

The CEA Forum

Winter/Spring 2006: 35.1

**MONSTROUS NO MORE:
HOW SHAKESPEARE'S CALIBAN AND
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT
ASPIRE TOGETHER**

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Believe me, fellow teachers: we all share the same frustrations. The tardies, the absences, the countless excuses are becoming more and more difficult to bear. Just this semester, I was in the middle of class, delivering a lecture on African-American theater that I had meticulously prepared, when a young charmer in my class stuck up his hand mid-sentence and demanded, "Do we really have to know this?" If you are like me, you have left your classroom more than once feeling like you've failed or just plain not gotten through at all. It's difficult to overcome the pessimism that can rise from that kind of frustration.

But this past summer, from the strangest and most unexpected source, I found new inspiration and insight. I was co-directing Act III, Scene ii of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and suddenly realized what should have been clear to me all along. There is a direct and quite powerful connection between Caliban, the monster who lives on Prospero's island, and the aspiring community college student.

By the time audience members get to Act III of *The Tempest*, they are well acquainted with Caliban. They have heard described one negative attribute after the next and are privy to all the insults the other characters hurl at him. In Act I, Miranda calls Caliban a "villain" (I.ii.313), and Prospero commands him:

Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself

Upon thy wicked dam, come forth! (I.ii.323-325)

In the same scene, the audience learns that Caliban's mother was a devil and witch; just the pronunciation of her name "Sycorax" connotes the phrase "sick at the core." Also in this scene, Caliban admits to having tried to rape

Miranda, still regretting his failure to do so. Therefore, by the end of Act I, Shakespeare has placed Caliban among what Stephen Greenblatt calls “the darkest European fantasies about the Wild Man” (Greenblatt 3052), and the audience feels that it has met the play's antagonist.

Even in Act III, Scene ii, there is much to further evidence the devilish attributes of Caliban. Having only recently been exposed to the power of alcohol, he is already stinking drunk, and this makes him violent. He indirectly threatens Trinculo, spurring Stefano to, “Bite him to death” (III.ii.32) and “Beat him enough!” (III.ii.80). More directly, Caliban persuades Stefano to kill Prospero in his sleep. He doesn't suggest a quiet murder, like Claudius pouring poison in Old Hamlet's ear; instead, he suggests “knock[ing] a nail into his head,” (III.ii.59), “brain[ing] him,” (83) or “batter[ing] his skull” (85), thus living up to his reputation of devil and villain.

But this scene also represents a significant shift in Caliban; we watch as he moves from monster to poet. Before the scene concludes, Caliban transforms from drunken sot to enchanter, capturing the imaginations of Stefano and Trinculo and the audience along with them. Caliban accomplishes this through his claiming and mastering of language – and using it elegantly.

Earlier in Act I, Caliban chides Miranda for forcing him to learn her language:

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! (I.ii.366-368)

But as Richard Hansberger points out: “Caliban is not as ignorant – or illiterate – as Prospero and Miranda would have us believe” (137). Indeed, Caliban seems to know instinctively about the enormous power of books and learning. When directing Stefano how to attack Prospero, Caliban tells him three times in one speech: “[Seize] his books,” “First to possess his books” and “Burn but his books” (III.ii.84-90). Caliban knows well that Prospero's power lies in his literacy. Being kept subservient and unlettered teaches Caliban that knowledge equals power. He reveals this understanding when he remarks that, without his books, Prospero is “but a sot as I am, nor hath not / One spirit to command” (III.ii.88-89).

For the first time in this scene and play, Caliban is now on a road to advancement. He has symbolically usurped Prospero's power through the books, and now a budding Mark Antony, he has railroaded Stefano with his new, potent rhetoric. He first appeals to Stefano's authority: “How does thy honour? Let me lick thy shoe” (III.ii.21). Next he appeals to his sympathy: “I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer, that by his cunning hath cheated me of the island” (III.ii.40-41). With his words and persuasion, Caliban offers Stefano a beautiful wife, power and riches, and Stefano cannot refuse. It is true that Stefano is drunk, greedy and foolish himself – but clearly *less* intelligent now than the “monster” who manipulates him. Caliban is advancing, gaining more power to get what he desires.

Caliban's largest move toward power is in his final speech of the scene. Here is where he progresses past his illiteracy, drunkenness, violence and ambition to a place of pure poetry and pride. Master of his surroundings, Caliban comforts Stefano and Trinculo, reassuring them that they need not be “afear’d” of the island noises. He moves to describe his space in such poetic and elevated language that the men become calm and enchanted. The sounds that Stefano fears come from “a devil” (III.ii.124) are to Caliban “a thousand twangling instruments” (132). The material goods that Stefano has been promised become worthless compared to Caliban's clouds that “open and show riches ready to drop upon [him]” (136-137). Hence, by the end of the speech and scene, Caliban is utterly humanized in the eyes of the audience. He has shown himself to be like all of us – using language to harm and to heal, to provoke and to persuade, to curse but also to praise. Shakespeare foreshadows Caliban's potential early in the scene when Trinculo attempts to insult him: “That a monster should be such a natural!” (III.ii.30-31). The scene closes when even the epithet “monster” loses its sting. When Stefano reverently says, “Lead, monster; we'll follow” (III.ii.145), it becomes a title of respect instead.

What is inspiring about this scene is how closely Caliban's shift parallels how our students come to understand English composition and literature. Many students enter our classes like Caliban, knowing books to be powerful but feeling eluded by them, unable to access their knowledge. Perhaps our students have also been made to feel foolish - and have lashed out in obscenities or even violence. Perhaps they have been reminded so often about their own monstrosity that they see no chance of ever being anything better. But when they learn to claim language for themselves, hearing rhetoric and poetry come from their own mouths, then they come to feel empowered, able to recreate themselves much in the same way Caliban does.

I think particularly of a few students I have had in my basic writing course. This course comes two semesters before Freshman Composition and is for mostly native students whose skills are at about a seventh grade level. Their essays are plagued with the standard spelling errors of "there" versus "their," "it's" versus "its," and "lose" and "loose." They write in sentence fragments, comma splices and run-ons and rarely use a thesis or topic sentence. Teaching the students how to remedy these errors becomes nearly impossible without starting at the very beginning. When I say, "Every sentence must have a subject and a verb," I get blank stares from my students who never quite learned what a subject is. Therefore, I begin every semester teaching the parts of speech, and every year, without fail, at least one student smilingly says something to the effect of, "This is great. I've never really known the difference between and adjective and an adverb." Or, "I never learned this in junior high. Did you?" The road toward enlightenment is long, but it has begun.

By the end of the semester, having been exposed to essays, periodicals and numerous short stories, the students read more regularly and critically than they ever did in their high school years. Learning to incorporate theses and topic sentences, they begin to write about what they read. Of course, they must proofread for basic sentence errors along the way, and suddenly, this all seems like an incredible lot to do. It's a definite struggle for most, and I can't pretend that they all succeed. Many will simply walk away from the challenge; others resort to plagiarism. But in so many cases, the evolution begins immediately, and it is undeniably powerful.

I remember a student from a few semesters back; we'll call her Margaret Ortiz. Margaret was a thirty-something single mom, punctual and serious, but almost always silent in class discussions. She would answer questions when called upon, usually correctly, but she would never volunteer her voice. Margaret earned a low B in the course; her papers were reliable but not sparkling, and to be honest, I never expected her to be a student I would remember. That is, until she shyly left me a Christmas card in her final exam blue book. The card itself was as non-descript as the sender, but her handwritten comment stays with me to this day: "Thank you for your teaching. This is the first year in my entire life that I felt confident *writing* notes in my Christmas cards instead of just signing my name. God bless you."

Talk about a thousand twangling instruments.

I also think of Logan Fenton, one of my Freshman Composition students. Logan was always respectful, but he looked like the kind of guy you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. His head was shaved, and underneath his white T-shirt and baggy pants were his gang affiliation tattoos. Logan had been struggling ever since his father passed away unexpectedly. They had argued earlier that day, and then, hours later, his father was gone. Logan took refuge on the streets, and though he was now trying to make a break from the gang life he had adopted, the streets weren't eager to let him loose. He was walking a dangerous line, one foot in the *barrio* and one in the classroom.

Just a few weeks before the end of the semester, Logan disappeared. After a few days, his mom called me in a panic. There had been a knifing. It wasn't Logan's fault; it was his hoodlum friends; he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time; the cops recognized his face, and now he was locked up. This was his second time sentenced to Juvenile Hall. His mom said that Logan really wanted to finish the semester, and she was willing to act as an intermediary. Was there anything I could do?

I chose to make allowances for Logan that I don't usually make. For one, the course's research paper was due, and failure to write a research paper means failure in the class. Logan wanted to do his assignment, but he had

no access to a library, only the internet. As a rule, I don't allow students to do internet research for the term paper, but in this case, there was no other option. I was clear about my expectations: if Logan could ensure the legitimacy of the sources, he could use the computer for his research.

I also don't accept papers electronically. Logan knew this rule from earlier in the semester. There were no questions asked. He dutifully got the paper to his mom, who got it to me. Logan received a B on that major work.

There was also the question of the Final Exam, worth ten percent of the student's final grade. The officials at Juvenile Hall were not willing to administer or proctor an exam, but they would allow me to do so if I chose. I thought about it for a long time. Logan had to be incarcerated for a year. Did I want him sitting in there, knowing he had failed his classes, regretting the time lost, bitterly aware that he'd have to repeat them all over again? Or did I want him to overcome the odds, knowing he *could* succeed after he did his time, ready for new challenges once the gates were opened? The answer became more and more clear as I drove to Juvenile Hall on my day off. I gave him the Final Exam myself.

Logan passed my class. I don't know where he is now, and I can't claim that his path was mended overnight. But I do know that he was back on campus after the year had passed. He hadn't looked me up as I asked him to, but I ran into him one afternoon. His hair had grown out a bit; he was holding hands with a new girlfriend. Over his shoulder was a backpack full of books. He was walking slowly; he smiled at me. He seemed to be finding his way though his personal tempest.

Every semester, literally thousands of students take our Composition and Literature classes, and every semester we are faced with the same range of emotions: our frustrations with seeing students flounder and fail, our impatience when students who are perfectly able to succeed don't, our struggles with the long hours of preparation and grading, the students who bold-facedly ask, "Do we really have to know this?"

But we also have our Calibans, our beautiful monsters, who come from lives enmeshed in violence, ignorance or pain. Sometimes, in our best moments, we can guide them away from that existence into the world of books and knowledge. They learn to embrace words, symbols, poetry, and they begin to claim these treasures as their own. In this reinventing of themselves, they move from monstrosity to enlightenment and leave our colleges for greater things. They are Caliban all over again: eyes wide open, singers of songs, no longer slaves on their own stolen islands.

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