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Source: *The French Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Dec., 2000), pp. 276-286
Published by: American Association of Teachers of French
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/398722
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THE FRENCH REVIEW, Vol. 74, No. 2, December 2000 *Printed in U.S.A.*

Mastering the Masters: Aimé Césaire's Creolization of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

by Judith Holland Sarnecki

"MANY A MAN'S TONGUE shakes out his master's undoing" wrote William Shakespeare in *All's Well That Ends Well* (2.4.23). Aimé Césaire takes Shakespeare at his word when he rewrites *The Tempest*, taking on the "master" in a political and artistic quest to free himself and his people from the oppression they have suffered at the hands of their colonizers. Yet how does one so thoroughly educated in French language and culture fight against complete assimilation? Césaire's most powerful tool seems to be, paradoxically, the very language he was taught by those who would control him. What better way to spread the word—a "word" which undergoes radical transformation in the hands of Césaire—to his compatriots living under political and cultural oppression than to stage, and hence expose, the process whereby one human being comes to control another. How Césaire uses language to pursue a revolutionary goal in his play, *Une Tempête* (performed for the first time in Paris in 1969 and subsequently in Abidjan and Fort-de-France), is the subject of my investigation.

Writing in a modernist vein, Césaire had an almost mystical belief in language, "l'arme miraculeuse," that allied him with surrealist poets and won him the admiration of André Breton. Believing wholeheartedly in language's revolutionary potential, Césaire launched a critique of European thought in *Une Tempête* that James Arnold calls "a reorientation in our understanding of the Renaissance man" (238). Césaire's adaptation of *The Tempest* for a black audience, Arnold contends, brings about an important ideological shift: by foregrounding political and racial themes, Césaire leads his audience to reflect critically on the value system of Western humanism (237–41). In so doing, Césaire demonstrates a decidedly postmodern sensibility. By unmasking the brutality which underlies colonization, Césaire shows how the West's "civilizing mission" becomes one more form of violence (Porter 373).

Nevertheless, the newer generation of Martinican writers has criticized Césaire for forsaking Creole—a mixture of maternal tongues and tongues

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of the "masters."[1] I would argue that while Césaire did not make a conscious effort to transcribe the popular language of Martinique, he does lay the necessary groundwork for the "creolization" that Edouard Glissant proposes in *Le Discours antillais;* moreover, many of the seeds Césaire sows can be detected in *Une Tempête.* Glissant's description of Creole as a detour from French that is full of *quid pro quo*s and double meanings actually recalls the way Césaire uses language to beat Shakespeare at his own game. The Caliban Césaire creates speaks a language that, like Creole, is pieced together from fragments that reveal the violence done to Africans forced into slave ships and carried far from their homeland. Caliban's "creolization" of the French language, furthermore, reveals a mastery that unsettles Prospero to the point of madness.

Reversal of Fortune

While on the one hand Shakespeare scholars take little interest in *Une Tempête,* on the other hand the younger generation of Caribbean authors criticize Césaire's ties to a Western icon and his abandonment of Creole in favor of French, African, and English references. Chamoiseau, Bernabé, and Confiant write in *Eloge de la créolité,* for example, that "La Négritude césairienne est un baptême, l'acte primal de notre dignité restituée. Nous sommes à jamais fils d'Aimé Césaire" (18). At the same time, however, they refuse Césaire the status of a truly Caribbean or Creole author: "Avec Edouard Glissant nous refusâmes de nous enfermer dans la Négritude, épelant l'Antillanité qui relevait plus de la vision que du concept" (21). Thus Césaire appears to be both mentor and stumbling block for these young writers, who consider him less anti- than ante-creole (18).

In his 1993 monograph *Aimé Césaire: une traversée paradoxale du siècle,* Rafaël Confiant amends his earlier position—"à jamais fils d'Aimé Césaire"—to "rebelle à son enseignement, toujours critique, sans en nier l'immense valeur" (272).[2] Confiant criticizes Césaire for an assimilationist politics that does not live up to his revolutionary poetics. While Confiant points out the paradox in Césaire's life and work, he appears to miss his own: his text tries to have done with Césaire and his enormous influence on a younger generation of Martinican writers at the same time that it pleads for Césaire's acknowledgment of the failure of his politics as a way of leading his people in a new direction.[3] Confiant summarily dismisses *Une Tempête,* contending that Césaire's Caliban remains locked in conflict with the white colonizer. Thus, even postmodern Martinican theoreticians such as Confiant have trouble appreciating how much ahead of his time, how "deconstructionist," Césaire really was in writing *Une Tempête:*

> Les Antilles françaises d'aujourd'hui souffrent d'un péché originel: celui de l'assimilation.

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> Celui qui a, non pas commis, mais légitimé ce péché, en présentant la loi dite d'assimilation de 1946, est Aimé Césaire, le père de l'idée de Négritude. (27)

While younger Martinican authors may feel the need to reject "Papa Aimé" and minimize the importance of his ideas, Jean-Paul Sartre in his 1948 essay, "Orphée noir," read Césaire's Négritude not as the universal black essence that Confiant takes it to be, but as a self-conscious, self-deconstructing notion:

> Ainsi la Négritude est pour se détruire, elle est passage et non aboutissement, moyen et non fin dernière. Dans le moment que les Orphées noirs embrassent le plus étroitement cette Eurydice, ils sentent qu'elle s'évanouit entre leurs bras. (xli)

This reading conforms with Aliko Songolo's assertion that even at the moment of its inception, negritude already contained the seeds of post-negritude.[4]

Césaire first used the term "Négritude" in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, published in 1939 upon his return to Martinique from his studies in Paris and his formative encounter with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Gontran Damas. Senghor acquainted Césaire with African traditions and values lost through colonization and enslavement. In Paris, at the very time that he was immersed in French culture, Césaire felt the need to reconnect with a lost past. As Senghor presented her, Mother Africa had the power of a myth of origins, a power Césaire longed to communicate to his fellow islanders. The explosive violence of the *Cahier*, according to Daniel Delas, results from having to express revolt and humiliation in the very language of the oppressors. Delas calls our attention to the abundance of interjections in Césaire's texts—a literal explosion of the word (73–74). Such interjections often manifest themselves as a cry—a kind of semiotic eruption of the African mother tongue into the French symbolic order. This preoedipal utterance also happens to be the only form of expression available to those whose means of communication have vanished; as such, it liberates and gives voice to the islanders who were hitherto silenced. Such violent linguistic eruptions are well suited to describe the island of Martinique with its volcanic Mont Pelée.[5]

Yet, Delas has a hard time considering Césaire's works outside of a European context. He claims, for instance, that Césaire steals white culture in much the same way that Prometheus stole fire from the gods (96). While this comparison is admirable, its central point of reference remains Western culture. It does not take into account how Césaire, unlike Prometheus, profoundly transforms what he steals. For Césaire uses French in new ways, bringing about a revolutionary shift in how colonized peoples might view themselves. Thomas Hale points out that Césaire's goal in *Une Tempête* was to destroy Western culture's myth of the good master/humble slave (24). Under Césaire's careful pen the

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master-slave (M/S) relationship reveals itself to be sadomasochistic (S/M). In *Trois Calibans*, Roger Toumson contends that Césaire redistributes Shakespeare's roles by a series of displacements that significantly modify the rapport that each subject has with himself and his world. In Toumson's words, the play is "un retournement d'un retournement" (361). He points out that Césaire's reversible points of view cause Caliban's monstrosity to disappear and Prospero's to manifest itself (415–16). The alienated, fragmented subject (Shakespeare's Caliban) emerges in Césaire's play as his own master because he claims the subject position in language in order to undo Prospero's "magic" (431). Caliban's linguistic mastery reverses the power dynamic operational in colonization. It is through this reversal that a later move to creolization becomes possible.

The Play's the Thing

Similar to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in many respects—the plot and the characters remain much the same—Césaire's text is truly subversive in both intent and execution, shifting the emphasis by reducing secondary story lines and foregrounding Caliban's plight. Shakespeare's story line is more ample, his use of language playful, his emphasis directed toward resolution and reconciliation: Prospero, former Duke of Milan, has spent twelve years on a desert island with his daughter Miranda after falling victim to a plot hatched by his brother Antonio and Alonso, the king of Naples. Now these two villains have landed on the island with their attendants during a storm of Prospero's making. Obviously Prospero has not been idle all these years. Indeed, he has wrested the island from the witch Sycorax and enslaved her son Caliban; he has freed the spirit Ariel from Sycorax's paralyzing spell; and, over the course of time, he has become a mighty sorcerer. He can cause the winds to blow and call forth the spirits of Greek and Roman mythology with a few well chosen words. Prospero befuddles his unwitting guests until he feels they are repentant, fosters the romance between his daughter and Alonso's son Ferdinand, promises Ariel his freedom, and continues to bedevil Caliban.

Césaire takes this plot and distorts it, turns it inside out and stands the relationships in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* on their heads. In *Une Tempête*'s final scene, Prospero announces: "Décidément, c'est le monde renversé" (3.5.87).[6] Césaire creates a "tempest" which is at one and the same time like Shakespeare's and yet entirely different. In much the same way that David Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* deconstructs Puccini's opera classic *Madame Butterfly*, Césaire's *Une Tempête* derails and reroutes Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.[7] Lawrence Porter points out that Césaire foregrounds the struggle between Caliban and Prospero, enhancing Caliban's character by reducing competing plots, specifically the revenge plot and

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the romantic idyll. Césaire unmasks Prospero's "magic," which turns out to be none other than the delusion and rationalization of "white superiority." Porter writes: "[The] mainspring of Césaire's parody is a metonymic reversal of cause and effect whereby Shakespeare's diagnosis of political ills becomes the symptom" (366). No longer allowing the audience to identify or sympathize with Prospero, Césaire brings them to a new consciousness and political awareness. The playwright's goal, Porter claims, is not catharsis but incitement to action (366).

When he gives voice to Caliban, allowing him finally to "talk back," Césaire incorporates into the French language just the sort of rebellion and resistance that Glissant ascribes to Creole (*Le Discours antillais* 32–33). In the last scene of Césaire's play, Caliban tells Prospero:

> Il faut que tu comprennes, Prospero:
> des années j'ai courbé la tête,
> des années j'ai accepté
> tout accepté:
> tes insultes, ton ingratitude
> pis encore, plus dégradante que tout le reste,
> ta condescendance.
> Mais maintenant c'est fini!
> Fini, tu entends! (3.5.87–88)[8]

Caliban answers his "master" in his master's tongue—how else could he have made himself understood when Prospero recognizes no language but his own?—yet the word order and rhythm are completely different from Prospero's. A deformation has already taken place. In addition, Caliban uses Prospero's own language to denounce him, to show his contempt for him, and to demonstrate that he understands the full extent of what Prospero has done to him. He tells Prospero:

> Et tu m'as tellement menti,
> menti sur le monde, menti sur moi-même,
> que tu as fini par m'imposer
> une image de moi-même:
> Un sous-développé, comme tu dis,
> un sous-capable,
> voilà comment tu m'as obligé à me voir,
> et cette image, je la hais! Et elle est fausse! (3.5.88)

Césaire's Caliban recognizes that the power to name someone is also the power to define that person. Much earlier in the play Caliban declares: "je te dis que désormais je ne répondrai plus au nom de Caliban" (1.2.28). Caliban's rejection of his name—the name given to him by Prospero—also signals his refusal of Prospero's definition of him as lazy, stupid, ugly, bestial, even demonic. In *Une Tempête*, Caliban effectively demonstrates that Prospero's "humanism" is decidedly inhuman (and inhumane) precisely because it does not accord Caliban the status of a human being. He tells Prospero: "Appelle-moi X. Ça vaudra mieux.

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Comme qui dirait l'homme sans nom. Plus exactement, l'homme dont on a *volé* le nom" (1.2.28). Acknowledging that Prospero has stolen his native tongue, Caliban rejects Prospero's power to dominate him through language.

The linguistic detour that Césaire takes in *Une Tempête* is by way of Africa, bringing in African expressions and adding an African god to the panoply of Greek and Roman ones incorporated in Shakespeare's play. The presence of Swahili and Yoruba words and the Yoruba god Eshu are disturbing: the words disrupt the text in ways that intentionally corrupt the "purity" of the French language, while the antics and obscene language of Eshu interfere with the spectacle that Prospero has conjured up for the young lovers, Miranda and Ferdinand. Both serve to break up a classic plot and a classic deployment of language. Eshu, the Yoruba trickster god, who erupts onto the scene like the volcanic Mont Pelée, introduces an African and West Indian cultural and religious element to remind the audience of an animist tradition that predates Christianity and Islam. Not only is this traditional religion still practiced by more than 13 million West Africans, it has survived in a very pure form in the West Indies and Brazil, transported to those regions during the transatlantic slave trade (*Cultural Atlas* 38). Porter reads the presence of Eshu as Césaire's way of symbolizing an authentic cultural heritage that the slaves of the black diaspora carried with them to the New World (376).

Césaire makes Caliban a sorcerer in his own right—after all, his mother Sycorax is presented as a witch in Shakespeare's play. The Martinican playwright ironically juxtaposes "black magic" to "white magic," making Caliban and Prospero equal adversaries in a clash not only of wits, but of languages and cultures as well. Césaire's text belies the notion that there is only one culture and one language worth acknowledging. Thus in *Une Tempête*, Caliban beats Prospero at his own game, mastering his language so well that he can bend it to his own revolutionary purposes. Caliban tells Prospero: "Chaque fois que tu m'appeleras [sic], ça me rappellera le fait fondamental, que tu m'as tout volé et jusqu'à mon identité! Uhuru!" (1.2.28). *Uhuru*, the Swahili word for freedom, has, according to James Arnold, "gained a universal currency since it first shook European colonialism in the 1950s" (240). In Césaire's play it becomes a touchstone that recalls and rekindles the revolutionary fervor felt across much of Africa in the 1960s when the cry for freedom from colonial oppression was heard the world over.

What Caliban does to Prospero in Césaire's play becomes the mirror image of what Césaire has done to Shakespeare: mastering the master. Prospero has often been perceived as the *porte-parole* or alter-ego of Shakespeare. Césaire implicitly makes this comparison, recognizing that the playwright, like Prospero, is a kind of magician who uses words to conjure up images to entertain and mystify his spectators. But

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the mystification that Césaire particularly wants us to recognize is that of racial superiority. Porter reminds us that Césaire's use of *le meneur du jeu*, who calls upon the actors to choose their roles by donning masks as the play begins, recalls the artificiality of both the category of "race" and the racialized social hierarchy under colonization (365). In Césaire's reworking of the bard's final play, Caliban increasingly defies Prospero as he grows in strength and self-esteem, while multilingualism and multiculturalism replace monolingualism and monoculturalism. Césaire's declaration of freedom from Western cultural values, therefore, shows itself to be a necessary first step in the process of creolization.

The all-important change Césaire effects in *Une Tempête* is to transform Shakespeare's deformed and sorry creature, Caliban, into a revolutionary hero by giving him a new way of speaking in a language all his own—a French punctuated by African and Creole expressions and rhythms. Compare the last scene of Shakespeare's play where Caliban admits the error of his ways by becoming a compliant and docile slave ("and I'll be wise hereafter / And seek for grace" [5.1.295–96]), with Césaire's final scene in which Caliban renounces and denounces Prospero once and for all. Janis Pallister informs us that Caliban's last lines in *Une Tempête* actually comprise a war song that evokes the Yoruba god of thunder, Shango (93). Césaire's Caliban begins his poetic chant: "Shango marche avec force à travers le ciel, son promenoir!" (3.5.89). This quite different ending suggests that power has passed from the hands of the master to a slave who will now conjure up his own tempests. It is equally important to note that Césaire's Caliban eschews physical violence—he does not strike down Prospero when he has the chance—but instead uses a volcanic eruption of words to destroy his adversary's self-delusions. Thomas Hale concludes: "C'est grâce à des assauts verbaux, et non pas à la révolte armée, que Caliban réussit pour la première fois à semer le doute dans l'esprit de son oppresseur" (28).

Césaire pinpoints Shakespeare's generation's prejudices and faulty logic as he lays bare one of the larger goals of Western culture: to tame and control unwieldy nature. In *Le Discours antillais*, Glissant asserts that culture and nature are posed as opposites in Western thought, with culture assuming a position of superiority. Glissant goes on to say that Western man's dream was not only to control nature—both his own and that around him—by culture, but also to make nature a slave of culture (139). In Shakespeare's text, Prospero clearly represents culture while Caliban represents its inferior Other—nature. Thus when Caliban is defined as "inferior" and placed below Prospero in *The Tempest*'s human hierarchy, such reasoning appears logical and justifiable. In attempting to explain how such a mentality operates, Glissant points out that the West is less a place than a project (12). Using an element that Glissant says is essential to

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the Creole language, namely derision, Césaire demonstrates the relativity of definitions that often appear absolute or universal. Relationships long presented as "natural" are thrown into question when the racist assumptions that underlie them are brought to light. The colonizer's project to ensure power over the colonized included representing the slave as less than human. Césaire negates this image, Lawrence Porter asserts, by endowing Caliban with greater lucidity than his master and a belief system of his own (366, 371). James Arnold points out that while Césaire's Prospero struggles against the natural world of the island, Caliban is represented as its ally; hence, the animist world view is recast in a respectable and desirable light (247).

Césaire's initial attack on Western culture comes in his subtle reworking of the play's title. Whereas Shakespeare calls his play *The Tempest*, Césaire names his play more modestly *Une Tempête*, just one among many, singular as opposed to universal. Césaire's title privileges process over product; it suggests that the storms (a common occurrence on the island, not the result of a delusional magician's ravings) are not an end in themselves. Rather, they are part of an ongoing process that brings about change in the form of destruction and renewal. The attack continues as Césaire makes us aware of how Prospero's behavior toward Caliban calls into question the entire notion of "civilized" man. For example, Césaire's Prospero tells Caliban: "La trique, c'est le seul langage que tu comprennes; eh bien, tant pis pour toi, je te le parlerai haut et clair" (1.2.27). Although Césaire may indeed underscore the sadistic streak in Prospero, this attribute presents itself first in Shakespeare's version. For this is how Shakespeare's Prospero addresses Caliban:

> For this, be sure, to-night thou shalt have cramps,
> Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins
> Shall, for that vast of night that they may work,
> All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinched
> As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging
> Than bees that made' em. (1.2.325–30)

Césaire also deconstructs the Western ideal of romantic love when he highlights a short scene in which Miranda catches Ferdinand cheating her at chess, a possible forecast of their future life together. Césaire plays on the double meaning of the word for chess piece, "échec." Yet Shakespeare himself suggests this idea, albeit in a more lighthearted way, when he depicts a game of chess in which Miranda declares to Ferdinand: "Sweet lord, you play me false" (5.1.172).

Other relationships cleverly rewritten include the one between Caliban, the black slave, and Ariel, the mulatto. By making Ariel a mulatto, Césaire reproduces Martinique's racial hierarchy with all of its inherent tensions. The dialectic between the two is reminiscent as well of the ideological differences between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, differences to

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which Césaire was keenly attuned because they reflected many of the ambiguities in his own position. He also modifies the relationship between Caliban and the two European servants, Stephano and Trinculo. In *The Tempest*, Caliban pledges loyalty to these two fools in the cowardly hope that they will kill Prospero for him. In Césaire's version, Caliban throws in his lot with Stephano and Trinculo for a time, but quickly realizes his mistake and rectifies it. This reworking of the relationship between Caliban and Stephano and Trinculo does two important things: first, it shows up the class prejudice in Shakespeare's play; and second, it points out that Marxist objectives do not necessarily coincide with liberation from racial oppression. Working class men can be just as racist and exploitative as their masters. As Stephano tells Trinculo in *Une Tempête:* "Il n'a pas l'air bête . . . Je vais entreprendre de le civiliser. Oh! Pas trop! Mais assez pour que nous puissions en tirer parti" (3.2.60).

All's Well That Ends Well

In an article that closely examines *Une Tempête*'s anticolonialist discourse, Lawrence Porter recognizes the full import of this too-long neglected play. He reminds us that Césaire's is the only full-scale adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and contends that "*[Une Tempête]* constitutes a detailed condemnation of imperialism and racism, rivaled in Césaire's career only by his masterpiece, the *Cahier*" (362).[9] Césaire's various strategies for undermining the project that "the West" represents enable him to master a "master" text of Western culture. Linguistic mastery provides the key to freedom in Césaire's play. The master magician is the one who can create the greatest tempest of words, words that have the power to change our relationship to others, even to change who we are. Language is the weapon that Césaire and his Caliban both use to expose a racist and colonialist mentality that lies at the heart not only of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but also of many seminal texts of Western civilization. Indeed, Césaire displays a double mastery by recrafting Shakespeare's play in the French language, implying a knowledge of English and European culture that goes far beyond a simple mastery of French. Like the sorcerer's apprentice whose magic spell sets off a chain reaction impossible to control, Césaire hopes to raise a storm that will sweep through his island, transforming in the process not only language, but his audience as well. Perhaps the Martinican poet could agree with Shakespeare on the conclusion drawn by the title of a very different play: *All's Well That Ends Well*. In Césaire's version of Shakespeare's play, it is Caliban, not Prospero, who controls the ending, an ending left open for future generations to write.

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[1]Biographical information on Césaire reveals that he was brought up speaking primarily French in his home, not Creole. The notion of "mother tongue" becomes problematic in colonized French territories where assimilation was highly successful due, in great part, to the imposition of the French educational system.

[2]*Eloge de la créolité* was written collaboratively by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant and was largely influenced by the theoretical texts of Edouard Glissant. See also "Creolization versus Francophonie: Language, Identity, and Culture in the Works of Edouard Glissant" by Bernadette Cailler in *L'Héritage de Caliban*, 49–62.

[3]Such an acknowledgement would of course mean Césaire's return to the very Christ-like role Confiant criticizes him for in the first place.

[4]I refer here to Songolo's paper "Aimé Césaire et la poétique de la découverte."

[5]It has been brought to my attention that during various interviews Césaire liked to compare himself to Mont Pelée. In a series of interviews on videocassette, *Aimé Césaire: une voix pour l'histoire,* directed by Euzhan Palcy in 1994, Césaire comments on how fitting it is that the island of Martinique was created by violent volcanic eruptions.

[6]*Une Tempête* has received less critical attention than *Une Saison au Congo* (1973) or *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* (1963). To the best of my knowledge, it has never been translated into English.

[7]Actually Césaire did it first—his play predates Hwang's by twenty years.

[8]All quotations from Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* are taken from the Seuil edition (Paris, 1969). Quotations from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* are taken from The Pelican Shakespeare (Penguin Books, 3rd ed., 1987), edited by Northop Frye.

[9]I would add to this important list *Discours sur le colonialisme* that Césaire wrote as a rebuttal to Octave Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, in which Mannoni rationalizes the colonizers' position as a necessary symbolic father to the colonized peoples.

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