A COLONIAL READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST*

Shamsoddin Royanian, Zahra Sadeghi
Semnam State University, Iran

Abstract: *Colonization and imperialism are of those interesting critical conversation throughout the world and this study examines how English theater addressed, promoted, and at times challenged ideologies of colonization and notions of civility and civilization. The Tempest in regarded as a New World drama by many critics because of colonization and civilization debates presented on the London stage and depiction of the colonizers and the colonized to present and, at the same time, question those colonial debates. Shakespeare depicts the New World's indigenous cultures in an ambiguous way to both present and question the ideologies of empire. This dramatization of the "other" helped sixteenth and seventeenth century audiences to recognize New World indigenous peoples as different rather than uncivilized and reevaluate what they have read or heard of these native peoples. Shakespeare presented the contemporary rhetoric through the medium of the theater and helped audience to visualize the process of conquest and colonization. He helped to civilize audiences about the reality of colonization, civility, and the New World. This theatrical medium makes audiences to challenge those established stereotypes of the New World natives and understand them as different, not inhuman or monster, and ignorant of European language and cultures, but no incapable of being civilized.*

Shakespeare, in dramatization of the New World, neither support nor oppose the process of colonization but he tries his best to show both sides of the issues and let the audiences to decide whether it is legitimate or not. This ambiguous representation of both colonizers and the colonized encourages the audience to examine colonial debates in as objective manner.

Key words*: Shakespeare; The Tempest; theater; New World; colonization.*

Introduction

Although colonial discourses in England in the mid to late sixteenth century were in the form of discovery narratives and literary works but it was not until the early part of the seventeenth century that playwrights like Johnson and Fletcher dramatized these discourses on the stage. Most of the plays staged in 1620s were journeying across the seas and encountering other lands with new people and cultures. Civilization was always defined by West colonizers in a way to accelerate their colonization of "other". As it is stated in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*:

> The worlds represented in colonialist fiction may seem strangely empty of indigenous characters… the ventures and adventures of the colonizers, of white men, make up most of the important action. The available drama is *their* drama. Almost without exception there is no narrative interest without European involvement or intervention. (62)

An examination of the current colonial discourse as well as the role of theater in England provides a background with which to analyze Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. This playwright dramatized New World Indians in order to show the "other" to his audiences and informed them of cultural differences. It is better to analyze how Shakespeare addressed his nation's colonial discourse on the stage and his representations of New World Indians in order to understand how England interpreted civility and civilization during those times.

BDD-A19923 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:39 UTC)

New World and the Theater

England's interest in overseas expansion and its involvement in this matter increased colonization debates in literary texts. Rebecca Ann Bach in "Colonial Transformations: The Cultural Production of the New Atlantic World" (2000) discuses the relationship between English culture's expansion to its colonial regions and its cultural productions that each helps the expansion of another. England's status as an imperial center leads to cultural productions and those productions help and accelerate English cultures expansion and its constitution as an imperial power. One of these cultural productions is literary texts in the form of poetry, plays and critical writings produced responding to these colonial issues. One example of these literary productions is John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) which consists of many references to colonization by presenting England's overseas expansion with allusion to the danger of the "Bermoothas". The other example is Captain John Smith's "Virginia Maske" (1624) which is set in the New World and shows aspects of native peoples' life and their encounter with new culture which are all taken from Smith's personal experience with Native Americans. Other literary texts written in this area are John Fletcher's *The Island Princess* and *The Sea Voyage* which show the desires and demands of Virginia adventures and Ben Jonson's *Eastward Hoe*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and *The New Inne* that are about England's colonial expansion.

It seems that theater has been used as an arena to expose contemporary cultural, social and political issues and where these colonial and imperial matters were presented and discussed in front of large audiences. The audiences could see the New World and its inhabitants and observe how these native people react to new values and cultures.

As it is mentioned earlier, many plays in early seventeenth century focused on issues of colonization and civilization and directly addressed these issues on the stage but Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, although did not do that direct mentions is classified in the same group as others. There is no direct references to America or Virginia and colonies or colonizing in *The Tempest* but it is officially known as a new World play. Now there comes a question here that if this play does not contain explicit references to the colonization how it is known and analyzed as a New World play? Is it related to the popularity of Shakespeare which makes it possible to grant his works in any literal, political and social issues or there is something else which justify this classification?

Some critics like David Kastan refers to the Mediterranean setting of the play to reject any consideration of the play as a New World text. Barbara Fuches is another one who does not believe in New World reading of *The Tempest* and knows it as a factor which ignores the role of the Mediterranean in the play. These critics were right somehow that there are many aspects of the play that do not support its status as a New World text but we should notice the fact that connections between Shakespeare's tragicomedy and the New World colonial discourse are so noticeable that make many critics to discuss and debate whether or not this play could be considered a New World play and we should notice that of course there are some references to the New World such as Ariel's reference to "the still-vex'd Bermoothes" (I.ii.12) and Trinculo's reference to the English's interest in New World native peoples, "when they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lazy out ten to see a dead Indian" (II.ii.30).

Alden T. Vaughan in his "Shakespeare's Indian: The Americanization of Caliban" (1988) elaborates on the significance o the New World ideas represented in many of the characters in

BDD-A19923 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:39 UTC)

The Tempest: "Prospero represents domineering colonial planters; Trinculo and Stephano are prototypes of frontier riff raff; and Miranda emblemizes Anglo-American efforts to suppress Indian culture" (Cuesta 67). Cahrles Freg in his essay "The Tempest and the New World" discusses how Shakespeare might have been influenced by the travel narratives of the time and refers to the influence of New World ideas and images on the production of Shakespeare's play: "Shakespeare shared with Fletcher, the Bermuda pamphleteers, and others an interest in tempests, shipwrecks, and mutinies, an interest in exotic fish and fowl, an interest in natives and their offerings, in native manners and native music_ in short, an interest in the same matters that absorbed all the travelers of his day" (Cuesta 67). Based on different evidences and reasons these scholars state to prove this play as a New World text now it is possible and also essential to read and interpret this play, its setting and characters according to colonization debates.

The Tempest as a New World Comedy:

Many critics believe that Shakespeare's comedy is a representation of English New World comedy because of so many allusions to the New World inherent in the play. Although there is no direct address to the New World in *The Tempest*, but nowadays this play is known in the context of the New World. If we consider this play as a New World text, it is necessary to examine issues such as English ideologies of colonization, civility and civilization. This play dramatizes the act of conquest and colonization while calling into question the rightfulness of this act and represents the effects of colonization on both colonizers and the colonized. As an inseparable part of colonial discourse the "other" is also represented in the process of this play. All these mentioned issues are dramatized in Shakespeare's comedy and are going to be analyzed in this article.

It is not as easy task to restrict a literal work to just one area of discussion and as Charles Frey in his "The Tempest and the New World" states, to apprehend and create meanings of the words and passages of any play we, as readers, should get outside it. When it comes to Shakespeare's works it is interesting that even new modern debates are applied in their analysis. It has been a widespread discussion among critics who work on Shakespeare's works all over the world whether or not *The Tempest* is a New World play although there are so many allusions in the play which relate it to the issues of discovery, exploration and colonization.

Shakespeare was inspired by the narrative of Silvester Jourdain's "A Discovery of the Barmudas" to create the setting of his play and like what presented in Jourdain's work he used similar materials such as the storm at the sea and an uninhabited island. We can compare these two literary works in their description of the scene. In Jourdian's work the terrain is described:

> For the islands of the Barmudas, as every man knoweth that hath heard or read of them, were never inhabited by any Christian or heathen people… Yet did we find there the air so temperate and the country so abundantly fruitful of all fit necessaries for the sustenation and preservation of man's life… it is in truth the richest, healthfulness, and pleasing land… and merely natural, as ever man set foot upon. (Cuesta 68)

In *The Tempest* the island is described in a similar way by Adrian and Gonzalo:

Adrian: Though this island seem to be desert, ___
Uninhabitable and almost inaccessible, ___
It must needs be of subtle, tender and delicate temperance.

BDD-A19923 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:39 UTC)

The air breathes upon us here most sweetly. (II.i. 21)

Gonzalo: Here is everything advantageous to life.
How lush and lusty the grass looks! How green! (II.i. 22)

Significance of the New World is presented in Gonzalo's thought of civilization and that how he would govern this island:

Had I plantation of this isle, my lord, ___
And were the king on't, what would I do?
I' the commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; ricks, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty; ___
All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavor; treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innate people. (II.i. 24-25)

Shakespeare incorporates the New World context in order to show Gonzalo's utopian vision of the island. Gonzalo imagines this island under his command and believes that he can change it into a kind of utopia.

We can observe the literature for colonization of the sixteenth and seventeenth century in their description of the island and their reaction to the land they entered. As we all know, in a colonizing process there are two major players: the colonizer and the colonized; and Shakespeare, apart from establishing a sense of place, portrays these two major players of colonization. Prospero and Caliban are known as the best representation of figures of colonization in this play and an examination of figures of colonization in this play and an examination of these two characters is essential and helpful in finding how ideologies of colonization, civility and civilization are introduced and in some parts questioned in this comedy.

Prospero as a Colonizer

Prospero is a representation of colonizer because the first action he did after entering the island was to take control over the inhabitants of it, Ariel and Caliban. His action, assuming possession of the island, parallels the actions of the English colonizers. The other significance of his similarity to colonizers is his assumption of the New World natives that he defines them as uncivilized and even inhuman. Shakespeare also helps Prospero to give a stereotype figure of inhabitants and distinguishes these native characters by "type". He depicts Ariel as representation of indigenous people who are more cooperative and Caliban, standing on the contrary side of the coin, represents the more resistant Indians. With this view toward indigenous

BDD-A19923 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:39 UTC)

people, Prospero feels a feeling of superiority and forces them to be in his service for the fear of his magical power.

Based on what Frantz Fanon remarks about conformity of colonized people that "the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adaptation of the mother country's cultural standards" (9) different reactions of Ariel and Caliban have different results for them. Although both Ariel and Caliban serve their commander, Prospero, Ariel is regarded more human and rewarded for his service with his eventual freedom: "then to the elements/ Be free, and fare thou well" (V.i. 60)

As a symbol of resistant colonized, Caliban is among those non-conforming indigenous peoples who are treated like slave, known as servant and inhuman without any civilization of their own. Prospero's behavior toward Caliban is that of a boss toward a slave and forces him to do what he commands and if he disobeys he would be punished physically:

> Hag-seed, hence!
> Fetch us in fuel; and be quick, thou'rt best,
> To answer other business. Shrug'st thou, malice?
> Of thou neglect'st or dost unwillingly
> What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps,
> Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar
> That beasts shall tremble at thy din. (I.ii. 16)

Caliban id forced to comply with Prospero for the fear of his magical power but as a resistant indigenous person he protests the injustice done upon him and calls Prospero a tyrant and usurper: "this island's mine, by Sycorax my mother/ Which thou takest from me" (I.ii. 15).

Richard Hakluyt in his "Reasons for Colonization" discusses the many ways to utilize the resources and inhabitants of the New World: "If the people be content to live naked and to content themselves with few things of mere necessity, then traffic is not. So then in vain seemeth our voyage, unless this nature may be altered, as by conquest…"(Cuesta 70). Hakluyt's definition of the reasons for colonization justifies English colonizers usurpation of indigenous resources and peoples by representation of lack of civilization in Indians' and superiority of English men. Prospero, as a symbol of English colonizer, assumes himself as bringer of civilization to peoples who are avoid of civility and gives himself the right to take possession of lands and peoples.

Shakespeare's description of Caliban is that of a demon shown in Prospero's description of his slave: "A freckled whelp hag-born_ not honor'd with/ A human shape" (I.ii. 13). Furthermore, Shakespeare's choice of Caliban's name reinforces his inherently evil nature. The word 'Calibam' seems to suggest 'Cannibal' which is a concept frequently referred to in English travel narratives.

Trinculo's view of Caliban, while stumbling upon him in the woods, represents the colonizer's view of the nature of the New World natives:

> What have we here, a man or a fish? dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of not of the newest Poor-John. A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man. (II.ii. 30)

His assumption of Caliban's nature is based on the strange appearance of Caliban and is like to most colonizars' judgment on the nature and humanity of the New World natives. He even imagines the financial benefits he could gain by exploiting a marvel like Caliban when he say that "this monster makes a man". Shakespeare, using the colonial rhetoric of sixteenth and

BDD-A19923 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:39 UTC)

seventeenth, gives a picture of the New World inhabitants and colonizer by presenting Prospero and Trinculo's perception of Caliban.

Both Prospero and Miranda wanted to educate or civilize Caliban but both of them believe in inability of Caliban to be civilized and learn European culture because of his innately evil nature:

Prospero: Thou most lying slave,
Whose stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee,
Filth as thou art, with humane care, and lodged thee
The mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honor of my child.

Miranda: Abhorred slave,
which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! 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 endow'd thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
Deservedly confined into this rock,
Who hadst deserved more than a prison. (I.ii. 15-16)

The way others describe Caliban's characterization seems to suggest Caliban's inability to become civilized neither by nature nor by education. This portrayal of the indigenous on the London stage reinforces contemporary view of the New World "other", showing indigenous cultures different from European and therefore questionable and evil.

Sir George Peckham explains how to treat those resistant natives who don't cooperate with the colonialist's purpose:

> But if after these good and fayre means used, the Savages nevertheless will not bee herewith all satisfied, but barbarously will goe about to produce violence eyther in repelling the Christians from their Ports and safelandings, or in withstanding them afterwards to enjoy the rights for which both painfully and lawfully they have adventured themselves thither: Then in such a case I holde it no breach of equitie for the Christians to defend themselves, to pursue revenge with force, and to doe whatsoever is necessarie for the attaining of their safetie: For it is allowable by all Lawes in such distresses, to resist violence with violence. (Cuesta 71)

The same as what Peckham suggests is depicted in *The Tempest* when Caliban attempts to violate Miranda, and Prospero punishes him with threats, violence, and enslavement.

Caliban as a Resistant Colonized

The Tempest challenges other current colonial discourses by giving a critical discussion about the ideology of colonization and represents the issue of colonization by its examination of indigenous, colonized peoples. The interesting point about this play is that it does not legitimize or condemn any ideologies and their legitimacy. By dramatizing a "native" on the stage the playwright lets English audiences to ponder about the effects of colonization and the legitimacy of this act.The interaction of contemporary rhetoric and dramatization of colonization on the

BDD-A19923 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:39 UTC)

London stage calls into question existing colonial discourses and ideologies, and it is the humanization of Caliban which best dramatizes the debates of colonization for the audiences.
Caliban is a complex and problematic character who has both desirable and undesirable sides. While Prospero and his daughter believe in innately evil nature of Caliban, many of his other qualities arouse sympathy from the audiences. Deborah Willis in his "Shakespeare's *Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism" (1989) explains how Caliban's qualities humanize him:

> As "wild man", he is also a composite, possessing qualities of the "noble savage" as well as the monster. He is capable of learning language, of forming warm attachments; he is sensitive to beauty and music; he speaks_ like aristocratic characters_ in the rhythms of verse, in contrast to the prose of Stephano and Trinculo; he can follow a plan and reason. (Cuesta 73)

These qualities emphasize his humanity and even while audiences are warned of his violent and evil nature, they see him as equal to other humans and feel sympathy for him in some situations, especially when injustice done upon him by Prospero:

> For every trifle are they set upon me,
> Sometimes like apes that mow and chatter at me
> And after bit me, then like hedgehogs which
> Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount
> Their pricks at my football; sometimes am I
> All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues
> Do hiss me into madness. (II.ii. 30)

Positive qualities presented in character of Caliban makes audiences to reevaluate contemporary colonial ideologies and colonizers' perception of indigenous peoples of the New World. Unlike colonizers' attempt to establish Caliban's stereotype as a monster incapable of being civilized, audiences recognize that he is capable of being educated and his differences from colonizers stem from his ignorance of European language, values and customs. This causes the audiences to reevaluate contemporary colonial discourses and attitudes toward the indigenous peoples of the New World, recognizing that pre-Columbian civilization was different, not uncivilized, and the native peoples had different values but were not inhuman or savage. We can see that *The Tempest* helps civilize the audiences about matters related to the New World, its inhabitants and their cultures.
Apart from depiction of the colonizer and the colonized, the play tries to present and, at the same time, question existing ideologies of colonization. Shakespeare uses the genre of comedy to enact the contemporary debates on colonization for theater audiences and sometimes questions the legitimacy of the English colonizers to take the control of the island in the conversation between Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban in which Caliban decides to stop his allegiance to Prospero and start a new one with the more benevolent Stephano. He thinks that these newcomers or new colonizers will treat him better than the treatment he received from Prospero and promises his loyalty to Stephano: "I'll kiss thy foot; I'll swear myself thy subject" (II.ii. 31). Stephano and other courtiers' assumption of their authority and right to rule the island symbolizes the assumption of English colonizers who believe that because of their superiority they have the right to colonize the New World natives who are considered "uncivilized". Using comedy to present the debates of colonization, civilization and the New World, Shakespeare aims to encourage audiences to question their presumptions about these matters.

BDD-A19923 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:39 UTC)

Conclusion

Colonization and imperialism are of those interesting critical conversation throughout the world and this study examines how English theater addressed, promoted, and at times challenged ideologies of colonization and notions of civility and civilization. *The Tempest* in regarded as a New World drama by many critics because of colonization and civilization debates presented on the London stage and depiction of the colonizers and the colonized to present and, at the same time, question those colonial debates. Shakespeare depicts the New World's indigenous cultures in an ambiguous way to both present and question the ideologies of empire. This dramatization of the "other" helped sixteenth and seventeenth century audiences to recognize New World indigenous peoples as different rather than uncivilized and reevaluate what they have read or heard of these native peoples. Shakespeare presented the contemporary rhetoric through the medium of the theater and helped audience to visualize the process of conquest and colonization. He helped to civilize audiences about the reality of colonization, civility, and the New World. This theatrical medium makes audiences to challenge those established stereotypes of the New World natives and understand them as different, not inhuman or monster, and ignorant of European language and cultures, but no incapable of being civilized.

Shakespeare, in dramatization of the New World, neither support nor oppose the process of colonization but he tries his best to show both sides of the issues and let the audiences to decide whether it is legitimate or not. This ambiguous representation of both colonizers and the colonized encourages the audience to examine colonial debates in as objective manner.

Works Cited:

Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2005. PDF.

Cuesta, Ilia Mariel. "Dramatizing the Indian: Representations of the "Other" in Lope De Vega's *El Nuevo Mundo Descubierto Por Cristobal Colon* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*". Thesis Submitted to the Department of English, The Florida State University, 2005. PDF.

Dobson, Michael and Stanley Wells, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press, 2001. PDF.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 2008. PDF.

Frey, Charles. "*The Tempest* and the New World", Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol.30, No.1, (winter, 1979): 29-41. PDF.

Graff, Gerald and James Phelan, eds. *The Tempest: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*, 2nd ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. PDF.

Hadfield, Andrew, ed. *Amazons, Savages and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550-1630: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. PDF.

Leggatt, Alexander, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004. PDF.

Nixon, Rob. *Caribbean and African Appropriation of The Tempe*st. The University of Chicago, 1987. PDF.

Shakespeare, William. The Tempest. Pennsylvania State University, 1998. PDF.

BDD-A19923 © 2014 Ovidius University Press

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:39 UTC)