were all enthusiastic about the British Mission in the World. The two Africans, they came from a family of Chiefs in what was then Gold Coast, showed a real grasp of history and literature. This filled Thompson with wonder and admiration. Here were two Africans who in dress, in speech and in intellectual power were no different from the British. Where was the irrationality, inconsistency and superstition so characteristic of the African and Oriental races? They had been replaced by the three principles basic to the Western mind: i.e. the principle of Reason, of Order and of Measure.

(Ngugi, 1967 [1968, 47])

What must first strike a critical reader of this passage is the seemingly caricatured nature of Ngugi’s portrayal of John Thompson. Thompson’s movement from professional detachment to “personal involvement” through the presumably old-fashioned medium of Kipling seems rather unrealistic, as does
his equally bookish adoption of a more practical estimate of the white man’s burden as taught by Lugard, under whom the British first secured Nigeria. Our credulity is stretched further when his refresher-course approach to British imperialism culminates in the “wonder and admiration” with which he responds to its success in transforming Africans into veritable Englishmen. Thompson’s virtually classic adjustment of his initial view of Africans as different and therefore unequal to the more “enlightened” position that transforms equality into identity — hence denying Africans the integrity of an otherness that balances the English claim to selfhood — also reads like a textbook version of inverse racial stereotyping. But Ngugi opposes here what may be termed aesthetic realism with a historical realism which he deftly employs to raise and resolve the charge of caricature. What the sophisticated reader might consider a naivety stretched beyond the bounds of belief is, in actuality, strongly grounded in western fact and fiction. Indeed, Thompson’s attitudes are symptomatic representations of beliefs that have characterized western encounters with the “Other” throughout the course of colonial history.

Thompson’s initial conception of Africans as both different and unequal, for instance, has an influential literary precedent in Prospero’s insistence on Caliban’s incapacity to master civil behavior. And it has a purportedly literal source in the stories of African intractability brought home by such Victorian explorers as Richard F. Burton: “[The African] is inferior to the active-minded and objective . . . European, and to the . . . subjective and reflective Asiatic. He partakes largely of the worst characteristics of the lower Oriental types — stagnation of mind, indolence of body, moral deficiency, superstition, and childish passion” (The Lake Regions of Central Africa, vol. 2, 1876, quoted in Brantlinger, 1985, 179). If one requires a more modern example of a “Victorian” attitude toward racial difference, one need look no further than the colonial writings of the otherwise progressive George Orwell (see, especially, his depiction of Burmans in “Shooting an Elephant” and Burmese Days). In short, Thompson’s naivety is as much a culturally conditioned and historically reinforced habit of mind as is the two Africans’ notion that to be civilized is to be British. That it seems so caricatured testifies to the absurd persistence of the colonialist stereotypes from which it derives. And there is more than a little irony in this being brought home to us by a latter-day Caliban with a far better “grasp of history and literature” than John Thompson can claim. Ngugi continues:

Thompson was excited, conscious of walking on the precipice of a great discovery: what, precisely, was the nature of that heritage? . . .

“...My heart was filled with joy,” he wrote later. “In a flash I was convinced that the growth of the British Empire was the development of a great moral idea: it means, it must surely lead to the creation of one British nation, embracing people of all colours and creeds, based on the just proposition that all men were created equal...”

Transform the British Empire into one nation: didn’t this explain so many things, why, for instance, so many Africans had offered themselves up to die in the war against Hitler?

From the first, as soon as he set his hands on a pen to write down his thoughts, the title of the manuscript floated before him. He would call it: PROSPERO IN AFRICA.

(Ngugi, 1967 [1968, 47–8]).

As Ngugi reconstructs Thompson’s enthusiastic development of his “great moral idea” of fraternity and equality, he again moves into the realm of caricature. In this instance, however, it is colonialist idealism, not racism, that is the object of his critical scrutiny. What makes Thompson’s otherwise laudable sentiments deserving of censure is, of course, the fact that they are just as ethnocentric as his racist attitudes. While the latter are premised on a belief in African difference and inequality consistent with an assumed sense of British superiority, the former start from an “improved” notion of African equality only to become “corrupted” by an assimilationist ethic which also operates in concert with an ethnic chauvinism (see Todorov, 1984, 42–3, 146). Caricature thus again yields to an incisive statement of the truth behind colonialist appearance, or, more correctly, of truth as the colonized other perceives it, independent of whatever unresolved mix of intentions may preoccupy the colonizer.

Although it may be objected that Thompson’s association of The Tempest with the “great moral idea” that is the British Empire is critically mistaken and historically inaccurate, what makes his apparent misappropriation of Shakespeare’s text both possible and plausible is his identification of the same with a series of other texts and events which it variously resembles, rehearses, and anticipates. In the complicated interplay of texts and observations that goes into the forging of Thompson’s project, Britain’s alleged success in the voluntary enlistment of Africans into military service recuperates Prospero’s failed attempt to civilize Caliban (that is, to have Caliban willingly do his bidding) in the form of a moral idea. Success on this front promotes the possibility of a second chance for Prospero in Africa. It promotes as well a second chance for the actual literary proponents of the great moral idea Thompson mistakenly (or presciently?) associates with Prospero. For it is Marlow and, to a greater extent, Kurtz from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness — perhaps the most influential colonial text in postcolonial Africa’s literary circles (see Hamer, 1984; Brantlinger, 1985b) — who fill in the outline first sketched by Prospero’s treatment of Caliban in The Tempest. However, Thompson never explicitly refers to Conrad, much less Kurtz who, if we allow literary history to supply chronology, had already tried and failed to apply his moral idea to Africa, and had revealed his own moral and cultural impoverishment in the process. Nor does he exhibit any awareness that the Africans who “had offered themselves up to die in the war against Hitler” had, in fact, like modern Calibans, been involuntarily conscripted. By means of such lapses in the logic of fact and fiction, Ngugi challenges the informed western reader to bring his “superior” grasp of history and literature
to bear on the gaps in Thompson’s argument but complicates the challenge by revealing related gaps in the reader’s own interpretive strategies. We know, for example, that it is Kurtz, not Prospero, Conrad, not Shakespeare, who employ the language of missionary idealism which occurs so prominent a position in nineteenth-century colonialist discourse. Such knowledge compels us to “correct” Thompson’s obvious misreading of Shakespeare by dissociating Prospero from his implied connection with Kurtz. But Ngugi is actually insisting on the validity of the connection we attempt to resist. He opposes our intervention by again making strictly literary history blend with colonial fact, rehearsing both on the level of plot by having John Thompson recreate Prospero’s failure to make a willing slave of Caliban in the colonial present, and by linking that failure to Thompson’s subsequently brutal treatment of intractable Africans in the manner of Kurtz.

A full appreciation of the intertextual complexity of *A Grain of Wheat* requires a broader knowledge of the novel than I can depend on here. But it should be sufficient to note that as a result of the Mau Mau rebellion, Thompson experiences a profound disillusionment with Africa and Africans. His disillusionment leads ultimately not to a book, but to an official investigation of his role in the deaths of eleven prisoners in the concentration camp over which he comes to preside. One of his notebook entries, made prior to his taking command of this camp, reveals the gradual emergence of the Kurtz latent from the start in Thompson’s conception of Prospero:

Colonel Robson, a Senior District Officer in Rung’ei, Kiambu, was savagely murdered. I am replacing him at Rung’ei. One must use a stick. No government can tolerate anarchy, no civilization can be built on violence and savagery. Mau Mau is evil; a movement which if not checked will mean complete destruction of all the values on which our civilization has thriven.

(Ngugi, 1967 [1968, 49])

As Ngugi presents it, Thompson’s identification with Prospero is motivated by an ideological single-mindedness that is not and cannot be careful about distinctions. Thompson’s inability to discern a break or juncture between the “moral idea” he associates with “Prospero in Africa” and his actions in Rung’ei is meant to serve as a representative instance of his culture’s limitations. “Civilization” is the privileged commodity in each instance, and what stands in civilization’s way is simply an obstacle to be surmounted or destroyed. It is in direct opposition to Thompson’s designation of European civilization as “the centre of the universe and man’s history” that Ngugi’s own ideological position takes shape: a position that reads into Prospero’s dispossession of Caliban the entire history of the destruction of African culture (Ngugi, 1972, 14, 7–11). That he advances, through Thompson, a reading of Shakespeare in which Prospero – the character who is critically identified with his playwright-creator more often than any other Shakespearean figure – is associated with Kurtz suggests an aggressive attempt to bring European assumptions of cultural superiority into unflattering contact with the history those assumptions have imposed on the culturally dispossessed. And, in choosing Shakespeare to represent those assumptions, Ngugi takes strategic aim at the one aspect of colonialism that continues to resist unconditional censure, namely, its purportedly high-minded intentions. In this respect, it may be said that if Thompson and Ngugi misread Shakespeare at all, they do so in consistency with the way colonial history has inscribed itself on colonizer and colonized alike.

One can attempt to free Shakespeare from these competing ideological appropriations by employing a developmental model to explain Thompson’s implicit association of Prospero with Kurtz. From this perspective, it may appear that Thompson’s initial identification with Prospero actually represents his identification with an early, idealist phase in western imperialism, and that his subsequent embrace of Kurtz’s “unsound methods” is representative of what becomes of such idealism in the course of colonial history. Working through this model would allow us to recuperate *The Tempest* as a historically “innocent” text that is corrupted by later historical developments. It would also allow us to construct an innocent moment in colonial history to which we could refer with the same nostalgia some historians bring to bear on their representations of early European explorations of Africa and the New World. But colonial history is no longer exclusively written in ethnocentric isolation by and for western eyes in a manner that privileges the glory of discovery at the expense of the people discovered. Nor does Ngugi present Thompson’s development in evolutionary terms; Kurtz is latent in this would-be Prospero from the start. For Ngugi, a Kurtz whose crimes are premised on an unquestioned claim to superiority is culturally and psychologically coextensive with a Prospero whose “high-minded” treatment of Caliban is premised on the same. And, by extension, a Prospero who can meditate “rarer actions” but actually executes rougher justice against his designated inferiors is coextensive with a Kurtz who would suppress savage customs in the name of his own definitions of what is human or humane.

What Prospero contributes to the possibilities of a Kurtz (or a Thompson, or...
a Rhodes or Stanley, for that matter) is a culturally privileged rationale for objectifying what are really always subjective representations of the Other, for presenting as facts what are really only fictions. Although no precise equation can be drawn between Kurtz’s unsound methods and Thompson’s murder of his prisoners, on the one hand, and Prospero’s “stying” of Caliban “in this hard rock,” on the other, each character’s actions derive from and focus on a representation of the colonized Other as “a devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick” (The Tempest, IV. i. 188-9). Roughly schematized, a psychological profile of the three characters reveals a movement from an ethnocentric idealism that founders on difference and defiance to an equally ethnocentric pragmatism that rationalizes violence as a suitable response to frustration. Each, moreover, rehearses a movement that may be considered characteristic of the European response to the colonial encounter. As Ngugi writes elsewhere, “In the story of Prospero and Caliban, Shakespeare had dramatized the practice and psychology of colonization years before it became a global phenomenon” (Ngugi, 1972, 7-11).

The Tempest, then, would appear to operate in concert with enduring colonialist assumptions from both Thompson’s and Ngugi’s respective points of view. For character and author alike, The Tempest supplies a pedigreed precedent for a politics of imperial domination premised on the objectified intractability of the native element. It provides a pretext for a paternalistic approach to colonial administration that sanctions a variety of enlightened procedures, ranging from the soft word to the closed fist. The play’s ability to fix the shared parameters of two otherwise opposed ideological positions should not, of course, obscure the extent to which The Tempest resists oversimplification and subordination to the ideological functions it has been made to serve. To clarify a point I have made above, in considering himself a Prospero in Africa, Thompson may be accurately reading his own colonialist condescension into a character but also misreading Shakespeare’s attitudes toward that character. The position which The Tempest occupied at its moment of production may not, for example, have been as decidedly colonialist as Thompson and Ngugi consider it to be at its point of reception. Paul Brown, in his recent demonstration that The Tempest “is not simply a reflection of colonialist practices but an intervention in an ambivalent and even contradictory discourse” (1985, 48), provides a comprehensive reexamination of the play’s position in its historic moment that is especially persuasive given the oft-noted lengths to which Shakespeare goes in endowing the play’s colonized voices with an undeniable grace and authority. And Francis Barker and Peter Hulme’s equally recent observation that “Prospero’s play and The Tempest are not necessarily the same thing,” and hence that Prospero is himself often the object of Shakespeare’s critical scrutiny, would appear to offer a crucial corrective to those who “identify Prospero’s voice as direct and reliable authorial statement” (1985, 199).

For his part, Ngugi presents Thompson’s identification with Prospero as a predictable choice, given the available possibilities in a colonialist canon within which The Tempest maintains a prominent position, along with such other seminal texts as Heart of Darkness. Shakespeare’s attitude toward Prospero is no more to his point than is Conrad’s similarly complex attitude toward Kurtz. Given Ngugi’s position as a politically committed African writer, The Tempest’s historical distance from Heart of Darkness is insignificant, Prospero’s difference from Kurtz negligible, insofar as each participates in a common colonialist enterprise that has seldom been known to make distinctions between its colonized subjects. Ngugi thus creates a character whose apparent contradictions are presented as symptomatic traits of a colonialist temperament that habitually represents its own inhumanity in the form of virtuous activity. Since contradiction is, for Ngugi, the characteristic state of Prospero in Africa, he sees nothing contradictory in the ensemble of texts to which John Thompson alludes and from which he derives. With respect to the problem of Shakespeare’s attitude toward Prospero, Ngugi would, then, appear to endorse Tony Bennett’s observation that “the position which a text occupies . . . at its originating moment of production is . . . no necessary indicator of the positions which it may subsequently come to occupy in different historical and political contexts;” and that it is “not a question of what texts mean but of what they might be made to mean politically” (1982, 229). For Ngugi, a historically or critically “correct” reading of The Tempest that isolates the play “at its originating moment of production” would serve merely an antiquarian’s interest, documenting an alleged “intervention” in colonialist discourse that made no discernibly positive impact on the subsequent development of colonial practices. His own variety of historicity would, on the other hand, focus on all that has intervened between the text’s originating moment and the present moment of reception; it would thus focus less on the text’s status as a historically determined literary artifact, now open to a variety of interpretations, than on its subordination to what history has made of it.

Since history, as he perceives it, has made The Tempest a celebrated early example of white paternalism exercising its prerogatives on and against its colonial subjects, Ngugi employs Prospero as a figure who would “naturally” appeal to an idealistic Englishman seeking a high-minded rationale for his own and his nation’s imperial designs in the repository of his cultural heritage. In so doing, he offers an implied commentary on a seldom acknowledged contributor to history’s productions, that is, a scholarly tradition which has long prided itself on its professed objectivity and disdain for ideologies and ideologies alike, but which is responsible for the dissemination of the ideologically charged reading of Shakespeare that makes Thompson’s identification with Prospero inevitable. It is only reasonable to assume that Prospero’s appeal would be felt most strongly by someone whose estimate of his dramatic status in The Tempest was uncomplicated by critical considerations of the kind we have reviewed above: considerations which are, for the most part, products of the past twenty years of Shakespeare criticism during which time Shakespeare’s assigned status as “national poet” and as spokesman for British political and social ideals has been in the process of radical revision. Were we to review slightly earlier examples
of the critical literature on the play – not necessarily drawn from Britain’s high imperial past – we would find that Prospero’s dramatic status has, for the most part, been unclouded. The admittedly extreme example of G. Wilson Knight’s identification of Prospero with “Plato’s philosopher-king” and of The Tempest as “a myth of the national soul” (1947, 254–5) cannot be considered representative. But Knight’s ability to celebrate within the same pages of a book originally published by Oxford University Press (and reprinted at least six times thereafter) The Tempest’s “alignment with Shakespeare’s massed statements elsewhere in definition of true sovereignty and . . . of British destiny” and, in respect to that destiny, British colonization – “especially [Britain’s] will to raise savage peoples from superstition and blood-sacrifice, taboos and witchcraft and the attendant fears and slaveries, to a more enlightened existence” – strongly suggests the availability and staying power of such ideas. Were we to look further afield, into the domain of American Shakespeare criticism, we would find equally conspicuous examples of the ways in which Prospero’s dramatic burdens – vis à vis his usurping brother, Antonio; the “foul conspiracy” of Caliban and friends, etc. – have been traditionally privileged at the expense of the burdens actually carried in the play by Ariel, Caliban, and Ferdinand. 10 We observe here, as in the previous example, that an ethnocentric scholarly community has generally discerned in an ethnocentric Prospero the mirror image of its own self-involvement and obliviousness to the claims of an Other who does not really seem to inhabit the same dimension of existence as itself.

Academic scholarship is not, of course, the sole mediator between The Tempest’s moment of production and the modern moment of its reception. As should be obvious from the example of Wilson Knight, the ideological position of the scholarly community itself, with respect to works like The Tempest, has been largely shaped by its understandably one-sided acquaintance with colonial history. For many members of that community, colonial history has presented itself (as in the case of the young Joseph Conrad) in the form of a succession of romantic exploration narratives that celebrate the courage and daring of adventurers in the wilds of Africa and the south Pacific, while only superficially portraying the lives of indigenous peoples (which are frequently presented with less regard than the authors lavish on the local landscapes; see Pratt, 1985). That such a mode of transmission should eventuate in the racial chauvinism of a Thompson or the nationalism of Wilson Knight is not surprising. But it is one of the many ironies of colonial history that the reading of The Tempest I have attributed to Ngugi also appears to draw heavily from the same literary and historical matrix that compels Thompson to effect the imaginative transfer of Prospero from Shakespeare’s fictically cross-referenced island to Africa. 11

The Tempest’s capacity to make a significant intervention in the formation of colonialist discourse and in the development of colonialist practices was, I believe, inherited from the start by the play’s generic resemblances to and rehearsals of contemporary reports of colonial encounters. 12 Indeed, the play’s very participation in this formative moment through the medium of Prospero’s appropriation of Caliban’s island, and his act’s perceived consistency with the colonial ventures of a Raleigh and the partisan writings of the Hakluyts, can be said to have condemned the play to participate also in that discourse’s evolution and eventual rigidification in the imperial moment of Britain’s colonization of Africa. It is, of course, in the nature of colonial encounters that stereotypes are privileged at the expense of distinctions. Prospero’s unqualified assertion that Caliban is a devil “on whose nature / Nurture can never stick” resonates more strongly in a mind bent on self-justification and an escape from uncertainty than does his ambiguous and, finally, puzzling acknowledgement of Caliban as his own. But this is also the case because the assertion finds so many echoes in the literature and history of colonization, and the acknowledgement so few echoes that are problematic. In a similar vein, it will ultimately be the “unsound methods” of a Stanley that will prove more influential than the efforts of a milder-mannered Livingstone among practical colonialist considerations. An example of the kind of intervention such a figure could make in Ngugi’s reading of Prospero into Africa is provided in the following excerpt from Stanley’s exploration diaries:

We tried to make a camp at Kiulyu. . . . As we spoke they mocked us. When we asked them if they would sell some grain, they asked us if they were our slaves that they should till their land and sow grain for us. Meanwhile, canoes were launched and critics sent ahead to proclaim we were coming. The beach was crowded by infuriates and mockers. Perceiving that a camp was hopeless in this vicinity, we pulled off, but [quickly] perceived we were followed by several canoes in some of which we saw spears shaken at us. We halted and made ready, and as they approached still in this fashion I opened on them with the Winchester Repeating Rifle. Six shots and four deaths were sufficient to quiet the mocking . . . and to establish a different character for ourselves – somewhat more respectable, if not more desirable. We captured three canoes, some fish and nets etc. as spoil.

(Stanley and Neame, 1961, 12)

From its reminder that magic in The Tempest occupies “the space inhabited in colonial history by gunpowder” (Hulme, 1981, 74), to the comparison it suggests between Stanley’s “respectable” transformation of stolen goods into “spoils” and Prospero’s self-righteous transformation of Caliban’s bid for freedom into a “foul conspiracy,” there is much here that could negatively color any latter-day Caliban’s reading of Prospero into Africa. Yet Stanley can also invoke the idealist strain of colonialist discourse, and does so in a disturbingly apposite manner in concluding the preceding anecdote:

I had an opportunity also to prove that although able to resent affronts and meet hostility we were not inhuman nor revengeful, for a wounded man struggling to escape from dread decapitation – the common fate of the wounded in battle – cried out for mercy and the rifle was lowered and he was permitted to go.

(Stanley and Neame, 1961, 125–6)
In its own context, Stanley’s choice of the “rarer action” is clearly six shots too late for those who have just been taught a different lesson; it is a largely gratuitous gesture that hardly offers proof of the humanity he claims to anyone apart from himself and his companions. But placed within the broader framework of colonial history, Stanley’s lesson of mercy exemplifies that curious convergence of a mind convinced of the virtuousness of its intentions with a will focused on demonstrating its mastery through force, which characterizes the colonialist temperament from Prospero on down to John Thompson. This convergence of assumed high-mindedness with brutality is exactly what dissolves the differences between Prospero and Stanley from the perspective of the colonized Other, whose claim to self-determination (‘they asked us if they were our slaves’) is summarily denied in each instance and made the basis for his exclusion from humane consideration. In *The Tempest*, what appears to disturb Prospero even more than Caliban’s foiled attempt to violate Miranda’s honor is Caliban’s insistence on recalling his former sovereignty, his reiterated effort to lay claim to a history and inheritance which imply a state of equality at odds with his assigned status as slave. It is in the face of Caliban’s assertion that “I am all the subjects that you have, / Which first was my own King” (I. ii. 343–4, 346–7). And, similarly, in Stanley’s anecdote it is more the mockery of the African “infuriates” than their show of hostility that incites him to a show of the same.

It will, perhaps, be objected that in comparison to Stanley’s methods, Prospero’s punishment of Caliban is negligible in intensity and consequence, and eventuates in a pardon that is prelude to Caliban’s liberation. But in terms of *The Tempest*’s status as a privileged text in the history of colonialist discourse, it is difficult to recuperate this apparent exercise in enlightened paternalism as a historically insignificant action. Because Prospero’s brutality—like Stanley’s—operates out of an assumption of high-mindedness that differentiates itself from the brutality of an Other who does not make the same assumption or cannot claim the same relationship to “civil behavior,” it will remain privileged in the eyes of actor and civil beholder alike. Caliban’s unregenerate response to Prospero’s accusation regarding his attempted rape of Miranda — “O ho, O ho! / would’t have been done” (I. ii. 351) — and Stanley’s unqualified remark about the “common fate” of “dread decapitation” both serve to disqualify the Other from the consideration we would otherwise grant him were he to subscribe to our own standards of civil behavior. They both confirm the Other’s ineradicable difference from us and sanction the measures taken to assure his containment (recall Wilson Knight’s remarks about blood sacrifice). We should, moreover, notice that an ultimately chastened Caliban’s acceptance of the pardon that succeeds punishment — “I’ll be wise hereafter, / And seek for grace” (V. i. 294–5) — actually serves to validate Prospero’s procedures from the victim’s perspective, thus making the duly conditioned slave a willing accomplice in a system of domination that has come to seem natural. Wisdom, for Caliban, has now become synonymous with complete acquiescence to Prospero’s early claim to cultural superiority (cf. Cohen, 1985, 400). In this respect, Shakespeare’s staged fantasy establishes the parameters of a colonialist procedure Stanley will rehearse with a rougher magic in Africa; and it produces exactly that effect on the Other Stanley aims at in his lesson.14

I am not suggesting here that Stanley needed *The Tempest* as a pretext either for his brutality or for the lesson in moral superiority that succeeds it, anymore than I suggest in my epigraph that Cecil Rhodes’s attachment to his library was modeled on Prospero’s attachment to his books. My point is that the well-advertised colonialist methods of men like Stanley and Rhodes — to the extent that they resemble and rehearse the actions and rhetoric of Prospero— have the effect of valorizing what they resemble and rehearse, and of dissolving distinction into identification. And these effects will be felt more strongly in those readings of *The Tempest* which are motivated and informed by the culturally divisive history of colonization than in those which maintain a critical distance from ideological polarization. As the West Indian George Lamming writes:

I cannot read *The Tempest* without recalling the adventure of those voyages reported by Hakluyt; and when I remember the voyages and the particular period in African history, I see *The Tempest* against the background of England’s experiment in colonisation. ... *The Tempest* was also prophetic of a political future which is our present. Moreover, the circumstances of my life, both as a colonial and exiled descendant of Caliban in the twentieth century, is an example of that prophecy.

(Lamming, 1960, 13)

In a more incisive vein, Derek Walcott has a character in his play, *Pantomime*, demonstrate that the specific form of colonialism takes in different places makes no real difference from the perspective of the colonized Other. Prospero is always master, Caliban is always slave:

For three hundred years I served you. Three hundred years I served you / breakfast ... in my white jacket on a white veranda, boss, bwana, effendi, / bacra, sahib ... in that sun that never set on your empire I was your shadow, / I did what you did, boss, bwana, effendi, bacra, sahib ... that was my / pantomime.

(Walcott, 1980, 112)

What plays no role in Ngugi’s depiction of Thompson — and emerges only at the end of Walcott’s play as a result of his Caliban’s overpowering insistence — is the possibility of Prospero’s acknowledgement of responsibility for making a “thing of darkness” out of someone who never really was his own. This is, of course, no more than a possibility in the text of *The Tempest* itself, one that has, moreover, occasioned all manner of critical dispute regarding its precise implications.15 On this account, we would do well to recall that the way in which *The Tempest* serves the competing ideologies of colonizer and colonized has, finally, as little to do with ambiguity as it does with whatever intervention
in the formation of colonialist discourse Shakespeare may have attempted to contribute. But it is also worth recalling that similarly promising examples of Shakespeare's possible departures from the colonialist rule have not been generally acknowledged by representatives of the colonized Other who have, in different circumstances, been willing to accept dissenting colonial voices as genuine interventions in a characteristically one-sided conversation. In attempting to extricate Shakespeare from the politically divisive functions he has been made to serve, we should not, then, be blind to the possibility that the apparent marginality of Shakespeare's interventions may also be predicated on their actual marginality in Shakespeare's text where departures from the colonialist rule—"You taught me language, and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse" (1. ii. 365–6)—always lead back to the same colonialist destination: "I'll be wise hereafter."

It is no doubt true that The Tempest has long functioned in the service of ideologies that repress what they cannot accommodate and exploit what they can. One consequence of this subordination of text to ideological transaction is that it is still a generally uneducable, bestial Caliban who survives the adjustments that have been made in Western racial prejudices; mainly a blindly self-righteous, authoritarian Prospero who presides in Third World inversions of the same. Yet the text of The Tempest continues to allow Prospero the privilege of the grand closing gesture; continues to privilege that gesture's ambiguity at the expense of Caliban's dispossession; continues, in short, to support and substantiate the very reading of itself transacted by the ideologies in question. It is in this respect, among others, that The Tempest is not only complicit in the history of its successive misunderstandings, but responsible in some measure for the development of the ways in which it is read.

Notes

1. For the Shultz quotation and for provocative remarks about political uses of Shakespeare, I am indebted to Donald K. Hedrick, whose paper, "Behind the Shultz quotation and for provocative remarks about political uses of Shakespeare, I am indebted to Donald K. Hedrick, whose paper, "How to Find Authors," was presented at the ideology seminar of the World Shakespeare Congress (West Berlin, 1986), which gave rise to this volume.

2. Some examples are: Lamming (1960, 1970) and Césaire (1969).

3. Two new essays which involve attempts of this kind actually move in two directions at once insofar as they consider the play's complexity symptomatic of its inescapable participation in the discourse of colonialism. See Brown (1985) and Barker and Hulme (1985).

4. In The Conquest of America (1984), Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes "two component parts" in Columbus's attitude toward the Amerindians which, he contends, "we shall find again in the following century and, in practice, down to our own day in every context in his relations to the colonized." The colonist either "conceives the Indians...as human beings altogether, having the same rights as himself; but then he sees them not only as equals but also as identical, and this behavior leads to assimilationism, the projection of his own values on the others. Or else he starts from the difference, but the latter is immediately translated into terms of substance or inferiority...What is denied is the existence of a human substance utterly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself" (p. 42).

5. A good recent example of such an approach is Hibbert (1982).

6. All quotations from The Tempest are taken from Frank Kermode's Arden edition (1958).

7. Each of these critics writes in the unacknowledged shadow of Harry Berger, Jr, who has convincingly exposed the flaws in an uncritical identification of Prospero with Shakespeare, but whose portrayal of Prospero's motivations bears a remarkable resemblance to O. Mannoni's classic depiction of Prospero as the prototypical embodiment of colonialist psychology. Where Berger observes that "Shakespeare presents in Prospero the signs of an ancient and familiar psychological perplex connected with excessive idealism and the longing for the golden age; a state of mind based on unrealistic expectations; a mind therefore hesitant to look too closely at the world as it is" and capable of exercising "violent repression" in the face of "the pressure of actual life" (1968, 258), Mannoni contends that "the colonial in common with Prospero lacks [an] awareness of the world of Others, a world in which Others have to be respected." And, he concludes, this lack of awareness of the other is often "commanded by an urge to dominate" (1964, 108). The difference between these seemingly overlapping points of view is that Berger makes Shakespeare an active partner in his critical distinction, implicitly assigning priority to Shakespeare's critical acuity, whereas Mannoni appears to implicate Shakespeare in the psychology of his dramatic surrogate.

8. Ngugi's thinking here is clearly indebted to Franz Fanon who, in Black Skin, White Masks (1952), eloquently argues against relative positions in respect to racism or colonialism. See, especially, pp. 85–91.

9. I choose the term "virtuous activity" because it was favored by another, more successful Prospero in Africa, namely, Cecil Rhodes, who, according to his biographers, "would often quote from Aristotle: 'The utmost good of man is the virtuous activity of the soul and pursuit of the highest virtue throughout life'" (Lockhart and Woodhouse, 1963, 203–4).

10. A good inventory of examples is supplied by Hallett Smith (1969), who provides an example of his own making in his introduction where he remarks that "[Caliban's] yearning for freedom is in no way respectable, since if he had it he would use it for devilish purposes" (p. 5). Another instance worth recording can be found in Norman Rabkin (1967). In the course of a seven-page commentary on The Tempest, Rabkin reiterates the oft-cited designation of Prospero as "a symbolic representation of Shakespeare himself" (p. 224); likens Prospero's maturation to that of Odysseus when he decides to leave Phaéton; and mentions Caliban only twice, once as the allegorical embodiment of the "brutal, earthy, fleshbound, treacherous" aspects of nature (p. 227), and later as a character whose "irremediable bestiality" exemplifies "certain facts [that are] finally and beyond the distillation of a single mind" (pp. 227–8). Apart from the revealing word which he employs to objectify Caliban's intractability in the face of an admirably flexible Prospero, susceptible both to change and growth (and which may also be employed to exemplify the critic's ideological bias), Rabkin's reading of The Tempest may be considered representative.


12. It is worth noting here that Shakespeare may have modeled his treatment of the colonial encounter on William Strachey's historically prior account of Sir Thomas Gage's successive encounters with the Virginia Indians which, as Harry Berger observes, "supplies a close analogue to Prospero's experience with Caliban" (1968, 261–2). In this account, Gage's initial resistance to any "violent proceeding" against the Indians ultimately ceases, after a particularly troubling example of the Indians' alleged intractability. To resolve "to be revenged" against them, Gages having now "well perceived, how little a faire and noble intractate works upon a barbarous disposition" (quoted in Kermode, 1958, 140).
14. See Barker and Hulme (1985) who throughout their essay try to "show how much of The Tempest's complexity comes from its staging of the distinctive moves and figures of colonialist discourse" (p. 204).
15. See, e.g., Greenblatt (1970) who, after entertaining several possible interpretations, concludes that "Shakespeare leaves Caliban's fate naggingly unclear. Prospero has acknowledged a bond; that is all" (pp. 570–1).
16. For example, Abdul JanMohamed (1983) makes a persuasive case for the "characteristic openness" of Isak Dinesen's colonial encounters in Kenya (p. 53). He considers Dinesen "a major exception to the ... pattern of conquest and irresponsible exploitation" (p. 57), not least because "she does not distance herself [from the native cultures surrounding her] through the notion of racial superiority" (p. 60). However, one should note that Ngugi, a native Kenyan, does not share JanMohamed's high opinion of Dinesen, as he makes abundantly clear in Homecoming (1972, 9) where he directly associates her with Prospero.
17. In The Stranger in Shakespeare (1972), Leslie Fiedler notes that some "exponents of negritude" actually make Caliban the "hero, not the villain of the piece," thus inverting "the racist mythology of their former masters" (p. 248).

Works cited

Fanon, Franz (1952) Black Skin, White Masks, repr. 1967, New York, Grove.