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Circulating Bodies

Research Essay

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Shakespeare's *Zombies: The (un)Dead, the Contagious, and the Resistant*

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is often classified as a castaway narrative, due in large part to Miranda's status as an exile. Yet it is also a colonialist narrative, as Prospero has taken control of both the island and the island's inhabitants (i.e. Caliban and Ariel). This is made clear when Prospero recalls that Sycorax had imprisoned Ariel within a cloven pine and "when I arrived and heard thee, that made gape / the pine and let thee out" (1.2 327-347). As a spirit confined to a tree, Ariel is representative of the spirit of nature or the spirit of the island as a whole. Prospero's enslavement of Ariel is both the enslavement of a singular living being and the spirit of the island; Prospero's "claim" or possession of Ariel parallels Prospero's taking control or "colonizing" the island. In this essay, however, I do not merely situate *The Tempest* within narratives of European transatlantic colonization. Instead, I reclaim *The Tempest* as a narrative of resistance by shifting my focus away from the *colonizer* and/or the *enslaver* and instead recuperating the stories of colonized/enslaved. I argue that both Ariel and Caliban function as zombies, or within what Sarah Juliet Lauro calls a "zombie dialectic" which centers narratives of enslavement and resistance instead of the plot surrounding Prospero's revenge (Lauro 5).

In order to discuss Ariel and Caliban's zombie-ness, I must first define the being that Ariel is, as spirits are not usually thought of as zombie figures. Prospero calls Ariel "thou spirit," which is one of few moments in *The Tempest* where Ariel is given a physical description (1.2 229). A spirit is defined as "the disembodied soul of a (deceased) person" (OED). However, the

OED also defines spirit as “the immaterial intelligent or sentient element or part of a person, frequently in implied or expressed contrast to the body.” This definitional contradiction helps to illustrate that, as a spirit, Ariel is a distinctly liminal being, as he is between dead and alive and between human and supernatural. Lauro establishes that “Both living and dead, the zombie is, like many monsters, always a border dweller, a hybrid character,” which indicates that the zombie itself is a liminal being—living and dead, human and monster, etc. (Lauro 9). But liminality is not the only reason why I am arguing that Ariel is a zombie-like figure. Lauro also notes that, towards the beginning of the zombie myth, “the “zombi” was comprehended as a spirit that could take on flesh or a specter that yet looked identical to the person it once was” (42). Therefore, Ariel does not necessarily require flesh to fit within the zombie critical framework. Literary scholars Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz also argue that it is the loss of individuality that converts people into zombies, which means that Zombies do not possess one specific personality or identity (137). As Ariel cycles through different genders, species, and forms, he lacks one specific identity, zombifying him further.

I would be remiss, however, if I discussed the zombie only in terms of the mythological definitions instead of what the zombie symbolizes: slave labor and colonization (Boluk 139). As I have already established, the relationship between Ariel and Prospero symbolizes that of the colonizer and the colonized, because Ariel was once inside a tree, representing the nature that Prospero would later own and profit from. It should also not be ignored that Ariel, the sentient and “living being” was enslaved by Prospero. Historian Sowande' M. Mustakeem used the phrase “the human manufacturing process” to describe the process through which black captives would be manufactured into slaves or cargo while on board slave ships (7). Thus, the wooden bodies of slave ships are conceptualized as wombs in which slaves were created. Ariel’s

emergence from the wooden body of the pine tree as Prospero's slave mirrors how black people would emerge from the bodies of slave ships as slaves or products that could be sold for profit. This reading of Ariel's emergence from a wooden body as an enslaved "body" very overtly places Shakespeare and *The Tempest* in conversation with an emergent transatlantic slave trade and the making/unmaking of bodies. The enslavement and zombification of Caliban, while also situating Shakespeare within the discourse of the slave trade, manifests in ways that are slightly different from Ariel. Most noticeably, Caliban, unlike Ariel, is a literal enslaved body, rather than an enslaved immaterial being who happens to be sentient despite being detached from a physical body.

In this way, Caliban functions as a zombie figure by being both physically alive while also demonstrating a form of deadness that the people of color and/or enslaved persons on the island embody. There are many ways to be dead in *The Tempest*, and the different ways mean different things. Men of color, as indicated by Caliban, are allowed to be alive within the social structure, but they must be perpetually enslaved, and they must be labeled as monsters. This dehumanization aids in the process of making Caliban, a man of color, what Lauro describes as "socially dead" (52). As a slave and as a "monster," Caliban is not afforded any social status because he is thought of as being beneath the other living folks on the Island. Similarly, Ariel is also socially dead because, not only does he not have social status, his interactions with other beings are very limited because of Prospero's control over him. Thus, his deadness is more of an interpersonal deadness. However, I argue that Prospero and Miranda are also socially dead. Prospero tells Miranda his brother "extirpated me and mine out of the dukedom," meaning that Prospero's social status was usurped before he and Miranda arrived on the Island (1.2 149-150). This loss of nobility and exile make Prospero and Miranda socially dead in the eyes of their

subjects in Italy. However, they are also not socially dead, because they, Prospero in particular, rule over Caliban and Ariel despite being stranded on the island.

Despite the complexities of deadness in *The Tempest*, there are distinct power structures that influence the characters and their actions. This is mostly indicated by Prospero's "possession" of both Caliban and Ariel, which in this case means "That which is possessed or held as property; something belonging to one, a piece of property" (OED). Prospero's possession of Caliban makes sense in this regard, because he is a physical thing that can always be touched, heard, seen, etc. Prospero's possession of Ariel the spirit, a supernatural being, is a bit more abstract and requires an analysis of Prospero himself in order to understand how he is able to control someone who is immaterial. In act five scene one, Prospero claims that he will break his staff and throw his book in the water. Prospero's ability to curse and the use of magical objects indicates that he is a witch. And because of Prospero's status as a witch, I also argue that Prospero has made Ariel into his own familiar. A familiar is "a spirit, often taking the form of an animal, which obeys and assists a witch or other person" (OED). Ariel may not take the form of an animal in *The Tempest*, but he does shapeshift into nymphs and goddesses in order to do Prospero's bidding. Ariel becomes the disembodied eyes and ears of Prospero, which is demonstrated by Ariel over-hearing Caliban's plan to have Stephano and Trinculo to kill Prospero and take Miranda as their queen (3.2 116-127). Ariel being Prospero's eyes and ears gives Prospero a God-like omniscience that reiterates his power to both the audience and the other characters in *The Tempest*. However, the question of accountability is raised by Ariel's status as a familiar, because "the accused distanced themselves from malefic acts by asserting that aggressive and violent deeds were committed by the familiar" (Warburton 104). Thus,

Prospero would have the power to use Ariel as a scapegoat if something went wrong in his plan to get revenge on his brother.

Within this narrative of witchcraft, deadness, and zombies, there is also resistance. Lauro argued that, “the zombie is not merely an allegory for slavery, but is also representative of resistance” (31). Caliban demonstrates this in the several instances where he unflinchingly curses Prospero and Miranda or when Prospero says that Caliban “plotted” to take his life (1.2 389-394, 5.1 328-329). Killing Prospero would not have only been a physical resistance to enslavement, but it also would have been resisting the social dynamics Prospero established on the Island, as Caliban could have killed the colonizer. According to Prospero, Caliban also “makes our fire, / fetch in our wood,” which is a subtler way of resisting the colonization and enslavement (1.2 373-374). While it is true that Caliban is doing their bidding, he also facilitates the burning of wood. Ariel emerged from the wooden body of a tree as the bodies of black folks emerged from slave ships, thus Caliban’s assistance can be read as the burning of the trees being a symbolic burning of slave ships. This is not only resisting the slavers, but this is a resistance to slavery as an institution, because, without vessels or wooden bodies to “make” slaves, the institution of slavery could not perpetuate itself. This reading of resistance illustrates the presence of push-back against the slave-trade from those who are enslaved, without the slaves needing to be heard in order to resist their masters. Further, slaves not needing to be heard to resist also works to subvert the colonization of language that Miranda perpetuated against Caliban (1.2 437-439).

In addition to enslavement and resistance, the zombie represents the fear of “others,” and the decomposition of established social boundaries through the transmission of a contagion. Ariel demonstrates this through his liminal status between embodied and disembodied, human and inhuman, male and female, etc. Therefore, Ariel is functioning as a social contagion, because

he is a literal foreign body that can cross (or not cross) into various spaces. It is Ariel's supernaturalism that allows him to function as the embodiment of a contagion that spreads zombification. In act one scene two, Prospero asks "but are they [the ship's passengers], Ariel, safe?" to which Ariel responds, "Not a hair perished" (1.2 258). This implies that Ariel's presence on the ship could have spread deadness, which is a fundamental part of zombification. Also, if we recall that the definition of "spirit" that suggests that Ariel could be the spirit of a dead person, I would also argue that the spirits of the sailors would also become sentient Zombies just like Ariel. By causing the deaths of the sailors, Ariel could have also caused the sailors to become zombies and, subsequently, dangerous "others" who, like Ariel and Caliban, do not fit into established identity categories or social standards. And while the creation of Zombies by Ariel, Prospero's familiar, may seem beneficial to the established social hierarchy because of the fact that zombies represent enslavement, zombies also represent resistance within the institution of slavery. This could then make a narrative of contagion, which represents "the fear of citizens being infected by outsiders," into a narrative of *immunity* where slaves are immune to death (both social and literal, as zombies are undead beings) while maintaining the ability to spread death to other bodies (Miller 145).

Ariel is then not only able to disrupt the island's social order by being the embodiment of the contagion of death. Ariel is also the carrier of another contagion. Boluk and Lenz argued in their paper that "textual articulations of anxiety regarding biological infection have simultaneously operated as expressions of otherwise largely unspoken anxieties," and while I agree, I would like to acknowledge the fact that there is no literal contagion in *The Tempest* (Boluk and Lenz 127). Instead, I am arguing that there is a metaphorical desire for freedom that is acting as the contagion in *The Tempest*. Ariel himself is presented not only as a carrier of this

contagion, but a personification of contagion itself, as is demonstrated when Prospero calls him a “malignant thing” when they are discussing the prospect of Ariel’s freedom (1.2 308). Malignant means “exceptionally contagious” or “having the property of uncontrolled growth” (OED). The contagions in this context are twofold: the first contagion that Ariel is embodying in this scene is a desire for freedom, because he is a being whom Prospero has enslaved. But it is not only Ariel’s enslavement that makes the desire for freedom contagious. Prospero is also the master of the slave Caliban, who is later described as being defiant towards Prospero’s rule. This makes Ariel’s desire for freedom a particularly infectious contagion, because Caliban was already insubordinate. Further, because of Ariel’s liminal status as a spirit, he represents a societal contagion, which is the breakdown of distinct social and physical categories. Prospero relies on the distinct categories of human, race, status, male, etc. to exert power over other beings on the island. Therefore, because Ariel is able to create the illusion of multiple spiritual beings, he is, in a sense, multiplying the number of spirits, which means multiplying the number of liminal beings on the island which threaten Prospero’s power over them (4.1 67-159).

For Caliban, otherness comes from both his race and the actions of his mother Sycorax whom Prospero killed after coming to the Island. Caliban’s race is never specified in *The Tempest*, but the characters refer to his race as if there is some implied otherness that comes with it. Miranda uses the phrase “thy vile race” (1.2 430-431), and because the word “thy” is a second-person possessive pronoun, this would indicate that Caliban is not of the same race as Miranda and Prospero, two white Italians. A second indicator that Caliban was not the same race as Miranda and Prospero was Caliban saying, “this Island’s mine by Sycorax, my mother, which thou tak’st from me” (1.2 396-397). This establishes that Caliban is a person indigenous to the Island rather than a colonizer of the island like Miranda and Prospero were. Further, Caliban is

othered because of his heritage or being the son of a witch, which Shakespeare explains through Prospero who claims that Caliban's parents were Sycorax and "the devil himself" (1.2 384). Because of all of this, Caliban is also the carrier of contagions that could have spread and helped Caliban to change the power dynamics on the island. Caliban himself told Prospero that he would have used Miranda to "peopled else this isle with Calibans" (1.2 420-421). Here, Caliban was not only acknowledging that he was a carrier of a contagion, but that he could spread that contagion by producing more people who would also be racial others because of his "contamination" of Miranda's eggs. If, like Ariel, Caliban had the power to kill, that means he also has the power to spread deadness to Prospero who would then become a zombie like Ariel. Therefore, both Caliban and Ariel are threatening to Prospero and Miranda because they both have the power to replicate their own "otherness," by both creating more spirits/zombies by killing people, and by replicating themselves through the sexual assault of Miranda.

Boluk and Lenz have argued that "zombies, like plague, are great social levelers," but, in the context of *The Tempest*, I would argue that reading Ariel and Caliban as zombies works more to situate Shakespeare within capitalist narratives of the circulation of enslaved bodies. Caliban and Ariel are both in roles of servitude to Prospero, but because Prospero frees Ariel at the end of the play, Ariel is more like an indentured servant than a slave. Ariel's spirithood seems to mimic this in that Ariel is not a material being, therefore Prospero is unable to literally hold on to him. Caliban's servitude is different however, because Prospero never insinuates that Caliban will ever be free, indicating that he is a slave in perpetuity. What Caliban and Ariel *do* have in common is their status as threatening "others" or zombies that could potentially spread various contagions to the other inhabitants on the island. And, intersecting with their status as zombies, Caliban, Ariel and even Miranda and Prospero himself are "dead" beings. Therefore, when

Prospero says, “As you from crimes would pardoned be, / let your indulgence set me free” he and Shakespeare are asking for the audience to excuse their complicity in the circulation and enslavement of the bodies of people of color. Additionally, I am advocating for *The Tempest* to be placed alongside other pseudo-historical Shakespearean plays such as *Richard III* and *Henry V*. This is because, while fears such as the colonizers (Prospero and Miranda) becoming the colonized (Ariel and Caliban) are titillating terrors for the entertainment of white people, living in perpetual slavery was and continues to be a very real horror for people of color. Whereas Prospero’s desire to be freed by the audience indicates that he believes a person can be “enslaved” by accountability, once again illustrating the social anxiety of the slaver becoming the slave and the living becoming the dead. Meanwhile, as zombie figures, Ariel and Caliban resist literal death, and therefore threaten Prospero. No matter how socially dead he makes them, they cannot be killed, which means they can always resist.

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