

Caliban's Name and the "Brave New World"

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Abstract

One of Shakespeare's most puzzling made-up names, that of *Caliban* in *The Tempest*, is traceable to the influence of the log of Columbus' first voyage to America, or from a transcription thereof by Las Casas, deriving from the linguistic confusion of Caribbean people ("Caribs") with Canibs, hence with cannibals. The allusion, however, is probably not to actual man-eaters, the question of whether the natives were *anthropophagi* (physically or mythically) notwithstanding. Although Montaigne's influential essay did indeed cite the latter, Shakespeare could have improvised here a bit upon Florio's translation.

It is a commonplace that Shakespeare invented the name *Caliban*, most probably influenced by Florio's translation of Montaigne's essay, "Of the Cannibals." The name is not found elsewhere, to anyone's knowledge, and no definite overall source of the plot of *The Tempest* has emerged. F. E. Halliday writes that the dramatist's debt to Michel de Montaigne "is most patent in *The Tempest*, where Gonzalo explains how he would colonize the island (II, i), the passage being taken from Montaigne's essay ..., describing an ideal community in America" (321). Still, the romance is also credibly thought by many scholars to have its setting in the Mediterranean (there having just been a wedding in Tunis), so that the native involved would appear to reflect or refract an Old World or, even better, Third World, not a New World, cannibal. On the other hand, the "still-vex'd Bermoothes" (1.2.229) clearly refers to Bermuda, and "brave new world" (5.1.183) alludes, in customary terms, to the New World.

An analogous textual problem of great concern to Shakespeareans is whether the familiar "base Indian" crux in *Othello* (5.2.347) conjures up an Indian of the Caribbean (where pearls, also cited in the immediate context, could be found) or an *India* Indian in spite of the fact that the British East India Company was in operation a number of years before the tragedy was written and so presumably only poor fishermen in the Indian Ocean area would have been incognizant of the value of their riches. Clearly major parallels in the travel literature of the time support the American connection, albeit in this case the immediate context (and parallels in Shakespeare's other works, notably *Love's Labour's Lost* 4.3.216-20), points to the Near East.

The matter of Caliban's name comes up in Alden and Virginia Vaughan's recent book and in several positive reviews thereof that I have seen, notably John Reichert's. They have questioned whether *Caliban* was truly meant as an anagram of *can(n)ibal*: "Would Shakespeare have chosen an anagram of 'cannibal' for a savage who did not practice what his name preached?" (Vaughan 30). What is more, a definite "stumbling block to the acceptance of the 'cannibal' explanation is its late emergence in print. It can be dated quite precisely to the 1778 edition of Samuel Johnson and George Steevens's annotated *Tempest*" (30). Consequently, the Vaughans prefer the "geographic link—'Caliban' as a variant of the name for a New World region connoting mystery and incivility" (32), though they concede that this correlation is also unproven. In any case, Reichert's review then has the following comment: "Or was Shakespeare perhaps familiar with the Hindu word *Kalee-ban* (a Hindu Satyr)? Or the Gypsy word *cauliban*, or 'blackness' (Prospero calls Caliban a 'thing of darkness')? Or was it *kalebon*, an Arabic word for 'vile dog'?" (Reichert 32). But these are merely flighty speculations.

One piece of proof that has not been given due credence hitherto is that the "garbling" of *can(n)ibal* in the form of *Caliban* could easily have derived, in part or indirectly, from Shakespeare's cognizance of the logs of Columbus, or Las Casas' transcriptions thereof, phrases from which were generally "in the air" at that time. According to Professor J. H. Trumbull of Hartford, as cited in *OED* (s.v. "Cannibal"), "i, n, and r interchange dialectally in American languages, whence the variant forms *Canibs*, *Caribs*, *Calibi*," whereby "Columbus' first representation of the name as he heard it from the Cubans was *Canibales*." *OED* then adds that "*Calib-an* is apparently another variant = *carib-an*." In a word, Columbus' locution of *cannibals* in some form derived from his misreported transcription of the name of the offending tribe as *Caribs* or *Canibs*, though the problem may actually have originated from the Taino tribe, as Columbus heard it, or from Las Casas' own transcription of Columbus' daily journal of his first voyage.¹

That Shakespeare could have been aware specifically of this distorted effect (insofar as what Columbus reported became widely known then) can be seen from *OED*'s further comment that the Carib people of the West Indies "are recorded to have been *anthropophagi*," a term that also happens to appear in *Othello* (1.3.144) and, in a variant form, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (4.5.8). This corroboration would tie in with the notion that the kind of cannibal alluded to in the name *Caliban* was meant figuratively only, the argument being that if Shakespeare had meant a man-eater specifically, he would have used the longer term. In fact, *OED* provides a figurative usage of *cannibal* (whereas many modern lexicons do not and so may be misleading

in this respect if consulted): "Cannibal," 1b, refers merely to a savage or primitive person, not one necessarily involved in anthropophagy. Arrestingly enough, a citation given for this usage is again from Shakespeare: "cannibals,/ How sweet a plant have you untimely cropped" (*3 Henry VI* 5.5.61–62). The point is that the Vaughans may well be correct in contending that Shakespeare had no bloodthirsty cannibal in mind when he thought up Caliban's name; but that did not preclude his associating such a name with the figurative meaning of the derivation just the same.

Further support for the position that Shakespeare could have been aware specifically of the linguistic confusion suggested here might be in his allusion to Frederick, Count of Mömpelgart, again in *The Merry Wives*, as "garmombles" (cited only in the Q version). After all, one garbled account would parallel similar verbal playfulness elsewhere. Although this particular variant form was obviously derivative of the alias the Württemberg dignitary traveled under (*Count Mombeliard*), it still represents a graphic linguistic mix-up of the original surname. As with the analogous metathetic name-change from *Fastolphe* to *Falstaff* in the Henry plays, the shift from *can(n)ibal* to *Caliban* could well have been deliberate, but not wholly or arbitrarily as if it was ultimately a product of what had been taken as Columbus' own quirkiness. In positing this approach, we need not disagree with the Vaughans, who have made room already for it with their following qualification: "A close alternative explanation is that 'Caliban,' as an extended anagram of 'Carib,' suggests that Shakespeare meant the monster to be a New World native but not necessarily a man-eater" (27).

Curiously, as William F. Keegan points out in his fine paper to appear in a collection of articles on Columbus, the purported cannibalism recorded in Columbus' log may really in part derive from the so-called "mythic cannibalism" described by members of the Taino tribe; in a similar enough manner, Caliban's supposed cannibalistic origin or tendencies, at least etymologically speaking, are defensible as "mythic" in another, more modern, sense. Thus, one feminist reading has it that he is basically a creature which "refigures ... incestuous, self-consumptive desires" (Boose 37). Likewise, because he would "seek for grace" at the end (*Tempest* 5.1.296), it is arguable that his eventual acceptance of Catholic Christianity (as evident from the Italians participating) bespeaks that of a sublimated form of cannibalism involved in the partaking of the Eucharist.² The same sort of conversion-to-be can be found at the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, during which Shylock's penalty is to accept Christianity and thereby, ironically, to receive the "pound of flesh" he has been after in the form of the Body and Blood of Christ. But the most curious or ironic matter of all to end on is that, as Keegan points out, it was Columbus himself and his men

who were initially identified as *Caribes/Canibales* because they carried off Tainos from their villages. Doubtless Shakespeare was unaware of this facet.

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Notes

1. In a paper initially entitled "Columbus Was a Cannibal: Myths and the First Encounters," William F. Keegan, Associate Curator of Anthropology, Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida, provides the following arresting account: "*Carib* is a Taino word. Columbus arrived ... looking for *Caniba*, literally, 'the people of the *gra Can*' [Grand Khan]. Columbus came to believe that the *Caniba* were enemies of the Taino. Columbus did not believe that the *Caniba* ate human flesh. The Taino belief in *Caniba* anthropophagy came from the failure of Taino captives to return after they were taken by the *Canibs*." I quote from the paper originally delivered for the conference *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Hamilton College, Clinton, New York, November 11–12, 1992) and due to appear in a collection of essays from this historical gathering to be published by the University Press of Florida in 1994. I quote with permission of both the Associate Curator and the Director of the Conference (and Co-editor of the forthcoming volume), Robert Paquette.

2. At a meeting of the Ohio Shakespeare Conference at Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio (March 25–27 1993), I broached this latter subject to a Jesuit who had been recently involved in a production of *The Tempest*, and he concurred that it was viable enough (at least on the psychological, if not perhaps so much so on the purely histrionic or theological, level). Because the issue was raised then in public forum, I feel I can report this with impunity. Further, it is of incidental interest that, as Keegan tells me, the cannibalism sometimes associated with the Tainos was sexual in nature.

Works Cited

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