

The Role of 'Nature' and 'Nurture' in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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Abstract:

*There has been a long standing debate on the role of nature and nurture in the development of human personality. Nature means the raw force and instinctive impulse of life, it is rough, uncontrolled and untamable. Nurture on the other hand, is the necessary training education and socialization to direct the rough energy of nature towards culture and sophistication. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* the debate reaches almost a climactic height regarding which is more influential in the flowering of human or even sub-human characters. The present essay intends to examine the play and some of its leading characters in the light of this issue and also to locate their mutual influences in the long run.*

Key words: Nature, nurture, magic, art, affliction, vengeance, pardon, pity.

In the *Tempest*, Caliban is the only original inhabitant of the island, though even he was not born hither. His mother Sycorax has been called a 'foul witch' (1,2,258) by Prospero. According to Prospero, (who however, never discloses his source of information, thereby most of the times, diminishing the authenticity of his account)

This damn'd witch Sycorax
For mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible
To enter human hearing, from Argier,
. . . was banished : for one thing she did
They would not take her life. . . .
This blue-ey'd hag was hither brought with child
And here was left by the sailors. (1,2,263 – 270)

But, Prospero's white magic, however potent and powerful it may appear, has never been able to capture and defeat Sycorax, for, many years before his arrival into the island, she died (1,2,279). Prospero's only achievement, about which he is overwhelmingly vocal, and which according to him, establishes his command of

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magic superior to the art of Sycorax, is to free Ariel from the cloven pine where he was put by Sycorax to groan for twelve years:

Thou best know'st
 What torment I did find thee in; thy groans
 Dis make wolves howl, and penetrate the breasts
 Of every angry bears: it was a torment
 To lay upon the damn'd, which Sycorax
 Could not again undo: it was mine Art,
 When I arriv'd and heard thee, that made gape
 The pine and let thee out. (1,2,286 – 293)

This also he seems to have done not purely out of compassion for the suffering Ariel, but to make use of him, in his future projects of exercising full control upon the island and elements and to accomplish his desire of taking revenge upon his enemies. But what is even more important is that, again there is no proof or support of facts behind Prospero's claim that Sycorax could not undo the punishment once she herself inflicted upon Ariel. Prospero is a man who loves to make tall claims and it is very natural that he will not waste even a minor opportunity to disgrace his opponent and thereby to establish his superiority, especially when there is none to challenge his authority and authenticity.

One thing more he did, which however, completes his self-coronation and establishes him as every inch a colonizer, that is, to snatch away and capture the island from its legitimate owner, Caliban, and to make him his slave, in due course of time. Caliban, within minutes of his first appearance in the play, repents:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
 Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,
 Thou strok'st me, and made 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 the I lov'd thee,
 And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle,
 The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile:
 Curs's 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 my own king, and here you sty me
 In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
 The rest o'th' island. (1,2,333 – 346)

It is interesting to note that Shakespeare does not allow his readers to doubt the authenticity of Caliban's account of the story, for, he speaks before Prospero and Prospero does not protest. The only face-saving claim he makes is that he (Prospero) took 'human care' upon Caliban 'till thou didst seek to violate/The honour of my child' (1,2,349-350). Caliban, as grown up on the wild island, has never been nurtured by arbitrary social values and conventions. He did not have any society to live in and in fact, had been his own king in the island. So, the idea of rape and the cruelty or violation of social norms does not touch or disturb him in any way. While he does feel that he must have had done some wrong to upset Prospero, he is happy with that as he is unable to understand the distinction between the urge for procreation, love and rape:

O ho, O ho! Would't had been done!
 Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
 The isle with Calibans. (1,2, 351 -353)

Prospero, however, as Lisa Murray correctly points out in her beautiful analysis in the article, "Nature, Nurture and Control within Tempest: The Role of the Servants", is not ready to excuse Caliban for his ignorance of courtesy and manners. He is after all a civilized man, well nurtured by society and aristocracy. He knows that rape is a crime, always, everywhere, - whether or not civilization is present (2).

For this reason Prospero cannot acknowledge the dark instincts inside himself, the similarities between himself and Caliban. Both men are extremely volatile but it is only Caliban who is made to acknowledge this. Prospero is locked in a struggle to expose his raw, wild nature of taking revenge and ensure domination on the one hand and the need to maintain an apparently humane face, fitting to the image of the mage and savior, the omnipotent and omniscient father, whose control extends everywhere from land to air, fire to water, books to politics and stage to human psychology.

Caliban, however, does not have any duality or ambiguity. He is the very representative of nature, wild, uncontrollable and unwilling to subdue. Nature means this raw force and instinctive impulse of life, it is rough, uncontrolled and untamable. Nurture on the other hand, is the necessary training and socialization to direct the rough energy of nature towards culture and sophistication. Caliban's role appears to be very interesting in this context. He has been used to test the limits of Prospero's manners, culture and sophistication, just as nature tests a man's patience with her unruliness. First he retorts back to Prospero's insulting call to come out from within:

There's wood enough within (1,2, 316)

When he does finally come out his initial response is to curse Prospero and Miranda :

As wicked dew as e'er my mother brush'd
 With raven's feather from unwholesome fen
 Drop on you both¹ a south-west blow on ye
 And blister you all o'er! ^{91,2, 323-326)}

This is surely a conversation that they have had many times before, and surely, as Lisa Murray correctly points out, even wild Caliban knows that his comment will bring Prospero's fury, but in fact, that is what he intends. Prospero is a pot of boiling water but Caliban knows how to make the pot boil over. It is a game to Caliban. He recognizes that when Prospero loses his control, even for a few seconds, the two men, savage and civilized, are not different after all. While he is not educated and well nurtured by the norms of society, Caliban is a man with a large sense of self-esteem and in his every back and forth exchange with Prospero, he challenges Prospero's authority to command respect (2-3).

To be convinced of this, one can take the very issue of rape. Even if Prospero's charge is true, surely that does not offer him legitimate claim to snatch away the island from Caliban even before he attempted (not actually did) the rape. And surely it is an unmistakable irony to see Prospero, the Usurper, charging Caliban, the legitimate king of the island, to be false and lying:

Thou most lying Slave
 Whom stripes may move, not kindness! (1,2,346 -347)

From the beginning this ugly play of cultural politics is played upon Caliban and accordingly, not only he has been always abused and laughed at as a 'slave', but emphasis has been given too, on his unnatural physical look and ethnic peculiarities to suggest his base nature and monstrosity. Thus he has been described as 'four legs and two voices – a most delicate monster' (2,2,91-92), a beast, hag seed, half man half fish. That he is irrecoverably brutal has been confirmed, first by 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 confin'd into this rock,
 Who hadst deserv'd more than a prison. (1,2,353 – 367)

And then by Prospero himself, who first, raises the issue of his birth: Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself/Upon thy wicked dam (1,2,321 – 322). Characteristically, without referring to the source of this information, his main purpose seems to be to stigmatize the rebel in every way possible, and thereby to construct a myth that gradually proceeds to justify the rule of the colonizer as legitimate, the colonized eventually becoming the 'white man's burden'. This is reiterated when he sends Ariel to chase Caliban and the other conspirators, his target being to teach them a good lesson for challenging his authority:

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost;
And as with age his body uglier grows
So his mind cankers. I will plague them all
Even to roaring. (4,1,188 – 193).

The readers only laugh at the other side of their hands when they remember the true nature of Prospero's 'nurture', his humanely taken pains of inflicting cramps, side-stitches and pinches 'as thick as honey – comb', 'each pinch more stinging/Than bees that made them' (1,2,330 – 331) and his order of bringing wood and performing other business even at the cost of sacrificing his dinner (1,2,332). The final output of this attitude is the confirmation of these opinions which Prospero accomplishes summarily when he introduces Caliban to Alonso in the final Act:

He is as disproportion'd in his manners
As in his shape. (5,1,290-291)

It is easy for the powerful colonizer to deny the powerless colonized the essential dignity of human shape and values, but what gets exposed underneath is the coloniser's own deformed nature, his original sin of power thirst, pride and greed which any amount of 'nurture' could never subdue but only sharpened. Thus Caliban, the monster, in the course of the play gradually ascends to human dignity and recognition while Prospero, the once dear duke of Milan descends to the identity of a rough tyrant, proud, scheming and revengeful, intolerant and authoritative, until the fag end of the play. When every outburst from Prospero grants the wild monster a small victory over 'civilization', a second victory also silently works underneath, one of a primal being who never read a book upon a learned one who considered his volumes superior to his dukedom. Caliban achieves a certain kind of dignity in his servitude by refusing, if sporadically, to bow before Prospero's intimidation. In his refusal he proves that nature can never be controlled, not entirely. Prospero himself could not offer half the resistance, when he was wronged and unduly exiled from Milan by his brother Antonio. That beside Caliban, Prospero only turns out to be a

pale, shrewd, defeated and corrupt figure has been uniquely driven home when during her father's narration of past events, Miranda remarks on the foul misdeeds of his uncle Antonio:

I should sin
To think but nobly of my grandmother:
Good wombs have borne bad sons. (1, 2, 118- 120)

It is only a dramatic irony that she speaks better than she understands. Prospero's subsequent activities in the play do mark him no better than his brother Antonio. That nature cannot be fully nurtured or tutored, seems better applicable to his case than to Caliban's.

However, the line between wild/rough and civilized/refined in the play is an artificially drawn one. For, Caliban too, has been exposed to some refinement and grace of culture and civilization, and while he retains every right to discard it, he cannot unlearn what he has already learnt. The art of using (English) language, here, appears as a culture gift of civilization. While Caliban aggressively declares that learning the art of language has enabled him only to curse and abuse profusely, the play keeps witness that Caliban actually has mastered the art of wielding language beautifully, even to the point of making it poetic. Having grown up on the bosom of nature, playing with the springs, brine pits, living by berries and pig nuts, fish, crabs and marmoset, Caliban's every word, every image, smells of the freshness of nature and his simplicity of feelings and uncorrupted emotions bind together a specific form of language where truth and beauty, like the sea and waves continually interplay. That he hates tyranny and runs after wonder he openly declares. To Trinculo he says:

I'll show thee the best springs; I'll pluck the berries;
I'll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough.
A plague upon the tyrant that I serve!
I'll bear him no more sticks, but follow thee,
Thou wondrous man.

This wonder-thirst may sound more like a Miranda like quest for beauty:

O, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in it! (5,1, 181 – 184)

For, after all it is Miranda who took pains to teach Caliban language. But even though Miranda received special care from Prospero:

Here in this island we arriv'd, and here

Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit
 Than other princess' can, that have more time
 For vainer hours, and tutors not so careful. (1,2, 171 – 174)

and Caliban, nothing but abuse: “ A devil, a born devil on whose nature/Nurture can never stick”, it appears that Prospero’s pains, humanly taken were not really lost. Caliban surpasses Miranda and leaves her miles behind, at least, in his ability of making poetic utterances, which is the language of nature and not of artificial education or ‘nurture’:

. . . 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 sometime voices,
 That if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming'
 The clouds me thought would open, and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd I cried to dream again.
 (3,2,133 – 141)

But alas! All this remains unnoticed by Prospero, self-blinded as he has been by his own pride and urge of taking revenge. It is a classic example, as Lisa Murray pointedly remarks, of not seeing the forest for the trees:

Prospero is so busy detesting this instinct-driven, savage man that the beauty of the island is lost on him. He is too set on controlling his natural instincts to see the passion hidden within the ‘wild’ man, one who has arguably been his closest company for twelve years. His hate blinds him to anything good in Caliban – to admitting that anything good can be harbored within so uncivilized – and so, while Caliban may be the slave, it is Prospero who is ruled. (3)

That Shakespeare’s plot construction also supports this view can be exemplified from two sets of comparisons : one between Ferdinand and Caliban, the other between Sebastian and Caliban. Ferdinand, as Terence Hawkes rightly observes in his essay “Playhouse – Workhouse”, “acknowledges the moral – not to say social – profit which accrues to his labour, and in consequence bears his burden willingly:

I must remove
 Some thousands of these logs, and pile them up,
 Upon a sore injunction: my sweet mistress
 Weeps when she sees me work, and says, such baseness
 Had never like executor. I forget:
 But these sweet thoughts do even refresh my labours,

Most busiest when I do it. (3,1,9 – 15)

Miranda readily offers to share his load (3,1, 23 – 24), but Ferdinand reconciles himself to the task in the name of love:

... for your sake

Am I this patient log man. (3,1, 66-67)

For Miranda's sake, Caliban also becomes the log man in the play, only, Miranda does not find in him any touch of beauty or wonder. His procreational attempts, his language of love, repeatedly knock on the closed door of her heart and receive no compassion but rebuke and abuse, slavery and punishment. Miranda also will undergo procreation in future years, at least one can safely expect that, otherwise why is she married to Ferdinand at all! But it is impossible for her to love the monster, the wild man of nature. And in consequence, it is also impossible for the wild man of nature to patiently bear the logs, the taunts of 'social nurture', which in his case appears in the form of slavery:

Prospero: ... What, ho! Slave! Caliban!

Thou earth, thou! Speak.

Caliban (within): There's wood enough within. (1,2, 315 – 316)

Repeatedly urged to fetch in fuel and to be quick, Caliban repeatedly refuses to comply with or partially accomplishes his task out of fear of cramps and other punishments. While Ferdinand's willing acceptance of the Elizabethan principle of work : God offers us all things for our labour, manages to implant work ethics in society, Caliban's complete refusal of this shows that artificial nurture(education without passion, culture without love) often may produce boomerang. Un-allowed to become the lover, Caliban, appears as the true rebel and it only an irony that he advises his fellow conspirators to use the same 'log' to 'batter the skull' of Prospero, the tyrant.

Prospero later realized his fault, his inability to 'nurture' Caliban properly, to make him civilized and socially, culturally acceptable; especially as he had full freedom, opportunity and responsibility in devising the training programme and schedule. Later he confessed:

"This thing of darkness I/Acknowledge mine" (5,1, 289-290). The same self-responsibility he realized to have had when he was ousted by his brother Antonio. In Milan, he valued his magic books above his dukedom. That was a mistake. At the end of the play, when he returns to regain his dukedom in Milan, he rectifies it by breaking his magic wand and leaving his books, deep under the sea water. In fact, had Prospero been truly disconnected with Milan and his desire of taking revenge, he could have made a new beginning in the island and the relationship with Caliban might have been an

altogether different one. The subplot would have been the main plot then. But revengeful as he had been by nature, he could not leave in peace in the island and ended up playing only the role of an Antonio in depriving Caliban of what was his legitimate kingdom. Even in his dealings with Ariel, who loves to lie among flowers and fly through the sky, he could not overcome his utilitarian instincts. He could not see the beauty of Ariel, nor the delicate tune of his songs, but only the untapped power that was waiting to be put to use and made profit thereof. It is true that both Antonio and Caliban made plot against Prospero and weaved foul conspiracy. But it is Prospero who appears to have neglected his responsibility in keeping them on right track and it is he who fails to overcome his nature and wastes his life in running for revenge after them.

But for Shakespeare, the play could have ended there with unending series of revenge and counter revenge, just as two opposite mirrors produce endless images and counter images of the single motif of a lighted candle, burning amid them. For, it is Shakespeare who finally introduces the theme of true 'nurture' amid dark shadows of nature, and this occurs through the lips of delicate Ariel. Asked by Prospero to recount the condition of his enemies, in Act V, scene I, Ariel speaks of the effect of each torturous spell played upon them and ends by complimenting Prospero's supreme power, which the master is finally successful to display. But underneath the flattery: "Your charm so strongly works 'em/That if you now behold them, your affections/ Would become tender" (5,1, 16 – 18), Ariel leaves an ironic suggestion too: "Mine would, sir, were I human" (5,1,20).

The irony is not lost on Prospero, rather it tolls him back to his sole self and the long subdued strings of humanity within him, commence to ring again. He suddenly remembers that his compassion, his connection with broad humanity had been set aside so far, and he realizes that in his quest to take revenge for the wrongs done upon him, he himself had inflicted many such afflictions upon others. A new Prospero seems to have been born at that moment who is no longer proud, arrogant and rude, but who is more willing to pity and pardon his offenders, who after long times has once again been aware of the still, sad music of human life, flowing softly under the currents of thousands of deeds and misdeeds.

This marks a turning point for Prospero who replies:

And mine shall.
Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art? (5,1,20 – 24)

He had been playing a God while planning his revenge and controlling his servants of the island, but now he realizes that he is no God and the loss of human pity will make him but another monster, refined, civilized on the surface, but cruel and abominable in reality. He makes a desperate 'come back' and using nobler reason against fury, asks Ariel to release his prisoners, nay, he pardons Antonio and frees Caliban, recalling softly his responsibility in the uneven battle between wild instincts and cultured civilization: "This thing of darkness I/Acknowledge mine" (5,1, 289-290). Both Antonio and Caliban waited for severe reprimand, but Prospero, at the moment of victory, withdraws, as he understands that the release is in forgiveness and not in vengeance. When he acknowledges Caliban or Antonio, he seems to acknowledge that dark place which lies within every civilized man, and he ensures his final release from its coil.

At the end of the Play Prospero is seen to leave behind everything, his books, his magic robe and spells, his command, his pride, - a broken man, who suffered and waited patiently for moving the wheel other way, who fought the battles of life single handed and overcame misfortune, stands alone on the shore; his eyes, flowing with tears for the single daughter, who has permanently departed in marriage with an alien prince, still flashing for home and Milan and he requests Ariel for a good sail and safe journey. But in comparison to his loss, what he gains back from the island – his lost reason and compassionate humanity – is nothing little either. It is only when he is able to set aside his impulse and live in harmony with his own humanity, when he is able to acknowledge both light and shade and their interplay on the rough routes of life that he becomes a free man. The island cannot confine him anymore. It is here that he meets his release, overcomes his 'nature' and tastes the true flavor of 'nurture'.

Reference:

(All textual quotes have been taken from The Arden edition of *The Tempest*, edited by Frank Kermode, 1990 Reprint volume.)

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