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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 2

The Tempest

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Shakespeare and the Mediterranean

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Mediterranean Echoes in *The Tempest*: the Rape of Miranda between Race and Politics

Anmol Deep Singh

Abstract

Critical works on *The Tempest* commonly acknowledge rape as one of the key elements in the play's prehistory, in particular, as the cause for Caliban's subjugated position. Nevertheless, this aspect seems to have been downplayed. Caliban's post-colonial construction as a mere victim has rendered him an innocent creature, but precisely the accusation of rape questions the traditional polarized construction of Caliban and Prospero as either good or evil characters. This paper aims to demonstrate how Caliban's attempted rape needs to be relocated in the Mediterranean cultural context, and reveals deep interconnections with Early Modern discussion of race, specifically of miscegenation, in connection with women's body as a site of political power. For this reason, Caliban's rape may be read as a highly connoted political act.

Keywords: *The Tempest*; the Mediterranean; rape law; race; politics

> Qu'est-ce que la Méditerranée? Mille choses à la fois, non pas un paysage, mais d'innombrables paysages, non pas une mer, mais une succession de mers, non pas une civilisation, mais des civilisations entassées les unes sur les autres . . . C'est plonger au plus profond des siècles . . . Tout cela, parce que la Méditerranée est un très vieux carrefour. Depuis des millénaires tout a conflué vers elle, brouillant, enrichissant son histoire: homme, bêtes, voitures, marchandises, navires, idées, religions, arts de vivre . . . la Méditerranée carrefour, la Méditerranée hétéroclite, se présente dans nos souvenirs comme une image cohérente, comme un système où tout se mélange et se recompose en une unité originale . . . Plus qu'aucun autre univers des hommes, la Méditerranée ne cesse de se raconter elle-même, de se revivre elle-même.
>
> Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée* (1977)

Introduction

It has become common knowledge that since the 1980s post-colonial readings have dominated the treatment of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Friedman 2013, 431), with the result of drawing a clear-cut, if simplistic, distinction between Prospero as the evil colonizer, and Caliban as the "emblem of oppressed natives" (Vaughan and Mason 1991, 144). Authors such as Hilb felt the need to write what he defines as a "Defense of Caliban",[1] while Bloom questioned the entire post-colonial reading of the play by claiming that "*The Tempest* is neither a discourse on colonialism nor . . . [Shakespeare's] mystical testament" (Bloom 1998, 662) and wondered why "feminist critics join in . . . Caliban's defense" (665). Apparently, Prospero's main justification for subjugating Caliban as a punishment for his attempted rape has been downplayed by post-colonial criticism. This essay aims at exploring precisely the role of rape in the play by investigating the play's historical dimension,[2] focusing in particular on the Early Modern discourse on rape and how it intersects with the issue of race in connection with the Mediterranean setting of the play. I will argue that Caliban's failed attempt to rape Miranda is racially framed and that Miranda, as well as Claribel's, potential sexual intercourse with a non-European man echoes the anxieties caused by the Mediterranean's reputation as a place linked to sexual violence against Christian women,[3] including issues of miscegenation (Loomba 2015). The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that Caliban's failed rape of Miranda read against the Mediterranean setting as well as issues of race and Early

1 Hilb in his essay counterpose to Prospero's accusation toward Caliban, and further notices that Caliban "should be declared innocent" (2020, 145).

2 In line with Jauss's reception theory, my aim will be to reconstruct the set of "conventions, expectations, and beliefs that existed at the time" (De Man 2005, xi), focusing specifically on rape. See Jauss 2005. The aim of this article is also in line with the 'hermeneutics of recovery', which "seeks to reconstruct the original context of production (the circumstances and intentions of the author and the meanings a text might have had for its original readers)" (Culler 2000, 68).

3 On how eastern Mediterranean was associated with sexual violence, see Öktem 2020.

Modern discussions of female bodies as sites of power, unveils its inherently political dimension.

1. *The Tempest* in the Mediterranean: Political Inflections in the Rape of Miranda

Located between Tunis and Naples, Shakespeare's island is firmly placed in a highly culturally resonant setting. Where it may actually be situated has been the object of much critical debate mainly in a postcolonial perspective. Sometimes defined as "Shakespeare's American play" (Richmond 2002, 28; cf. also Hilb 2020, 144), it has often been interpreted as an allusion to the colonial ventures that were taking place in the Early Modern period, thus locating the island "both in the geographical and cultural context of . . . colonial enterprises across the Atlantic" (Bigliazzi and Calvi 2014, 8). Hess, Brotton, and Kastan[4] have pointed out the obstruction of knowledge caused by colonial readings which have downplayed the "significance of the Mediterranean world for Elizabethan and Jacobean England" (Hess 2000, 121).[5] De Sousa as well wonders how "Shakespeare's Mediterranean has received relatively little scholarly attention" (2018, 140), although most of his plays are set in the Mediterranean. Hamilton's represents one of the first attempts to relocate the island within an Old World context "pav[ing] the way for *The Tempest*'s 'home journey' towards a European and Mediterranean context" (Bigliazzi and Calvi 2014,

4 See Bigliazzi and Calvi 2014.

5 This does not aim at dismissing the importance of the New World dimension of the play and the colonial enterprises that were taking place during Early Modern England, but at shedding light on the importance of the Old World dimension of the play. The play seems to point out both aspects, but the Old Word dimension has sometimes been minimized by post-colonial approaches. This essay aligns with Wilson-Okamura's argument that *The Tempest* "may not be a play about the New World, but without the New World, The Tempest would be a different play" (2003, 715). Nevertheless, if the allusions to the New World in the play have been the object of consistent studies mainly by post-colonial approaches, now what "literary criticism is . . . called for . . . [is] giv[ing] justice to the play's Mediterranean setting without neglecting obvious references to Atlantic exploration and colonization" (2003, 709).

10) by focusing on the "pivotal importance of Vigilian symbols and idiom in the play's configuration and understanding" (ibid.). Since then, the relationship between the *Aeneid* and Shakespeare's last play has become a major topic in criticism.[6] Even so, Hamilton's attempt focuses on the Mediterranean mainly as a conduit for an analysis of classical echoes and few studies have focused on other Mediterranean echoes.

It should be here recalled that Ferdinand Braudel defined the *mare nostrum* as a palimpsestic "vieux carrefour" (1999, 9) made of "non pas une civilisation, mais des civilisations entassées les unes sur les autres" (8) and where "tout a conflué vers elle, brouillant, enrichissant son histoire: homme, bêtes, voitures, marchandises, navires, idées, religions, arts de vivre" (9). Clement also describes the Mediterranean islands as "political, cultural, and religious crossroads" (2012, 115) and as "meeting points for different cultures and religions" (116), which turned it into "an arena of interaction, of encounters, and exchanges out of which the richness of Shakespeare's imaginative world grew" (Burke 2002, 136; cf. also Bigliazzi 2022, 16). While historically the Mediterranean has always represented "a barrier or frontier between cultures" (Clement 2012, 115), it has been noted that specifically in the Early Modern period "the Mediterranean Sea marked the borders between Christianity and Islam" (ibid.), rendering it a space of encounters and conflicts, "raising questions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, civilisation and barbarism" (Bigliazzi 2022, 15). This clearly applies to a period deeply characterized by cross-cultural awareness due to mercantile and colonial expansion, which resulted in both fascination and anxiety. As Loomba remarks, "contact with outsiders became more attractive as well as more threatening for Europeans" (2002, 6), a way to intensify "expressions of European and Christian superiority" (4) which would deeply mark "racial thinking over the next 400 years" (ibid.).

6 The relationship between *The Tempest* and *The Aeneid* has been the object of scholarly debates. In his groundbreaking work on *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Bullough omitted Virgil's epic poem from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*'s analogues and sources (Kallendorf 2007, 103). On the relationship between Virgil's epic poem and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* see Kallendorf 2007; Wilson-Okamura 2003; Bullough 1975; see also Bigliazzi's chapter in this volume.

In this light, the relocation of *The Tempest* within a Mediterranean setting allows an exploration of the play from a different perspective from the "over-confident" (Öktem 2020, 36) colonial readings which have flattened "the text into the mold of colonialist discourse and [have] eliminat[ed] what is characteristically Shakespearean" (Skura 1989, 47; cf. also Bigliazzi and Calvi 2014, 9). Starting from the fortuitous occasion of the return voyage from Claribel's political marriage which triggers the action, the play echoes Early Modern Mediterranean geopolitical preoccupations.

The brief and yet crucial reference to the absent Claribel "works as a dramatic strategy mirroring the contemporary diplomatically active, but publicly silenced, engagement with the Ottoman empire" (Bigliazzi and Calvi 2014, 10). The action unfolds within a context which bears racial inflections connected with her story, which, although occurring mainly offstage, before the play's beginning, is key for an understanding of the play's "cultural project" (Hess 2002, 128) and its racial politics, framing Caliban's failed attempt to rape Miranda. The king's "fair daughter" (2.1.66) has been given to the African king Tunis as a bride. The king's decision is not devoid of criticism: the king's courtiers "'kneeled' to him and 'importuned' him to not 'betroth' her to 'to an African'" (Kunat 2014, 311) and even the king's brother warned him (ibid.). It has been widely noted that within the Shakespearean canon the interracial, inter-cultural, and inter-religious sexual relations are regarded "with horror by several if not all the characters in the plays" (Loomba 2002, 41), as acknowledged by Sebastian's speech:

> Sir, you may thank yourself for this great loss,
> That would not bless our Europe with your daughter,
> But rather lose her to an African;
> Where she at least is banished from your eye,
> Who hath cause to wet the grief on't.
> (2.1.118-22)[7]

Nevertheless, the specific reference to Claribel demonstrates that these unions are permissible only with a political aim, and yet they remain problematic. Sebastian and Alonso consider the shipwreck

7 All quotations from *The Tempest* refer to Lindley 2013.

as the divine punishment for this doomed union. Claribel's marriage[8] reveals aspects related to the politics of the play as well as the "intricate dynamics of political power, race, and gender in European contact with Islam" (Öktem 2020, 43), where "the need for political and economic alliance makes the Tunisian king a legitimate husband" (ibid.), in stark contrast with Caliban's sexual desire for a white woman.

The stories of these two young daughters reflect to different degrees the sense of a potentially dangerous and disturbing Mediterranean space characterized by a sense of abuse and sexual violence perpetrated against Christian virgins (ibid.), besides appearing in romances of the time as an "arena of sexual pleasure" (Stanivukovic 2007, 63) often associated with non-normative sexuality; for instance, in *Myrrour of Knighthood* (1585), the English translation by Margaret Tyler of Diego Ortuñes Calahorra's romance *Espejo cavalleros*, the eastern Mediterranean is described as a space of homosocial and homoerotic bonding (ibid.). Stanivukovic notes that precisely the eastern Mediterranean was perceived as a place in "which expanding geographical frontiers meant erasing sexual boundaries" (62) and was often associated with non-normative or deviant sexuality. In McClintock's terms the area appears as "porno-tropic" (1995, 22; cf. also Loomba 2015, 56) for the European imaginary, that is, as Loomba further observes, "a place where Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears" (ibid.).[9]

In a period where the British reign was commercially and politically rivalling with the Ottoman empire, the eastern Mediterranean was often associated with sexual transgression and sexual vices (Stanivukovic 2007, 65), and specifically the "abhorred sexual sins practiced by the infidels" (ibid.), that is, sodomy. Timberlake, for instance, associates rape to sodomy for as

8 Hess notes that "during the early modern period the most familiar [cultural] barrier separating Christians from Muslims was marriage" (2000, 128).

9 This aligns with Loomba's contention: "for European travellers and colonialists the promise of sexual pleasure rested on the assumption that the darker races or non-Europeans were immoral, promiscuous, and always desirous of white people" (2005, 159). On the non-normative sexuality connoting the eastern Mediterranean, see Stanivukovic 2007.

both are "violent and misogynistic" (ibid.) behaviours and reports that the Turks "vse the sinne of Sodom and Gomorah very much . . . whereby the poor Christians that inhabit therein, are glad to marry their daughters at twelve yeares of age vnto Christians, least the Turks should rauish them" (1608; cf. also Stanivukovic 2007, 65). Meanwhile, accounts of Christian virgins victims of abduction, held captive in Eastern Mediterranean to be made wives to Muslims sultans (Öktem 2020, 43) were widespread in London. Popular books "attested the vulnerability of Christian women to Islamic abduction and enslavement in harems" (ibid.) even if some of them – like Claribel – were given by their fathers. Read against the play's topography, the historical and cultural background of Claribel's story resonates with the "hundreds of Christian maidens that populated the Islamic harems in this period" (36) who were the victim of abduction (Barker 2021), while Caliban's rape attempt on Miranda echoes the anxieties caused by the stereotype of the black rapist and the stereotypical image of the Turk characterised by cruelty, sexual aggression, perversion, lewdness, and degeneracy (Tiryakioglu 2015, 22-5) – depravations very much in line with the Mediterranean context.[10]

There is a shared consensus that the failed sexual assault on Miranda constitutes one of the key elements in the prehistory[11] of the play and that rape is a topic which permeates the play (Orgel 1984, 85).[12] Nevertheless, little research has been dedicated to it. As already recalled, in current criticism, Prospero has become the "prototypical English colonizer" (Brotton 2004, 30) and Caliban the

10 "The theatrical representations of Turks and Moors [as negative characters] became predominant on the theater stage when the Ottoman Empire was expanding rapidly and when Islamic power was posing a sustained threat to Christian Europe" (Tiryakioglu 2015, II).

11 Rape appears to be a central and key element in the play, nevertheless it is not staged and consequently the audience can rely only on Prospero's account. Di Maio quoting Catty notes that "although physical rape was central in the plots, it posed problems in terms of staging, for sexual representations would not be allowed. Thus, rape scenes 'must take place off-stage, and therefore between scenes'" (Catty 1999, 208; cf. Di Maio 2023, 184).

12 Orgel argues that even Ferdinand engages with "submerged fantasies of rape" (Orgel 1984, 5) in 4.1.

"emblem of oppressed natives" (Vaughan and Mason 1991, 144) and an "African-Caribbean heroic freedom fighter" (Bloom 1998, 662). Bloom argues that *The Tempest* represents one of the "worst interpreted and performed" (ibid.) plays; in particular, he objects to feminist criticism allying with post-colonial stances in Caliban's defence (665). Critics such as Valdivieso a.o. observe the shared subjugated condition of Caliban and Miranda: "Prospero is not only the white imperialist who subjugates the native islander; he is also the patriarch who uses his daughter for his own purposes… In general, we can say that feminist critics have been much more sensitive to the subjugation of Caliban than materialist critics have been attentive to the subjugation of Miranda in particular and women in general in this play" (1998, 301). On the other hand, recent feminist criticism has alerted us on the implications of rape,[13] and yet Caliban's failed rape of Miranda has never been placed centre stage and has been looked at as Prospero's excuse to justify his rule. Nevertheless, it is precisely the master/servant dichotomy alongside its correlates that is destabilized in the play: Caliban is a victim of Prospero's power but at the same time he is also the offender, the perpetrator of violence. This invites us to revise the common vision of Caliban as an exclusively innocent victim.

It has been argued that Caliban's ignorance of morals is the ground for his attempted rape, in other words, he "cannot be guilty of rape, since his actions were driven solely by sensual knowledge without rational or ethical mediation" (Kunat 2014, 309). All we know about him is that he is the son of Sycorax, an African witch, and, according to Prospero, fathered by the devil himself. [14] After his mother's death, Caliban lived on the island alone, thus

13 Feminist critics have recently addressed what has come to be identified as rape culture. If at beginning of this new inquiry "aspects of misogyny and sexual abuse . . . [have been] confined to activist spaces, academic journals, and select college classrooms" (Holland and Hewett 2021, 2) now these themes are beginning to enter even in popular culture (ibid.). In line with this new wave, rape in literary works has started to come to the forefront in the works of some feminist critics. See Holland and Hewett 2021.

14 "If we credit Prospero's account that Caliban was the son of Sycorax and the devil", as Fiorato writes, "we have to remember that in the early modern period it was believed that the progeny of the devil might have hu-

remaining an uncivilized creature, that is, ignorant of "human laws of common life" (Fiorato 2013, 123), until Prospero arrived and became his "schoolmaster" (1.2.172). However, while Miranda's education turned out to be "profit[able]" (1.2.172) (Akhimie 2018, 152), Caliban's was not. Throughout the play he is presented by Prospero and Miranda as "an uncultivable underclass of subhuman who can labour but who cannot improve" (152) even by way of *cultus animi*, that is, the "cultivation of the soul or the self through good conduct and education" (153), and, as I will argue, such inability and viciousness are traced back to his "vile race" (1.2.358).

On the other hand, if Caliban seems to be unaware of the ideological and moral implications of rape, he seems to recognise its potentially political effect: when Caliban is accused by Prospero of trying to dishonour[15] Miranda, his reference to his future lineage betrays an instinct for self-preservation, which, as primitive as it sounds, does have a political inflection: "O ho, O ho! would't had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (1.2.349-51). Within the typically patriarchal and political framework represented by Prospero's project, but also by Claribel's story, Caliban's conception of sexual intercourse and of Miranda's body as incubator for his progeny may be read as, *mutatis mutandis*, a failed coup. The Calibans he mentions would have likely outnumbered Prospero and what for Prospero is sexual assault, but for him sexual intercourse, looks like a way to establish political power. Furthermore, Caliban seems aware that in order to assert his dominium, and consequently his status as legal persona, he needs to presents himself as belonging to a "kinship structure where one can inherit and leave property to be inherited" (Fiorato 2013, 124). What may be sensed from Caliban's perspective is an attempt at self-affirmation through procreation and a primitive conception of ownership. This is his own way of redefining himself as the progenitor of a race and the possessor of the island. Moral law defining sexual intercourse as abuse has no place in his vision.[16]

man as well as less than human shape" (2013, 126).

15 The word choice made by Prospero is revealing of his own patriarchal cultural system but also of a Christian moral perspective.

16 However, it must be noted that Caliban seems to acknowledge

Prospero is aware that if Caliban's attempted rape had been successful, it would have impaired any possible plans of regaining his power through a political marriage of his daughter – a project which is not manifest from the outset but gradually becomes clear. According to this perspective, then, Miranda's body and precisely the failed sexual assault are key for an understanding of the play's political message, which makes the failed rape a highly connoted political act.

2. 'A most detestable crime': Prospero's Conception of Rape Against Caliban's

Ideas of rape culture in Early Modern England have been fairly investigated. Nevertheless, they were affected by the "anachronistic ideology of the 1970s and 1980s that placed rape in a transhistorical continuum of misogyny and male oppression and left no space for inquiry into the complexities of history" (Barker 2021, 121). Much of the currently available literature on rape in Early Modern England is based on two sources that have become ubiquitous in criticism: Nazife Bashar's *Rape in England between 1550 and 1700*, and the seventeenth-century anonymous treatise *The Lawes Resolutions of Women's Rights*.[17] It must be noted that these two sources have been disproven in recent years for being unrepresentative of how rape was perceived at the time. If the 17th legal treatise – being a trade

Miranda for her beauty: in the subplot of the play, where he advises Stephano to murder Prospero in order to obtain power over the island, Caliban speaks of "The beauty of his daughter" (3.1.91). Such exchange reveals how Caliban seems to acknowledge Miranda as a kind of object of pleasure and as an instrument of self-affirmation; this lets us catch a glimpse of Caliban's perverse morality, mainly based on an unbridled patriarchal and sexist vision of woman as a kind of object, as a kind of prize. In Early Modern England, lust was seen as a natural response to female beauty, and Caliban is represented throughout the play as a bestial creature incapable of controlling his drives.

17 "Speculation . . . still surrounds the origins of the manuscript" (Barker 2021, 92) even the date of publication is unknown; we only know that the earliest copy is dated 1632. On its authorship and the publication dates see Barker 2021.

book, "largely disregarded by the legal profession" (Barker 2021, 95) – has no legal authority and offers no reliable information on the legislation governing rape in the Renaissance, though it could have "a strong claim as a piece of social history" (115), Bashar's essay[18] interprets rape and particularly its rare prosecution cases as mirroring the patriarchal legal system of the time, which prosecuted it only if it affected inheritance and property arrangements. Recent criticism instead has pointed out the complex interrelated reasons that must be taken into account when approaching these numbers, which have been ignored by Bashar. Besides the obvious psychological and physical distress caused by the sexual assault, Barker underlines how in a juridical case what was at stake was a woman's reputation and the reputation of her family and often "punishment falling to a woman was usually greater than to a man" (2021, 24). Even ignorance surrounding sex contributed to this perspective as conception after rape was seen as evidence of consent on the woman's part (ibid.). Di Maio also remarks that:

> accessibility of law courts was way more restricted for women, who also had limited possibilities to file lawsuits on their own. For rape victims, appearing as plaintiffs was rather disadvantageous: the more women's sexuality was exposed during hearings, the more they risked being associated with adultery, whoredom, fornication and immorality. Not unlikely they would be alleged in their turn to be malevolent and revengeful and to seek the destruction of men. (2023, 180)

Under this light Bashar's assertion oversimplifies the way in which rape was treated, though she deserves to be credited with being one of the first scholars to address rape in Early Modern England.

In an age where women represented a "potential asset to be disposed of in an advantageous marriage" (Barker 2021, 7), a woman's loss of virginity, even if forced, meant the "loss of a marriageable daughter, spousal services, and possibly the wife's landed property" (ibid.). This affected especially the aristocracy since their "primary concern was for bloodline and inheritance, but the loss of reputation or the financial implications of bringing

18 On the unreliability of these two sources, see Barker 2021.

up a child fathered by another impacted throughout society" (22).[19] Considering that Caliban's rape would have deflowered Miranda – the daughter of the former Duke of Milan and therefore in principle important for the "dynastic and material fortunes of the family" (60) – as we have already pointed out, it would have affected Prospero's political plan of marrying his daughter to the heir of the kingdom of Naples. Although this should not induce us to think that Miranda is only a political instrument in Prospero's hands, not least because his punishment of Caliban antedates any actual plan of vengeance and recovery of his former political status, we should bear in mind that Renaissance women "were active in forging family and political alliance" (59). This is demonstrated in the passage where Miranda plays at chess with Ferdinand, metaphor of the quest for power, where she cleverly accepts her seemingly subordinate role[20]. Therefore, the love story between the young couple is instrumental for the play's political aims (Bellman 2011, 171).

The play's racial framework, given by Claribel's story, offers an interpretative key to understanding the play's engagement, as previously asserted, with Mediterranean geopolitics and foregrounds Miranda's rape. I have argued that Caliban's sexual assault intersects with political issues: not only does Caliban acknowledge Miranda's procreative function as a collateral effect of his sexual intercourse as an implicit political act, but within the Christian frame of the play her 'unchastity' would have undermined Prospero's logic of male patriarchal power in case an occasion for regaining it had ever presented itself. Caliban's failed rape of Miranda is in principle, if not in practice, an aggression against Prospero, a way for Caliban to assert himself through the propagation of his own race, against

19 In this sense, the play seems to recall *Othello* which depicts, as Drakakis has noted, the "nightmare of patriarchy", that is, the loss of one man's power over his property. In the early modern period, "domestic power" was represented by "the authority of the husband over the wife, the authority of the father on the offspring . . . and of the patriarch on his servants" (2011, 161, trans. mine).

20 This can be acknowledged in 5.1: "MIRANDA Sweet lord, you play me false. // FERDINAND No, my dearest love, / I would not for the world. // MIRANDA Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle, / And I would call it fair play" (5.1.171-4).

Prospero's. In turn, for Prospero, his daughter's loss of virginity is a potential threat to any possible attempt at regaining his political power through her marriage, insofar as Prospero is "the possessor and ruler of Miranda's political potential" (Cieślak 2019, 110). In either case, Miranda is reified: she is Caliban's instrument for self-preservation in a primitive conception of self-affirmation, and Prospero's means to achieve a 'civilized', patriarchal politics of power imbued with a Christian morality of female 'honour'.

3. Between Rape and Race

In 1.2 the idea of an exogamous relationship between Caliban and Miranda is explicitly addressed. The already mentioned reply by Caliban to Prospero's accusation of rape in 1.2: "O ho, O ho! would't had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (1.2.349-51) should be set against Miranda's following comment on Caliban's horrifying "vile race" (1.2.430), which raises fears of miscegenation (Loomba 2015). Shortly afterwards, in one of the few moments when Miranda is allowed to speak, she says:

> . . . Abhorrèd 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 endowed 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.
> (1.2.352-62)

Miranda finds in Caliban's "vile race" and his racial inferiority the reason for his capability of "all ill" and inability to learn how to improve himself. I will return to the mention of race in this

passage, but before that we have to observe the anachronism of the discussion itself, insofar as "racial thinking is quintessentially a nineteenth-century product" (Bassi 2016, 13). Nevertheless, as Loomba remarks, the "fear of being anachronistic should not stop us from investigating the history of racial difference" (Loomba 2002, 2). Furthermore, race nowadays "carries overwhelming connotations of skin colour" (ibid.), and "even today, race is a confusing term that does not carry a precise set of meanings but becomes shorthand for various combinations of ethnic, geographic, cultural, class, and religious differences" (ibid.). In the play, Caliban is never explicitly described as black or as a moor.[21] The only mention of his 'darkness' is famously made by Prospero in 5.1.330, but it has different moral connotations increased by the use of the word "thing" ("this thing of darkness", 5.1.271). This remark seems to confirm Caliban's "specifically African lineage" (Brotton 2004, 32).

Caliban's racial connotation plays a central role in the failed sexual assault on Miranda. Firstly, Caliban's Africanness is likely to have induced the audience to take sides with Miranda without questioning her word and the word of her father. As Barker points out, a "male judge and jury would be reluctant to convict a man simply on a woman's word" (2021, 123). In an age where a woman's voice was likely to be unheard and a woman had to demonstrate almost with a theatrical performance her innocence the audience was likely to side with Prospero's accusation and with Miranda precisely because of Caliban's race. In the 13th century Bracton's *De legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae* discussed how a woman's lack of consent had to be demonstrated. The legal treatise reports that a raped woman had to

> go at once and while the deed is newly done, with the hue and cry, to the neighbouring townships and there show the injury done her to men of good repute, the blood and her clothing stained with blood, and her torn garments. And in the same way she ought to

21 There is no clear description of Caliban in the play. Some authors argue that Caliban's name's etymology may be traced back to the "Romany word for Blackness, *caulibon*", though the most credited position is that Caliban may derive from Montaigne's essay which refers to cannibals. On the first position, see Hilb 2020.

> go to the reeve of the hundred, the king's serjeant, the coroners and the sheriff. And let her make her appeal at the first county court . . . Let her appeal be enrolled in the coroners' rolls, every word of the appeal, exactly as she makes it, and the year and the day on which she makes it. A day will be given at the coming of the justices, on which let her again put forward her appeal before them, in the same words as she made it in the county court, from which she is not permitted to depart lest the appeal fall because of the variance, as is true in other appeals. (Bracton 1632, 415; cf. also Barker 2021, 39)

The codified victim of rape had to comply with these features, if not, consent was assumed and consequently sexual assault could not be prosecuted by law. These features of "physical disarray" were even reproduced also in theatrical representation of rape (Pallotti 2012; Barker 2021).

The few recorded Renaissance accounts of a prosecuted rape reveal a justificatory attitude towards a white rapist,[22] yet the perception of rape perpetrated by a black-skinned subject was

22 In early modern pamphlets "the figure of the rapist is constructed in a way to raise sympathy in readers" (Pallotti 2012, 296), who in turn may "question the ways in which the justice system operates" (ibid.). For instance, in a pamphlet of 1688 a man accused having raped a nine-year-old refuses to admit his crime despite the evidence. The pamphlet "focuses on his 'excellent' (3) behaviour, 'much like [of] a Person of a more than ordinary Birth and education' (3), on his pious last speech addressed . . . from the 'cart' and on his final prayer, and it seems to insinuate that perhaps the condemned man was after all a victim of wrongful judgement, an innocent unjustly sentenced to death. The text insists on his religious attitude, as well as his firm refusal to acknowledge the crime he was found guilty of, though he confessed 'all manner of Sin' (3). It also points out that his qualities and the words he uttered 'did very much affect the Spectators, every Person seeming to be very Sorrowful for his Untimely End' (3), his rhetorical ability apparently obfuscating the plain evidence brought against him" (Anonymous 1688, 2 and Pallotti 2012, 296). In another case, in the narrative of a man found guilty of raping a thirteen-year-old child, the focus was not on the victim but on the reason that brought him to commit suicide (297). In modern days we would refer to this attitude as being part of rape culture, while early modern men "often claimed that sex, not rape, had occurred . . . hereby shifting the emphasis back onto female behavior and repositioning culpability" (Di Maio 2023, 180).

different. Pallotti notes how in Early Modern ballads images of women victims of a cultural other[23] circulated widely, thus locating the "responsibility for rape and violence outside the local white community and attributing them to a racial other" (Pallotti 2012, 194). The representation of rape attempt in these ballads also had political implications since it implied "a way to underscore the chastity of Western imperialistic culture" (ibid.).

Lastly, it has long been remarked that the female body was often used in geopolitical discourses of power as a visual and verbal trope for the exploration and colonization of the continents awaiting to be "deflowered" by the Europeans (Loomba 2015, 89), while "native women and their bodies are described in terms of the promise and the fear of the colonial land" (153).[24] Conversely, for a Western audience the dark-skinned native's sexual assault of a white woman, symbolically embodying European culture, was perceived as a threat for its symbolic implications (90), and Caliban's seems to be one of its earliest incarnations.

Blackness was usually associated with viciousness, ferocity, and evil in general. In Renaissance theatre, the Mediterranean "negative stereotypes" (Hess 2000, 123) were often used as a foil to the civilised nature of Western society even "before the staging of *The Tempest*" (ibid.). Moreover, as Loomba further notices, "[w]hite men were represented as 'saving brown women from brown men'" (2002, 155), which served as a philanthropic justification for colonial enterprises: colonizers, as would often be the case in the

23 In *A lamentable ballad of the tragical end of a gallant lord and vertuous lady* (1658-1664) a noble woman is raped by the black servant who "in order to revenge himself on his master's unfair reproach, imprisons the whole family, except the master, rapes the lady, kills the children and their mother in a locked tower of their moated castle, in the full sight of all the townfolks" (Pallotti 2012, 293). In another ballad "The black and heathenish rapist, driven by an aberrant violence, shows no respect for social hierarchy, no emotion nor pity towards any of 'his family'" (ibid.). Pallotti notes how the connection between aggressive behavior and dark skin was "revealing of the fears and anxieties circulating in early modern English society" (ibid.).

24 "The new artwork and the new geography together promised the 'new' land to European men as if it were a woman; not to mention the women of the new land who were regarded as literally up for grabs" (Loomba 2015, 89)

history of civilization, often claimed a 'civilizing mission' against barbarity and oppressive patriarchal domination. Likewise, in *The Tempest* Caliban's failed attempt to abuse Miranda is what causes his enslavement, while catalyzing Early Modern discourses on blackness and its manifold threats.

Thus far I have discussed how rape constitutes a key element in the play, mainly focusing on Caliban's failed rape. It must be noted, however, that also other – white – male characters do objectify Miranda less for procreation purposes, than for purely sexual desire. In this respect, Sundelson points out the exchange between Prospero and Ferdinand, where Prospero warns the prince of Naples against "break[ing] her virgin-knot before / All sanctimonious ceremonies" (4.1.15-16) as Ferdinand seems to "protest too much" (Saundelson 1980, 48):

> . . . As I hope
> For quiet days, fair issue and long life,
> With such love as 'tis now, the murkiest den,
> The most opportune place, the strong'st suggestion.
> Our worser genius can, shall never melt
> Mine honour into lust, to take away
> The edge of that day's celebration
> When I shall think: or Phoebus' steeds are founder'd,
> Or Night kept chain'd below.
> (4.1.23-31)

This dialogue according to Saundelson and Orgel includes "submerged fantasies of rape" (Orgel 1984, 5). Orgel further argues that in the play if "all women are at hearts whores, all men are rapist: Caliban . . . [and] Ferdinand". When Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban plot against Prospero to establish their dominion over the island, Caliban speaks of "The beauty of his daughter" (3.1.91) and tells Stephano that "she will become thy bed, I warrant. /And bring thee forth brave brood" (3.1.97-8). Whereas Caliban speaks of 'brood', Stephano sees her as a possible companion, as his queen and partner in his rule. Nonetheless, Miranda is objectified, seen as a kind of pleasurable prize obtained after and for the murder of Prospero. Miranda is not the main aim of the political coup, but

the idea of her beauty seems to give Stephano a new energy and reason to kill Prospero.[25] The white Stephano who acts as a civilized character toward Caliban, although coming from the same cultural environment and Christian moral code as Prospero, appears not to be civilized but simply wanting to objectify Miranda less for procreation purposes and more for sexual pleasure.

In conclusion, a simplistic good/evil binary consideration of Prospero as the oppressive master/colonizer and Caliban as the servant/colonized does not fully account for political issues referable to a more complex dynamics involving gender, rape and race. It is precisely the rape attempt on Miranda that destabilizes this dichotomy, a question inadequately addressed in criticism of the text. As I have tried to demonstrate, Caliban's failed sexual assault on Miranda needs to be read against the play's historical and cultural topography of the Mediterranean background: within that context and rape discourses belonging to the relevant Early Modern perspective on this subject, Caliban's sexual aggression reflects asymmetries of class, politics and race. The play's mobile perspectivisim on this question disrupts clear-cut oppositions showing the complexities of female bodies at a time when they were perceived as potential sites of power. This essay argues that rape in *The Tempest* may be read as a highly politically connoted act. To a certain extent and within a somewhat primitive system of power based on ideas of self-propagation as self-affirmation, as well as a logic of sexual enjoyment as male potency, Caliban seems to suggest an alternative form of political power, very disturbing for a Western 'civilized' society speaking the language of Christian morality.

25 It seems that Stephano is interested in Caliban's proposal of killing Prospero, in order to obtain power over the island but when Caliban speaks of Miranda's beauty Stephano seems to be moved by a new enthusiasm: "STEPHANO Monster, I will kill this man. His daughter and I will be king and queen save our Graces! And Trinculo and thyself shall be viceroys. Dost thou like the plot, Trinculo?" (3.2.99-101).

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