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**On Samaroo's *Tempus Est*: the Earliest Colonial
Rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest***

A talk given at the Royal Festival Hall, London, on 8 November 2000

employed three compositors of differing carelessness. They worked from a manuscript prepared by the legal scrivener Ralph Crane, who probably worked from Shakespeare's rough draft or a copy of Shakespeare's rough draft - no-one knows for sure - the receding of the original work creating space for error as well as conscious tampering. Crane is said to have tidied up Shakespeare's manuscript, assuming it was indeed Shakespeare's manuscript. He divided the text into acts and scenes and added elaborate stage directions. He changed the punctuation according to his own style of expression. He may well have meddled with the metre of the play. Speeches may have been taken out of the mouth of one character and given to another. For example Miranda's savage outburst against Caliban in Act I Scene II calling him "Abhorred slave," accusing him of gabbling "like / A thing most brutish" and of belonging to a "vile race," quite rightly struck critics as not quite in keeping with the fragrance of her character, but sounding more like the cursing of a cheated and revengeful harlot. So for two hundred and fifty years editors gave Prospero the violent speech to preserve Miranda's linguistic virginity. Even a single letter of a word changed by Crane or the blind printer could alter perceptions of the play in a profound way. The editors of the New Arden edition point to the controversy over Ferdinand's exclamation in Act IV Scene I:

Let me live here ever;
So rare a wonder'd father and a wise
Makes this place Paradise.

Ferdinand's eulogy to Prospero typifies the overwhelming male orientation of the play. In 1709 Nicholas Rowe published an edition of *The Tempest* which changed "wise" to "wife" ("Let me live here ever; / So rare a wonder'd father and a wife / Makes this place Paradise"). Feminists were understandably supportive of the substitution of "f" for "s" - wife for wise - since Ferdinand then appears to

acknowledge Miranda's presence and power. It was argued that the "apparent long 's' was actually a broken 'f' which remained intact in the first few impressions but subsequently lost half of its crossbar." So, apart from zealous editors, blind printers and slack compositors the meaning of *The Tempest* was possibly affected by weak or base metal. The apparent lack of justification, as it were, in Shakespeare's text, has paradoxically *justified* myriad interpretations of the play. Artists from the seventeenth century onwards have been so fervent in their spin-doctoring of its contents that even Prospero would have been rendered speechless by their labour. I will add my own ingredients to this alchemical cauldron by suggesting a green and New-Age aspect, but before I do so I will rehearse some previous transmutations.

Firstly feminist criticism, which asks questions about the pre-history of the drama, stories which lie outside Prospero's commanding narrative, stories about women. Who is Claribel apart from being the daughter of the King of Naples and the wife of the King of Tunis? Who is Prospero's wife, equally dismissed from the text in Prospero's grudging one-liner to Miranda: "Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter." And Sycorax, Caliban's mother, who is killed off before the play begins and subsequently remembered by Prospero in a few utterances? Sycorax is described variously as swine, bitch, hag, vile witch. This trinity of dimmed and muted women are given voice and presence in the fiction and poetry of Marina Warner, Hilda Doolittle and others. Marina Warner also fleshes out Sycorax's literary forebears in the figures of Circe and Medea, in the process intimating the ways in which Prospero is mired in an ugly and obsessive sexuality, his puritanical rant masking unspeakable desire and unspeakable experience. The possibility of union between Prospero and Sycorax giving birth to Caliban sheds new light upon Prospero's fanatical protection of his daughter as well as on Prospero's

recoil from Caliban as from his darker self. In Suniti Namjoshi's poetry, Caliban is female and enjoys a lesbian relationship with Miranda outside Prospero's conception. In Sarah Murphy's novel *The Measure of Miranda*, a young Canadian Miranda blows up a Central American dictator on seeing photographs of tortures he had sanctioned, and she dies in the process. Gender politics, power politics, Third World politics, the politics of human rights, and the politics of revolutionary suicide, engage with each other in ways unforeseen by Prospero, never mind Shakespeare, but which have

aristocrat who is modest, self-effacing and quietly-mannered, from the Johnny-come-lately with his designer-label loudness of appearance, and from white-trash who are on all-inclusive package holidays and so eat and drink like fevered swine. A system of discreet apartheid separates the various English classes within the space of the hotel, and much of the humour and menace of the work comes from the incongruities that are revealed when one class accidentally enters the space of the other. The Prospero character, the owner of the hotel, is an Englishman whose incessant self-promotion and boasting of social influence have a certain poignancy, masking self-hatred and inferiority. He is of a lower middle-class south London origin: through prolonged study he was granted a place to read Pure Mathematics at one of the poorer Oxbridge colleges. His Oxbridge life is a series of social humiliations which eventually erode his confidence in the pursuit of pure scientific knowledge, so he settles for the practical and becomes an accountant and entrepreneur. Ownership of a hotel in the colonial outpost of Jamaica is his way of fleeing a class-ridden England. In Jamaica he can lord it not over the natives, who play no part in his pained psyche, but over the hotel clientele from places like Barnsley and Huddersfield.

Both Jarman and Doby deliberately ignore any racial colouring of the play, but in the latter part of the twentieth century, postcolonial criticism has dominated interpretations of *The Tempest*, Caliban giving full vent to the grievances of empire. Prospero has come to symbolise the tyrannical European whose technology of printing press and compass and gun unleashed such havoc in native communities and whose calculating rationality denied the intuitive processes by which the distance between self and other can be bridged. Caliban becomes the field Negro, the cane-cutter, the eternal labourer, dispossessed of island and of native culture and who is trapped in retaliatory behaviour. Ariel symbolises the mulatto or house-Negro, the

new breed of West Indian given a degree of authority and policing over his fellow black in the imperial system of divide and rule. Miranda is the European virgin who has to be protected against heathen invasion, against native lust. She is the site of struggle between the coloniser and the colonised. If she is lost to the colonised, the whole of European civilisation crumbles. Postcolonial renderings of the play highlight what is now a generally accepted view of the economics of empire, from the scholarship of Eric Williams onwards, which is that the trade in slaves and slave-produced commodities underpinned Western economic and cultural development. British places like Bristol and Liverpool, once fishing villages, became thriving cities and some of the world's greatest seaports, because of the business of slavery. Britain's great commercial systems in banking and insurance arose to service the slave trade. In the realm of culture the eighteenth-century taste for neo-Palladian and neo-Gothic architecture was enabled by the revenues from slavery. The Beckford family which built Fonthill as a monumental display of both styles made their pile from the Caribbean, from Caliban's uncouth and Philistine labour. The new

modern colony sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous people.

The deepest mood of postcolonial writing, however, is not righteous and retaliatory anger but a song of redemption. *The Tempest*, as with *Othello*

some of his green ideas, even though I run the risk by such abstraction of simplifying his surrealistic composition. *Tempest Est* has three concerns relevant to Shakespeare's play. Firstly a huge clearing has been made in the Amazonian rainforest of Demerara and it is on this devastated spot and island of desolation that Samaroo sets the Shakespearean scenes. Prospero is neither man nor woman, white nor black, Christian nor pagan. He is a living economy of bones arranged in a

I Scene II when Caliban is ordered to fetch fuel, or Ferdinand's statement in Act III Scene I that "I must remove / Some thousands of these logs, and pile them up, / Upon a sore injunction," by suggesting that Prospero's rulership of the island is bound up

Robinson Crusoe is of course the most memorable and enduring embodiment of the practical. There is nothing romantic or spiritual in Crusoe's attitude to nature or to the landscape of the island. His view is quite simple: if it moves, shoot it, skin it, eat it or cut it down and hack a boat out of it. Crusoe submits all life to economic judgement. His ledger-book mentality extends to the killing of natives as he makes a neat inventory of his victims:

3 killed at our first shot from the tree.
2 killed at the next shot.
2 killed by Friday in the boat.
2 killed by ditto, of those at first wounded.
1 killed by ditto, in the wood.
3 killed by the Spaniard.
4 killed, being found dropped here and there of their wounds,
or killed by Friday in his chase of them.
4 escaped in the boat, whereof one wounded if not dead.

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21 in all.

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In Samaroo's *Tempus Est*, the emphasis is not so much on the destruction of native life, which is assumed, but on wanton cruelty to animals. In yet another incarnation Prospero is situated in a library of dead animals which he studies obsessively for signs of life. His cell is packed with an assortment of butterflies, insects, birds and fish neatly pinned to boards or set in boxes, and all annotated not in terms of their species or their aesthetic qualities but by the date they were caught, the method of killing, whether by poisoning or spearing or starvation, and their market value to collectors of exotica. Money is a factor in Prospero's treatment of wildlife, but his obsessive scrutiny of his bounty for signs of life suggests a fascination with killing for the sake of killing, for the mystery of killing. Prospero's behaviour is evocative of the most bizarre and inexplicable aspect of the colonial encounter, which was the impulse to destroy even when seized by awe at the appearance of native life. In 1586

an English adventurer, John Sarracoll, and a company of soldiers land in Sierra Leone and enter a small town which astonished them. Sarracoll writes, “we found their houses in the streets so finely and cleanly kept that it was an admiration to us all, for neither in the houses nor streets was so much dust to be found as would fill an eggshell.” Then something quite inexplicable happens. The soldiers, for no apparent reason, set fire to the town and it was erased within fifteen minutes. The critic Stephen Greenblatt has unearthed other examples of European astonishment which was suddenly converted into the desire to kill. The Spanish explorer Bernal Diaz in the 1520s comes upon the city of Mexico and is amazed at its palaces and gardens. Diaz writes, “I stood looking at it and thought that never in the world would there be discovered other lands such as these. Gazing on such wonderful sights we did not know what to say or whether what appeared before us was real.” Diaz and his men then set about destroying the place utterly. The simultaneity of awe and the urge to kill can never be fully understood, and perhaps it lies in Prospero’s statement about Caliban: “This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine.” Three hundred years later, in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, comes Marlow’s monumental confession of the meaning of his Congo experiences:

We were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet...we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign - and no memories. / The earth seemed unearthly...and the men were - No, they were not inhuman...They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity - like yours - the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.

In other words Africans are identified as mirror-images or twins of Europeans, and the sudden revelation of kinship evokes immediate horror and an overwhelming urge for repulsion and distancing. It is not a matter of killing the father-figure but of killing the twin. Such horror of oneself is the horror of the existence of the multiple

self and Samaroo's originality, in 1929, is to intuit Prospero's need to kill animals as Prospero's need to deny kinship between the human and the non-human. He rationalises division by killing and price-tagging nature. Elaborating on Act IV Scene I of *The Tempest*, when Caliban and his companions are hunted by dogs - "Let them be hunted soundly," Prospero commands, putting the horn to his mouth -

The science of Isaac Newton is evoked to give rational underpinning to the theology of the chain of being. The orderly heavens reflect the orderly class-system of England, a system in which hunting is the exclusive prerogative of the upper class.

From orb to orb, where Newton leads the way;
And view with piercing eyes the grand machine,
World above worlds; subservient to his voice,
Who, veil'd in clouded mystery, alone
Gives light to all.

Newton is central to an understanding of Samaroo's text. In the process of a long diatribe against nature in Creole, Hindi and Latin, Prospero gradually takes shape and comes to life as Shiva, the Hindu destroyer of the universe. The word is a curse made flesh, or rather, the cursed word is fleshed into a machine called Prospero-Shiva, literally armed with axes, which set about not clearing the trees but hollowing them out, degutting them, and leaving them standing in a ghostly settlement called New Tongue, which is the Creole pronunciation of New Town. In the colonial period there were innumerable new settlements innocuously called New Town, but Samaroo's naming is significant because Prospero-Shiva's diatribe is sprinkled with half quotations and mis-quotations from William Blake - "not a grain of sand, not a wild flower left, but I will not wipe from my eye / nor seashore, nor palm of hand not herb nor fountain nor rill, but to my wile." This couplet is a mishmash of Blake's famous lines, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand, / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, / And Eternity in an hour," which are intimately linked with other lines from Blake which are central to his vision of man's kinship with nature and the cosmos. "...each grain of sand / every stone on the land / each rock and each hill/ each fountain and rill / each herb and each tree / mountain, hill, earth and sea / cloud, meteor and star / are men seen afar." The conscious is grounded in and integrated with the unconscious, the interior and the

outward worlds penetrate each other, centres and peripheries coalesce, in the marriage of heaven and earth. Blake contrasts the alchemical imagination with what he calls Newton's "single vision," which is conventional perception within the material world. As Michael Mitchell writes, "single vision" is the privileging and separating of the conscious from the unconscious, "a process which gives birth to division, categorisation, measurement." Revelry becomes levelling, labelling. Logos becomes technologos: hence Samaroo's creation of the Prospero-Shiva machine. Its couplet, which rhymes "eye" and "wile" ("not a grain of sand, not a wild flower left, that I will not wipe from my *eye* / nor seashore nor palm of hand nor herb nor fountain nor rill, but to my *wile*") conveys the authoritarianism of technology. "Wile" echoes "will" - previous words like "hill" and "rill" encourage the pun. So the two end-words of the couplet are "eye will," words which are ominous in their suggestion of dictatorship. But Samaroo resists the rhyming logic of the diction of his couplet by choosing not "will" but "wile," as if to expose technology as artifice and trickery which hollows out nature, which takes the word out of flesh. And the "eye" of the couplet again refers to Blake's association of science and single vision. The miraculously complex and living eye is reduced to "I," to ego and singularity and separation and inequality. Blake's argument with Newton is that you "believe a lie / when you see with, not through, the eye." "May God us keep / from single vision and Newton's sleep." In Samaroo's text, Prospero's penultimate incarnation is as a gilded monocle laid out in grass to catch the sun's rays and ignite the forest. Single vision yokes heaven and earth, but catastrophically. The gilded monocle is a whimsical reference to the vision or single-vision of El Dorado which drew settlers to the green landscape of Guyana. In 1929 Samaroo could see, *through* his own eyes, the consequences of such greed, which were deforestation and ecocide.

Prospero's final incarnation, not surprisingly, and perhaps disappointingly, given the originality of Samaroo's mind, is as a paper-making machine. Trees are mangled and turned into pulp which is then turned into square pieces of paper which are monotonously lined. An empty glove traces endless obscene words on the paper, words like root, vein, waterfall, rock, spirit, sky, which culminate in the closing line

Tempest and yokes Shakespeare's play to early twentieth-century concerns about the environment which are even more urgent today.

Let me end by quoting two writers who share Samaroo's concerns and who in different ways link ecology to the language of poetry, to modes of seeing and expressing the world which deny reductionism and commodification. Firstly Ted Hughes's condemnation of the muting of the song of the earth:

While the mice in the field are listening to the universe, and moving in the body of nature, where every living cell is sacred to every other, and all are interdependent, the developer is peering at the field through a visor, and behind him stands a whole army of madman's ideas, and shareholders, impatient to cash in the world.

Finally the Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire:

Poetic cognition is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge. Through reflection, observation, experimentation, man, bewildered by the data confronting him, finally dominates them. Henceforth he knows how to guide himself through the forest of phenomena. He knows how to use the world, but that does not make him King of the World. Image of the World. Yes. Science can offer him an Image of the World but briefly and superficially. Scientific knowledge enumerates, measures, classifies and kills. To acquire it man has sacrificed everything: his desires, fears, feelings and psychological complexes.

Ted Hughes and Aimé Césaire - poet of the North, poet of the South, poet at the centre, poet at the margin - and so we can foolishly extend the dance of binaries, the dance of death, except that both, in the face of ecological disaster, asserted the primacy of the imagination over race, class, gender, nationality and ideology. Both were, first and foremost, poets struggling to achieve a language appropriate to the living fabric of landscape, a metre and cadence and diction to name and hallow the landscape. Otherwise lay scientific formulae, economic fabulation, deforestation - in short, the *prosaic*.

Notes

This is a revised version of a lecture commissioned by the BBC as part of its 'Shakespeare for the Millennium' series. The BBC has asked the editors to point out that transcripts of the other talks in the series are available online on the BBC Radio 3 website (www.bbc.co.uk/radio3).

The poem beginning 'His black bony peasant body' is David Dabydeen's "Miranda," from his collection *Coolie Odyssey* (London and Coventry: Hansib, Dangaroo, 1988).

Select Bibliography

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