



# Race in Othello and The Tempest

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# Historical Context of Othello

- Performed by King's Men at the court of King James I on November 1, 1604.
- Tragic Era of Writing: *Hamlet* (1600), *King Lear* (1604–5), *Macbeth* (1606), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–7)
- Wars between Venice and Turkey were important in late 16<sup>th</sup> century—Battle of Lepanto, 1571
- Racial Context:  
<https://global.oup.com/academic/category/arts-and-humanities/literature/shakespeare/race/?cc=us&lang=en&>

# Moor and Race

- Moor today describes the Arab-Islamic inhabitants of Spain who invaded Spain from N. Africa in 8<sup>th</sup> Century.
- In Elizabethan era, it denotes African, Muslim, and above all, outsider
- Iago is bothered by the race of Othello and envies his success
- Desdemona's father also expresses racist objections to their marriage.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1hPm2iWrks>

# Moorish Characters from Era

- The most stereotypical and racist depiction of an African character is Aaron, the villain of Shakespeare's early play *Titus Andronicus*.
- Aaron is the opposite of Othello: he is lecherous, cunning, and vicious; his last words are "If one good deed in all my life I did / I do repent it to my very soul" (*Titus Andronicus*, V.iii.188–189).
- Othello is admired by most of Venice and all of the court. He is brave, loyal, and driven by a desire for Honor. He truly loves Desdemona.
- In contrast, Iago describes Othello as beastly, vicious, and ignorant, using racist terms and analogies.

# Race and Sex

- Many of the racist statements of Iago are in the context of sex: to Brabantio, “You have lost half your soul; even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe. Arise...or else the Devil will make a grandsire of you.” I.1.95
- I.1.125 “You’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you’ll have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have courses for cousins, and jennets for Germans.”
- 130: “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.”

## Theme of False Appearances

- Introduced by Iago: 1.3.426ff “I hate the **Moor**, and it is thought abroad that **twixt my sheets has done my office**. I know not if it be true, but I for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety. He holds me well. The better shall my purpose work on him....The Moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose as **asses** are. I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.”

# Conclusions on Othello

- Othello is jealous, impulsive, naive and passionate
- His character rises above a stereotype or a caricature—although Iago and Brabantio see him as a Moorish stereotype
- His actions in killing Desdemona in a fit of rage reinforce these stereotypes
- Yet his genuine love for Desdemona—as opposed to lust, and his Nobility as a man and leader, stand in tension with the racial stereotypes

# History and Sources of The Tempest

- Composed: 1610–1611; first performed at Court by the King's Men in 1611.
- The play reflects travel journals of the era, including the accounts of a tempest off the Bermudas that separated and nearly wrecked a fleet of colonial ships sailing from Plymouth to Virginia.
- Jamestown founded, 1607
- Montaigne's essay "Of the Cannibals," translated into English in 1603.
- Anagram: Caliban and Canibal; Prospero and Oppresor

# Prospero: Benevolent Rule or Manipulative Colonizer?

- The Court (King of Naples, Alonso, Duke of Milan, Antonio, & King's brother, Sebastian) are amoral, Machiavellian betrayers
- Prospero is the wronged and moral representative of Court who works to put it back in order
- Yet Prospero DOES manipulate Miranda, Caliban, and Ariel
- Another view: Post-Modern interpretation— Prospero (white colonizers) and Caliban (native people enslaved and disenfranchised)

# Caliban as Social Outcast

- P: “thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself upon they wicked dam...” (1.2.383-4)
- “This island’s mine, by Sycorax, my mother, which thou tak’st from me. When thou camest first, thou strok’st me, and mad’st much of me...[and Caliban showed him all the good things of the island]...I am all the subjects that you have, which first was mine own king;” (1.2.396ff)
- <http://splash.abc.net.au/home#!/media/1575409/-the-tempest-two-sides-of-caliban>

# Prospero-Caliban, Master-Slave (1.2)

- **PROSPERO**

351 **Abhorred slave,**  
352 Which any print of goodness wilt not take,  
353 Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,  
354 Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
355 One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,  
356 Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like  
357 A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes  
358 With words that made them known. **But thy vile race,**  
359 Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures  
360 Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou  
361 Deservedly confined into this rock,  
362 Who hadst deserved more than a prison.

- **CALIBAN**

363 **You taught me language; and my profit on't**  
364 **Is, I know how to curse.** The red plague rid you  
365 For learning me your language!

# Caliban's Description of the Island reveals a genuine love (III.2)

- Does his love of the island suggest his rightful ownership?

- **CALIBAN**

135 Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
136 Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
137 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
138 Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices  
139 That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
140 Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
141 The clouds me thought would open and show riches  
142 Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,  
143 I cried to dream again.

# Low Class Characters: Revolt and Treason

- Caliban discovers the servants of the ship's nobles: Stephano and Trinculo
- He pledges his service to them like gods (similar to how the Native Americans saw the Spanish as gods)
- They plot to murder Prospero and become lords of the island
- High and low alike are possessed by boundless ambition and are willing to betray and divide society to achieve their ends.

# Prospero and Ariel

- In Act I Ariel reminds Prospero about his promise to set Ariel free
- We learn how Prospero set Ariel free from imprisonment in a pine tree
- Prospero: “If thou murmur’st I will rend an oak and peg thee in his knotty entrails, til thou hast howl’d away twelve winters.” (I.2.349-351)
- Threatening to do what Sycorax had done hardly shows Prospero to be kindly

# Reconciliation and Unit

- In the final scene, everyone is brought together by Prospero and Ariel
- The king begs forgiveness
- Prospero forgives his brother, but...
- The honest, innocent, and chaste love of Miranda and Ferdinand transforms the scene:
- Miranda: “O, wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world that hath such people in it!” (V.1.215)

# Ariel Freed and Prospero ready for death

- and in the morn  
308 I'll bring you to your ship and so to Naples,  
309 Where I have hope to see the nuptial  
310 Of these our dear-beloved solemnized;  
311 And **thence retire me to my Milan, where**  
**312 Every third thought shall be my grave.**
- I'll deliver all;  
315 And promise you calm seas, auspicious gales  
316 And sail so expeditious that shall catch  
317 Your royal fleet far off.
- *[Aside to Ariel.]*
- 317 My Ariel, chick,  
318 That is thy charge: **then to the elements**  
**319 Be free, and fare thou well!** Please you, draw near.

# Conclusion

- While Caliban and Ariel are not explicitly figured as Native Americans, they are natives to the island
- The play does re-present the Colonial conquest of native land and “natural” rule of people and place
- Prospero is presented as the gracious Colonizer who gives education and law and civilization to Caliban
- Caliban is presented as less human and uncivilized and unappreciative of the Colonizer’s “gift”
- Yet, Caliban’s love of the island’s natural beauty shows him to be the true native and Prospero’s misuse of Ariel implies that he may not be as Virtuous as he presents himself to Miranda and the audience