

“I do not lie”: Caliban as a Truthful Devil in *The Tempest*

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Abstract:

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Caliban says, “I do not lie” (III.ii.47). The meaning of this line is interesting to unpack because Prospero defines Caliban as a “poisonous slave, got by the devil himself/Upon thy wicked dam” (I.ii.319.320). The status of Caliban as half-devil/half-witch beast is complicated by John Dee’s *A Treatise on Angel Magic*, in which angels, demons, and devils are categorized and defined through their actions and language, including their lies. The use of this text adds an important dimension in understanding Caliban, his counterpart Ariel, and the truth value of their language in the text.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Caliban, Devils, Lying

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* Caliban makes the assertion that “I do not lie” (III.ii.47). My students often find this line to be amusing. After all, Prospero defines Caliban as “a born devil on whose nature / Nurture can never stick (Shakespeare 1973, IV.i.188-9). If Caliban is a demonic figure, then of course he lies; we can’t believe anything he says as he is a “bad” creature. *The Tempest*, though, is written by Shakespeare, who often masterfully inverts and turns inside out normal expectations. As such, we need to look at what Caliban says in conjunction with what he does and who he is in order to analyze if he is a “lying demon”, or if Shakespeare in crafting him makes him something new. From this perspective, what we find is that this character is a focal point for Shakespeare to play with dualities associated “good” and “bad” demons, and through doing this it makes Caliban far more “real” and frightening character, because, in the end, he is “just like us”, lies and all.

For the purposes of this article, I will be using as a background the book *A Treatise on Angel Magic: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks*, edited by Adam McLean. McLean notes that there are a variety of works, comprised on Mss. Harley 6481-86 which act as a “compendium of Western occult traditions about Angels and related spirits”, collected by a Dr. Rudd and based on the work of John Dee--mathematician, astrologer, perhaps practitioner, and advisor to Queen Elizabeth. I will, more specifically, be using Ms. 6482, *A Treatise on Angel Magic*, which

is "Of Angels Good and Bad: Their Degrees and Offices". The use of this text presupposes, as noted by Gabriela Horvath in *Theatre, Magic and Philosophy: William Shakespeare, John Dee and the Italian Legacy*, that John Dee had broad philosophical influence on Early Modern understanding of science and nature, including the workings of Mages, Witches and creatures, like Angels and Demons. Horvath asserts that this influence was pervasive as an undercurrent, or generalized understanding, about the nature of Otherworldly beings. It is from this foundation that I analyze the characters in the *Tempest* to see how they fit within and overturn stereotypes and, through this, form a commentary on spiritual dualism, especially in relation to truth values, in the play.

From the perspective presented in Ms. 6482 a *Treatise on Angel Magic*, Prospero and Ariel will be analyzed first and, once this is done, how Caliban fits within the framework. After situating what category of demon Caliban seems to represent, I will examine his use of language and begin to evaluate how he plays with the truth and the framing of reality through his language. As is not surprising, in the process of crafting Caliban, Shakespeare has an interplay between using/complicating the stereotype of the "lying demon" in order to show how this figure is very much like ourselves.

Framing of Prospero and Ariel

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare writes of an island ruled by the master magician Prospero. Prospero uses magic, aided by Ariel, to create the tempest that is the impetus to the action at the beginning of the play. One traditional view of Prospero is that he is a stand in for Shakespeare, while some scholars will say that he is a stand in for John Dee. If he is a representation of a real person or not is beyond the scope of this project, as the focus is more on Caliban, however, it should be noted that Prospero does seem to function in the text as a Magus, one who manipulates nature as a means of controlling the "world", the island which he rules and all of the inhabitants on it. Prospero's status as a Magus has been discussed by various scholars. Arguments include Barbara Mowat's discusses that the "pre-island Prospero" has "linked magic to intellectual study"; this changes when he is on the island to manifest as "godlike control over the natural and supernatural worlds", to a third and final stage at the end of the play as "pagan/enchanter brought [back] into the Christian world" (Mowat 1981, 284, 287, and 289).

The second stage in Prospero's development as a magic user (godlike control over the natural and supernatural world) is taken up by Karen Flagstad, who focuses on the interplay of identity and magic in *The Tempest*. Flagstad comments upon Renaissance views of the occult as a form of creation, noting that as a Magus who controls the island "there is a sense in which Prospero also 'creates' Caliban, who [then] returns to wreck vengeance on the visionary scheme of things which depend on his exclusion" (Flagstad 1986, 213). This sort of commentary is important because it frames Caliban as a "bad" and vengeful creature. Adam McLean, in his introduction to *Treatise on Angel Magic* notes that "occultists of an earlier time, especially during

the transition of the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, were strongly influenced by [a] prevailing current of dualism' (McLean 13); in other words, if there are good Otherworldly beings, then there must be bad as well. If one traces this perspective of dualism in the text, then Caliban, as bad creature, is the foil to Ariel, a "good" being, who is, as the cast of characters in *The Tempest* notes, an airy spirit. Within *Treatise on Angel Magic*, there are various categories of Otherworldly beings, specifically demons, starting with those of the air and going down to those in Hell. Those which exist higher in the air, closer to Heaven, are able to occupy this space because, although they rebelled against God, they were not so wholly committed to the Rebellion, didn't orchestrate it, etc., so, though fallen, they are able to exist closer to God than those who played a larger part in the rebellion and, thus, are more physically removed from Him (i.e. in Hell). Airy spirits are "second level" demons who often are recruited by Mages to help manipulate nature. For instance, it is noted that "these are they whose help the Necromancers" and engage in "operations of nature, do move the winds with greater fury than they are accustomed and do out of season congeal the clouds causing it to thunder, lighten, hail and destroy the grass, corn, and vines of the earth" (McLean 2006, 60). This sounds a great deal like the tempest that is used at the beginning of the play to shipwreck Antonio and the others on the island. Although Prospero might initiate the idea of using a storm, it is only with the help of Ariel that such a tempest can be conjured. One can see that Shakespeare is drawing from this undercurrent of categorizations and qualities of demons in order to frame Ariel in the play.

Framing of Caliban

Thus, if Shakespeare is using the conventions of Magus and airy spirits in his text to frame Prospero and Ariel, then what is Caliban? The first thing that is significant to note about Caliban is that he is a chimera. Prospero says that, Caliban is a "poisonous slave, got by the devil himself / Upon thy wicked dam" (Shakespeare 1973, I.ii.319.320). His father is a devil; his mother, Sycorax, is "wicked" and a "foul witch" (Shakespeare 1973, I.ii.309). This parentage has an impact on how the audience, particularly those who are more well-versed in the occult, would view Caliban. For instance, as noted in *Angel Magic*, section on "The Difference Between Witches and Enchanters", "though they [witches] have familiars and conversations with the Divine...they themselves scarcely understand" the meanings in these discussions" (McLean 2006, 137). A witch, though a dabbler in the occult, is not as skilled or knowledgeable as a Magus. This sort of perspective may be used in support to show how Prospero, being superior to Sycorax in power and importance, may be justified in taking over control of the island. Continuing this and by extension, this sort of argument also shows how Caliban, through his mother's lineage, is also inferior to Prospero and should, because of this, be subject to him. Although a modern audience may cringe at the argument of power dynamics just noted, they are common assumptions that were used to justify conquest and colonization in the Early Modern world and are reflected in the social dynamics in Shakespeare's play.

Although this power structure is the norm, Shakespeare does complicate the issue. Caliban may be part witch and part demon, but man has a dual nature as well. There is a section in *Angel Magic* which emphasizes that man may be seen as a chimera also:

Flesh is two-fold, flesh from Adam and not from Adam. Flesh from Adam is gross, because earthly, but what flesh is not Adam, it is subtle, not fit to be bound or comprehended...these subtle Creatures do differ in this from spirits, that they have blood, flesh and bones, beget children, speak, eat, drink, walk. Spirits do none of these...They are therefore a peculiar creature, and from their double nature they are made one mixture as any compounded matter of sweet and sour, or two colors under one species" (McLean 2006, 153-4).

Granted, in this description the "parts" of man are not witch and demon, but human and divine, so there is an elevated quality to man that Caliban seems to lack, but the mixture of two aspects of being is significant. Neither Caliban or Prospero is "pure" or "whole"; they are both amalgamated beings with part of one's nature being base. Perhaps this "likeness" is why Prospero has such a difficult relationship with Caliban. With Ariel, who is more fully and distinctly Other as a second-level demon of the air, the relationship is easier to define, the identity of the "Other" easier to understand. With Caliban, however, identity is something more complex as he is a blended being, just like Prospero and all humans are blended beings. Perhaps what Prospero despises in Caliban, then, is a reflection/understanding of the blended, including the base, nature in himself.

So, what "level" of demon is Caliban? With Caliban's sort of parentage, it is clear that he can't be a spirit of the air but he also is not damned to the underworld; as noted in the section of *Angel Magic* called "Of Angels Good and Bad, Their Degrees and Offices" he occupies the position of a "third-level demon", the sort of being (like man) which exists in corporal form, walking on the Earth, and, in occupying this space, interacting with humans. This sort of demon is one whose "principal and function is to persecute men and to tempt and allure men to sin, and thereby work their damnation" (McLean 2006, 60). Certainly, within the play there is content that can be used to frame Caliban in this way. For instance, Prospero's reason for describing Caliban as a monster and for his need to control Caliban with "internal pinches" is because he tried to rape Miranda and, of Caliban's own admission, "Thou dost prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (Shakespeare 1973, I.ii.350-1). Such a comment presents Caliban's intentions toward Miranda, intentions that clearly runs counter to her wishes, as unwanted and violent in nature. This violent nature is compounded with Caliban's desire to get Stephano and Trinculo to kill Prospero. In both cases, the behavior enacted by or encouraged by Caliban is a grave sin, and shows just how dangerous Caliban can be. Using just these few points as reference, we might frame Caliban as a monstrous character whose his actions are disturbing and reflective a stereotypical dangerous demon.

One might point to the relationship Caliban has with Miranda, Stephano and Trinculo to underscore Caliban as a physically and morally dangerous character, but in these interactions does he use language in a dangerous way? In another section of *Angel Magic*, “Of the Orders of Wicked Demons and of their Fall and their Divers Natures”, the classification of demons is drilled down further. For instance, there are classification of demons who represent false gods, impersonate miracles, and even are bad Genii. Within this classification system, there are two types of demons that Caliban might represent. The *Spiritus mendaciorum* are “spirits of lying...this kind of Demon deceives by their Oracles, divinations and predictions” (McLean 2006, 69). Going back to the introduction of this article we might consider not only the actions of Caliban, but also his exasperated outburst that “I do not lie” (Shakespeare, 1973, II.ii.48). One might question when Caliban says this if he is a reliable source or not; does he or does he not lie? Alfred Tarski, a Polish mathematician, in “On the Concept of Truth in Formal Languages”, focuses on a formula of “truth” values in order to deal with the Liar’s Paradox. In the Liar’s Paradox, if a liar says “I am lying”, and is lying, then he is telling the truth. By Shakespeare having his third-level demon, which is stereotypically framed as a liar, saying “I do not lie”, it is almost as though Shakespeare is giving us, years before it became an issue, an inversion of the “liar’s paradox” in order to complicate the stereotype of the “lying demon” and, through this, problematize and move us out of the medieval idea of duality (good versus bad demon) and toward a more nuanced view of the good and evil. This happens particularly in the sections of the text in relation to dreams. Dreams are significant because, according to the texts studied by Dee and which were generally understood as characterizing demons in the Early Modern world, demons often deceive by “their Oracles, divinations and predictions”, which may come in the form of a dream. (McLean 2006, 69). But in this case, Caliban doesn’t use a dream to tempt others, but uses the idea of the dream in a very different way. Karen Flagstad argues that one of the qualities of the island that readers often forget is that for as much as Prospero is a dream maker in the text, so Caliban is as well (Flagstad 1986, 205). It is this quality of dream making that is of importance in one of the most celebrated speeches that Caliban makes:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices
That, if I then waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again. (Shakespeare 1973, III.ii.140-8)

It is in a dream state that we have Caliban say these lines, which I would argue underscore the complication of the stereotypical "lying demon"; Caliban may be "a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick", but it seems like the contrary is true (Shakespeare 1973, IV.i.188-9). When Miranda and Prospero "teach me [Caliban] how / To name the bigger light, and how the less / That burn by day and night" (Shakespeare 1973, I.ii.336-8) they give Caliban the gift of their language and through it a way to understand, order and describe the natural world. Caliban uses this language in both positive and negative ways. He misuses language in a number of ways. For instance, he uses slippery language in his persuasion of Stephano and Trinculo and he also uses language to curse at Miranda and Prospero. He even says to them "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (Shakespeare 1973, I.ii.365-367).

But as can be seen in Caliban's soliloquy he also uses language to craft beautiful descriptions of the island that he loves. When he is in this dream state, the island that he sees is his, is beautiful, and when he wakes he feels an incredible sense of loss. It is through this dichotomy that we see Shakespeare problematizing the limitation of Caliban as creature who only uses his language to deceive—as a lying devil. We see that through the language of this dream state that Caliban has the potential to be more than Prospero's limiting stereotype suggests. This moves the idea of the demonic beyond the medieval idea of the "good" and "bad" duality; Caliban has both good and bad qualities, just like Prospero.

So, if Caliban isn't a *lying* devil, then what might he be? In the same section of *Angel Magic*, we have another classification that might fit Caliban better—*Vasa Iniquitatis* or a "vessel of anger" which are "the inventors of mischiefs and of all wicked Arts" (McLean 2006, 69). This seems like it might fit Caliban as he is, through much of the text, angry at Prospero, Miranda, even Ariel. He rages at Prospero, but in doing so, we, as audience, can understand why. He charges that:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strok'dst me, and mad'st much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in't; and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I lov'd thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o'th'isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place, and fertile.
Cursed be I that did so!—all the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have, which first was mine own king. (Shakespeare 1973, I.ii.336-347)

One of the things that is significant in this passage is that Caliban may be angry and may curse, but this is as far as his powers go. He says that toads, beetles and bats will light on Prospero, but they never do, and they don't even derive from Caliban, but Sycorax. This aligns with commentary in *Angel Magic* that, in the end, demons are not as powerful as humans might initially think that they are. Coming out of Middle Age duality, there are angels which are glossed as good and which help man, and demons, which are glossed as bad and which harm man. *Angel Magic* and the depiction that Shakespeare has of characters in *The Tempest* complicate this duality. In the section on "Of Angels Good and Bad, Their Degrees and Offices", it is noted that "their power is restrained that they cannot put in execution the full puissance of their malicious desire without the permission of God" (McLean 2006, 60-1). Caliban can be angry; he can even say a curse, but that curse will have no effect unless God allows it to happen.

Recall that one of the ways that a first level demon operates is to help necromancers with altering weather; as such it is Ariel that is helping Prospero create a tempest. In this way, Prospero doesn't have as much power as it initially *seems* that he does. Likewise, people may fear Caliban, for he does seem like a frightening chimera that rants and curses, but language is all that he has. Certainly, language can be a form of power, but the language that demons use can only be so powerful as God allows it to be. In the end, the curses are futile; they have no real impact on the world. It is in this space of that Joshua Held finds importance in Caliban's final lines in the play--"I'll be wise hereafter / and seek for grace" (Shakespeare, 1973, V.i.295-6). Whether Caliban truly has learned to forgive the loss of the island and accept Prospero or not, we as readers will never know. Shakespeare's play ends with ambiguity in Caliban's character and the audience is left with the task of grappling with his sincerity. For Caliban in Shakespeare's text, the defining moment of redemption may be those final lines "I'll be wise hereafter / and seek for grace" (Shakespeare, 1973, V.i.295-6). If so, then Caliban's potential, as indicated by the elevated language in his soliloquy, finally may be realized and he will move beyond being the underside or "bad demon" part of a medieval dichotomy of the Other. Rather, he may be considered to be a more nuanced being, very much a mutable man, like Prospero, and reflective of our varied nature, lies and all.

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