

Osment's *This Island's Mine*: Borrowing powerful voices



Estibaliz Encarnación Pinedo | Universidad de Murcia, Spain

As Dymkowski mentions in the introduction of *Shakespeare in Production: The Tempest*, “*The Tempest* is a wonderfully rich play [Shakespeare’s] last play seems unusually elastic; its almost miraculous flexibility [allows] it to embody radically different interpretations, characterizations and emphases.” (Dymkowsky 1). The number of very different adaptations which we can find is an example of its potential, and at the same time, it stresses the ambiguity of a play whose life expectancy seems eternal. An adaptation, however, does not just imply a recognition of the original’s value, but can be used in itself “as a weapon in the struggle for supremacy between various ideologies, various poetics” (Lefevere 234). In this essay I will analyse Philip Osment’s theatrical adaptation of *The Tempest, This Island’s Mine*. At first sight, this adaptation seems to bear very little resemblance with the original; it is based in London, none of the characters act or speak like those in *The Tempest*, there is no magical element whatsoever and the plot has nothing to do with the original. Nevertheless, the oppression and subordination under which many of the characters live coincides with a reading of *The Tempest* which has had many advocators throughout the critical history: the colonial and postcolonial reading. With this essay I want to highlight the significance of *The Tempest* as an incredible initiator of critical thinking.¹ Furthermore, I will question the necessity of discussing this postcolonial reading, concluding instead that what needs to be stressed is the power of literature as a way of expressing subaltern voices and social problems.

Oppression

As I pointed out in the introduction, initially there seems to be little connection between Shakespeare's and Osment's plays besides the title and the representation we find of the play within the play. However, they both respond to some extent to a colonial scenario where oppression is the controlling force. When *This Island's Mine* was first performed in 1988, *The Tempest* had long been read as powerful text for the preoccupations of colonial history. From the 1950s onwards, since the publication of Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: the Psychology of Colonization*, there have been many critical and artistic productions which agree with this view. In this understanding of Shakespeare's play, Prospero is regarded as the white coloniser who imposes his culture and his power on Caliban, the native Caribbean slave whose culture is denied by the established Western society.

Osment, on the other hand, is not interested in showing this historical past, which does not mean that there is no communication with the present. This link to modern times and Shakespeare's society might easily be observed if we ask *This Island's Mine* the following question: Are we still colonised? The answer becomes a clear and resounding affirmative when we see how the different characters of the play are constantly put down by forces which they need to fight. In this sense, Osment's *This Island's Mine* goes along with the colonial reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in so far as it succeeds in expressing the power of the oppressors and the struggle of those oppressed, that is, the established dominant against the "Other".

This movement towards the present is usually implicit in the term "adaptation". As Fischlin and Fortier state in the introduction of *Adaptations of Shakespeare*: "The notion of adaptation (from the Latin *adaptare*, to fit, to make suitable) implies a way of making Shakespeare fit a particular historical moment or social requirement." (17). Therefore, what Osment has done is to take the

original play and translate it into the language of 1980s England. By language I do not simply mean the lexical output, but everything that surrounds it, including culture, technological progress, people's preoccupations and passions, et cetera. For instance, by the time *This Island's Mine* was performed, England was suffering from a wave of discrimination towards homosexuals with the passing of the law Section 28 of the Local Government Act. This law, which prevented 'the representation of positive images of homosexuality in schools and any discussion of alternative living' (qtd. in Fischlin and Fortier, "*This Island's Mine*: Introduction" 255), encouraged a disapproval of gay people and, together with the emerging awareness of AIDS, boosted the rejection towards those who were different. This law is echoed in the play in the first scene, when the teenager Luke's fear of revealing himself as gay to his family and friends is expressed. His speech is interrupted by voices which shout "DON'T TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO BE GAY" and "GOVERNORS TAKE ACTION TO PROTECT HEALTH AND MORALS" (Osment 259). These different voices are going to be a recurring aspect of the play, and they serve to express a very complicated idea of oppression. Unlike in *The Tempest*, England in Osment's play is no longer the coloniser but the colonised, since the USA is the one with the power. However, the idea of oppression in the play – and in our contemporary society – is more complex than that. We no longer have just one character imposing their will on the rest, but a multitude of simultaneous fronts which create a suffocating environment. Furthermore, the oppression does not merely come from an outsider that comes to take what he supposes to be his, but also from the very inhabitants of the island, England in this case.

Voices of oppression: talking about *Prosperos*

In the author's note to the play, Osment points to a complex understanding of narration and dialogue. Sometimes the two will cross the line, merging the

narrated parts and the bits of dialogue said directly by the characters. Furthermore, in the first production, all the actors were on stage during the whole performance, which helped create an ambiguity towards where the voices came from and to whom they were addressed. All these situations, together with the appearance of the voices mentioned in the previous section, create a space where many people can be heard, although none can stand out at the same time. Thus, the play gives an opportunity for different voices to be heard, the oppressors and the oppressed, without conferring power on any one of them. In *The Tempest*, Prospero is not only the main voice but also a kind of director/God who is able, through his magic, to control people's mind and will. Osment, on the other hand, has opted for the opposite process of taking power from him and giving it to others. This plurality of voices links the play with the postmodern moment and the emergence of subaltern identities. In the play we find many oppressed groups such as lesbian, gay or black people, who are put down by the main culture. In the following paragraphs I will analyse the presence of two major forces of oppression in the play: homophobia and racism.

Homophobia and its representations in the play

In scene 7, Mark tells his boyfriend how he has been fired from the restaurant where he worked. His boss' only explanation is that some members of the staff have complained and that he should understand "their fears" (263). A few scenes before that, we learn that they had just found out that Mark was homosexual, which made them feel uncomfortable in his presence. As Mark thinks when he sees their reaction,

Am I imagining it?

Or are they really being funny with me?

Ever since I mentioned Selwyn,

Told them I'd got a boyfriend. (260)

All the prejudices reflected in Mark's dismissal are part of one of the major voices of oppression within the play, directly affecting many of the characters in *This Island's Mine*. In the 1980s, together with the gay/lesbian liberation movement in England and the United States, there was an immediate rejection by certain groups of society which did not accept the differences and tried to banish homosexuality from their lives and culture. This part of society, expressed in the play through the different anonymous voices, works as a force of oppression and plays the part of one of the many "Prosperos" that exist in the play.

With regard to the homophobia within the play, one is able to appreciate that it is not only this external part of society that tyrannises the homosexual characters, but also their families, and ultimately themselves. We can find many examples in the play about this oppression from relatives. Martin, for instance, has suffered the rejection of his own family and lives now isolated from them. Ever since his sister, Luke's mother and her husband saw him in a demonstration for the rights of gay people, they have claimed to be "afraid of the effect [he] could have on Luke" (266). Similarly, Luke fears his mother's reaction when learning the truth about him, imagining a conversation with her in which someone will need to be blamed: "You didn't do wrong, Mam; It's nobody's fault; I am happy as I am" (259). Furthermore, Selwyn has also suffered from a rejection by some members of his family, especially his brother, who has actually "threatened to beat" (269) him up due to his homosexuality. Finally, Marianne has also felt uncomfortable with both her mother and her father from the moment they knew she was a lesbian, which ended up with her not being able to live up to their expectations.

Additionally, a third turning point is given to this homophobic oppression in the play, which is the inhibiting force from homosexuals towards homosexuals themselves. It is Martin, as a mature man who has lived and encouraged the emergence of the gay/lesbian minority, who is in a position to criticise the homosexual group from within. In the scene at the disco he seems to be complaining about the coldness and the shallowness of the present homosexual life, at the same time that he looks back with melancholia at a time when the fighting for freedom seemed to come hand in hand with a promising future. However, as he regrets in scene 16, the situation is not so encouraging: "Is that what we fought for all those years? Where did all that coming together go?" (272).

Racism

The second major force of oppression that we find in Osment's *This Island's Mine* is more closely related with the Shakespearean text and the postcolonial reading. In *The Tempest*, according to this interpretation, Caliban is seen as the Other, the racially and culturally different member of an "inferior" society which is oppressed by the white Western man. In the adaptation we are examining, racism still plays an important role in the discourse. There are several characters who have suffered the subjugation of other communities or individuals due to their colour or nationality. To what extent the issue of racism was important in Shakespeare's time is maybe something particularly difficult to address, but what is undeniable is that Osment has found some aspect of *The Tempest* which is very useful to express the particularly prominent problem of racism in his own time.

One of the characters that directly suffers this oppression is Selwyn, who is brutalised by the police for no other reason than being black. The attack reminds him of older times, when his older brother would advice him to run

whenever he saw a policeman approaching. To make things worse, Selwyn is carrying a book about gay workers and unions when he is stopped, which gives the policemen three reasons to “punish” him: he is black, gay and a threat to social stability. However, the different voices in the play make the issue much more complex than that. As it happened with the oppression derived from homophobic rejection, a kind of self-oppression or limitation that burdens the character, taking him deeper into his own conflict, is noticeable. Selwyn, when talking to Matt – here reduced to his white lover – fails to see the possibility of a real equality and fraternity between the two, which can be translated into an understanding of race as something that carries its own limitations. When Mark offers his help after Selwyn has been attacked, the latter rejects it, claiming that Mark would not be able to understand the pain that he is going through. By rejecting Mark’s help and going back to his mother’s, he is highlighting the difference between the two races and, at the same time, making it more difficult to find equality. Just a few lines before he is attacked, we are told that “Selwyn feels pleased with himself; He’s made it in a white man’s world; No need to feel victimized” (268). Whether it is a momentary disillusion or a real comprehension of life is not clear, but what can be drawn from the play is that racism is not simply something that happens from one group towards another, or at least, that the consequences that racism can have on a member of society can deeply affect, if not boost, their own vision of otherness.

Finally, what these two major oppressive forces come to represent in the play is a feeling of rootlessness which affects many of the characters. As in *The Tempest*, many of the characters in *This Island's Mine* do not feel at home; either because they actually moved or were forced to move, or just because they do not feel they belong where they are. For example, Luke runs away from home for fear of telling his parents and friends that he is gay. Martin and Marianne are alienated from their families for the same reason and live far away from their

relatives. Miss Rosenblum, Martin's landlady, had to run away from Germany due to the Nazis' racism. On the other hand, we can also find in the play a feeling of returning home or finding one's home someplace else. Selwyn, for example, decides to go home to his mother's for a while. Some of the characters, like Miss Rosenblum, who had lost her family, find their new home in England. We can appreciate this kind of reconciliation at the end of the play when she claims that "This is my home now, here's where I must make my life" (284).

Intertextuality. References and Characters

In this section I will analyse more closely some of the direct references which are made between the adaptation and the Shakespearean text. In order to do so, I will concentrate on the three characters that appear in the play within the play – Prospero, Caliban and Miranda – and who have their correspondences in the main narration of *This Island's Mine*. In the author's note, to which I already referred, Osment states that "[t]he doubling of Stephen/Prospero and Marianne/Miranda is important" (258). Even though he does not specifically explain why, it is clear that these characters, together with Selwyn, are the ones responsible for many of the Shakespearean references. Furthermore, the suggested doubling of some of the characters is used, most of the times, as a way of highlighting the differences instead of showing the similarities. What we find in *This Island's Mine* is an inversion of the original text; a kind of revision in which the characters have changed along with the society they now live in.

Stephen, Marianne's father, doubles up as Prospero in the rehearsals and in the final production of "The Tempest" at the end of the play. The first time he appears in *This Island's Mine* we see him through the eyes of his daughter:

White hair in stylish cut

Tanned urbane face

Expensive grey suit
Looking half his age
Relaxed and powerful (266)

The image we get from this description could be quite similar to the one we get from Shakespeare's Prospero. He is an aged man, even though he does not look old; he has features that remind us that he comes from the city – he is civilised –; and, more importantly, he has a “relaxed and powerful” expression. All of these details coincide with the Prospero we would typically find in a postcolonial reading of *The Tempest*, where Prospero, as the coloniser, would need to be powerful and a landmark of Western society. There are, however, several differences with this reading in *This Island's Mine* which are related to the updating of the adaptation, as much as to a new direction Osment takes, starting from a different point of view.

In *The Tempest*, it is Caliban – the native “savage” – who tries to rape the innocent Western virgin. Osment, in his adaptation, has turned that fact around, making Stephen/Prospero the one to actually rape the black “slave” – Mrs Berta Jones. The rape is described in the play in clear colonising terms:

What was she to do?
He was white,
A man
Her boss.
She was black
A woman
His maid.
And it was 1949. (280)

In case this was not enough to eradicate any trait of goodness that Prospero/Stephen could have, he is later exposed as responsible for selling blood in a bad condition to Africa, which caused the spreading of the HIV virus.

Another significant difference is that Prospero is now an American, becoming a threat to England and its inhabitants. Speaking as an American, he claims that his plan is to make the rest of the world a better place, echoing Gonzalo's utopian speech in *The Tempest*:

We're gonna build a better world,
Where there's no more war,
No more hunger,
No more disease.
Everyday new discoveries are being made
To make our life on earth a better one –
We're on the edge of a new age. (274)

These are the words of a hypocrite rather than those of a dreamer or a deluded man; an idea that is encouraged by the fact that we already know that he is actually contributing to the world's hunger and disease. In fact, instead of making this a better world, he is only making profit for his own interest and that of his new nationality. In this case, the USA constitutes the totality of the world for him; anything done for the benefit of this country, even though it proves detrimental to other places, is not only acceptable but also desirable.

Secondly, I will analyse Marianne, who doubles up as Miranda in *This Island's Mine*. When introduced, she is described as a "southern belle" (261) who has escaped from the USA in quest of her personal freedom. As Miranda in *The Tempest*, she is stranded on an island that does not exactly feel like home: "she sometimes feels that she has no nation; that she's stuck somewhere in the mid-Atlantic; an exile in both countries" (261). Nevertheless, even though we can find

similarities, Marianne stands out as an active and rebellious girl, which contrasts with the supposed lack of action of Miranda in the original text. She is very aware of her uprising against her father and his authority, taking it almost into a military context. When she is going to meet her father at the restaurant, she is decided to “attack” him by wearing a badge against the presence of US bases in England. The expressions with which her approach to the restaurant is described are almost warlike, showing the excitement and danger of the rebellious moment. In Scene 11, she puts the badge on “with nervous resolution”; instead of walking she is “rushing wildly”, “risking her life” and “colliding” (266) on her way to the restaurant. All these expressions stress both Stephen’s power and Marianne’s rebellion against him. Another example of her active character when confronting acts of injustice is found when some bullies hit her girlfriend’s son because of her mother’s homosexuality. The moment she finds out what has happened, she “rushes out of the door and down the stairs to find the bullies” (271).

Ultimately, this very active Marianne contrasts with the Miranda we see in the rehearsals of “*The Tempest*” within the play, who sticks to her lines and does not really stand out. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that a change so noticeable in the characters does not necessarily mean a completely different understanding of the world and of the role of women. It would be unfair to compare Miranda’s freedom of act and speech in Shakespeare’s text and in Osment’s play, and to conclude that the latter shows a more progressive approach. What I hope the contrast brings out is the process of adaptation and updating; taking *The Tempest* to a contemporary context implies the necessity of modifying and stressing the cultural change, as well as its similarities.

Finally, Selwyn is identified in *This Island's Mine* with Caliban. The doubling-up of the actor, in this case, does not need to be stressed in the author’s note since he is already an actor in the play, and in the play within the play. As

mentioned before, he has been the object of racist and homophobic repression and brutality. As Caliban in *The Tempest*, he fails to fit, at least momentarily, into a world in which he represents “otherness”.

His approach when interpreting Caliban is not welcomed by the director of the play, who with the following lines interrupts the rehearsals and demands a more “savage” tint in the interpretation:

Selwyn, darling,
Caliban is a primitive,
He tried to rape Miranda,
So don't try and give us the noble savage,²
It just won't work,
It's an oversimplification
It will destroy the balance of the play.
Prospero is the hero,
Not Caliban. (263)

This short commentary is charged with meaning and opens up various interpretations. First of all, it alludes to a reading of *The Tempest* which is the total opposite of that shown in the rest of Osment's play. In this view Prospero is seen as a humanist, a noble old man who has been betrayed by his brother. Caliban is, therefore, the brute savage who is necessarily dominated because of his immoral actions. In contrast, by stressing Caliban's frustrated attempted rape in *The Tempest*, the audience's attention is drawn towards what is happening outside the rehearsal, that is, the actual rape committed by Stephen in *This Island's Mine*. Consequently, if we should never forgive Caliban for what he did, we should never forgive Stephen's crime.

In other rehearsals, we find similar comments that seem to point to a traditional representation of Caliban on stage. Selwyn is told to use his body and

to have a strong accent, that is, he is reminded of the necessity of highlighting the stereotypical differences between both races. What is more interesting however, is that Selwyn's supposed intention of not stressing Caliban's differences as much as the director of the play would like him to contrasts with what he does in real life. As we saw, after being brutalized, he feels that there might be a gap that cannot be filled between black and white, highlighting his otherness rather than making it disappear.

Conclusion

As we have seen, what really links *This Island's Mine* and *The Tempest* with postcolonial theory is the representation of the oppressors and the oppressed. Nevertheless, in our contemporary society the change comes with a plurality of Prosperos, that is, we are no longer able to blame just an individual for all that is going wrong in our lives. On the contrary, we live under the pressure of many different narratives³ which we are, in a sense, responsible for. These different voices – racism, homophobia, unemployment or violence – are shown in the play as the main preoccupations of contemporary life. Furthermore, the implications of the title chosen for the adaptation – which is a direct reference to a sentence uttered by Caliban in the original text and which has been used by many critics as Caliban's desperate and rightful claim on his supremacy over the island – does not necessarily imply that the postcolonial reading is the appropriate one. As we can find in an essay by Walch:

The opaqueness and the openness of Shakespeare's plays have moved very much into the foreground of contemporary Shakespeare criticism. Gone seem the times of critical claims to a single valid interpretation. Instead, Shakespeare's play-texts have begun to be considered the ground for many simultaneous readings, all legitimate even if frequently mutually exclusive. (Walch 223)

Therefore, if there is not one good and rightful reading of *The Tempest*, there is no reason to argue whether Osment's approach is appropriate or not. Instead, what we are left with is a society that uses Shakespeare as a way of expressing its own concerns. Osment, in this case, uses the power of the voices we find in Shakespeare in order to fight against what he feels is wrong or should be changed. It is, perhaps, in this ongoing potential to express different ideologies that the true genius of Shakespeare lies.

¹ I am considering here the definition of Critical Thinking given by Michael Scriven and Richard Paul:

“Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem, or question-at-issue, assumptions, concepts, empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions, implications and consequences, objections from alternative viewpoints, and frame of reference. Critical thinking – in being responsive to variable subject matter, issues, and purposes – is incorporated in a family of interwoven modes of thinking, among them: scientific thinking, mathematical thinking, historical thinking, anthropological thinking, economic thinking, moral thinking, and philosophical thinking. (in <http://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/410>)

In this sense, *The Tempest* can be considered a promoter of critical thinking in so far as it still makes people reflect on their lives and be able to project their interests and preoccupations by using the text – adapting, for example – to achieve various needs. The power of being able to actually change the original text according to our specific interests shows the importance of critically thinking and updating information and contrasts with the blind acceptance of those who do not discern what is important or relevant.

² The same “noble savage” has been used by authors such as Greenblatt regarding the colonial reading of *The Tempest*. In *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, despite Greenblatt's defence of the oppressed, he recognizes that Caliban is, at the end of the day, “anything but a Noble Savage” (26).

³ In the Lyotardian sense. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir, 1979)*, Lyotard states:

In contemporary society and culture – postindustrial society, postmodern culture – the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation The principle of a universal metalanguage is replaced by the principle of a plurality of formal and axiomatic systems capable of arguing the truth of denotative statements (37, 43).

The general understanding of oppression that we get from *This Island's Mine* is in agreement with Lyotard's vision of power and language in a postmodern society. The fact that there is no longer a Grand Narrative emphasizes the plurality of forces which are so prominent in the play.

Works Cited:

Dymkowski, Christine. "Introduction". *Shakespeare in Production: The Tempest*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 1-93.

Fischlin, Daniel and Mark Fortier. "General Introduction." *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. Ed. Daniel Fischlin, and Mark Fortier. London: Routledge, 2000. 1-22.

Fischlin, Daniel and Mark Fortier. "*This Island's Mine*: Introduction." *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. Ed. Daniel Fischlin, and Mark Fortier. London: Routledge, 2000. 255-257.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Lefevere, André. "Why waste our time on rewrites? The Trouble of Interpretation and the Role of Rewriting in an Alternative Paradigm." *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*. Ed. Theo Hermans. London/Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985. 215-243.

Lyotard, Jean François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 1984.

Mannoni, Octave. *Prospero and Caliban: the Psychology of Colonization*. London: Methuen, 1956.

Osment, Philip. "*This Island's Mine*." *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*. Ed. Daniel Fischlin, and Mark Fortier. London: Routledge, 2000. 258-284.

Walch, Günter. "What's the past is Prologue: Metatheatrical Memory and Transculturation in *The Tempest*." *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare's Time*. Ed. Jean-Pierre Maquerlot and Michèle Willems. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. 223-238.