



Shakespeare: A critical analysis

Shakespeare and Colonialism

Speaker:

Colonialism is a key theme in 'The Tempest'. Penny Gay talks about the casting of a native aborigine in the role of Caliban:

Penny Gay:

We had recently a very interesting production of The Tempest in which the character of Caliban was for the first time *ever*, played by an Aboriginal actor, a native Australian Aboriginal actor, and the emphasis that he gave to the lines, '*be not afeared the isle is full of noises*' was just astonishing, it was as though he was actually speaking about the land that he knew in a way that all the educated white folk both on the stage and in the audience couldn't possibly have known, it was astonishing. It is of course common-place and has been since I think the late 60's to have Caliban played by a recognisably non white character who might be thought of to be a native of some colonial some colonised island, but this was quite a breakthrough in Australian theatre.

Jyotsna Singh:

In The Tempest something that a lot of western students miss that there's a whole tradition of re-reading the play from by Latin writers, you know that there's Roberto Fernandez Retima's essay which talks about how Latin writers have read him or Caribbean writers have read him, or there's a play that I would recommend to your students A Tempest by Amy Cesare in French which is now translated, which I often teach with.

Jyotsna Singh:

I think that is one play that has really lent itself very well to post colonial theory, but there's also a move recently and I'm not sure if your students have caught up there have been several articles in the past few years one I think a few months ago by Doug Rooster, maybe a year ago, which basically has a sort of sense that let's bring the play back home. This is not about colonialism this is about the individual misunderstood man or this is about the English stage, and I think that's a kind of disingenuous move.

Ania Loomba:

I think for feminists one of the most disturbing things in the play is that Caliban whom we might like to think of as this rebel slave, as the anti colonialist voice, is actually equally patriarchal. He does not deny that he wanted to rape Miranda, and moreover he says yes I wanted to rape because I would have peopled this isle with Caliban's. Now how do you know that the progeny wouldn't have been little Miranda's

Jyotsna Singh:

A lot of third world re-readings like Lambing or Cesaire or Ingugi who have talked of The Tempest who have either identified with Caliban and see Prospero as a coloniser, they're really in other ways very sexist, and they really don't question the kind of gender hierarchies very much.

Ania Loomba:

There's only one woman character, she's alone on the island, and for the first part of her life, and for the first act of the play, she is being totally commanded by Prospero her father so it's a play which actually symbolises the operations of patriarchy in a very sort of dramatic way.

Jyotsna Singh:

Aime Cesaire never has Sidorax appear, you know she is the native woman the Caribbean woman, all with Clarabelle's marriage to the Tunisian king. So I think that's one of the real issues in even in Othello, and I think in a lot of post colonial theory and I think in a lot of theoretical work that is very compartmentalised as far as I'm concerned it's like - this is race and this is gender and this is queer theory, and everybody has their little turf. And that's a real problem I have with it.

Stephen Regan:

We've heard about recent re-readings of The Tempest, post colonial readings, feminist readings, where does criticism go now. ?

Jerry Brotton.

I think it learns from those developments, and I think they're very important. I think it's been very important to put issues of colonisation into our readings of the plays. I think that now we do move on, I think that we complicate the way that we think about the play. I think we ask whether it's valid any more to talk about colonisation. Isn't it actually slightly anachronistic, because actually if you're being historically specific, English colonisation hadn't really got going at the time. Now perhaps we want to consider whether we're believing the myth that the play in itself is starting to create. The play also has a very vivid geographical imagination about that space of the old world, and that space of the old world is very much ever present in maps and geographical treatise of the time. So I mean if we look at images like this, an early 16th century global image of the world, the focus is on Africa and the old world. And that's very much the focus throughout this period, which is imbued with a classical past, people wearing classical clothing that's what you're getting in the play, a cutting backwards and forwards from the classical past to the contemporary present. This is not a play which is about confident colonisation, it's about how you use power and knowledge towards forms of colonisation and imperial power, and that's very different from just saying 'yes, here we have confident English celebration of colonial power and authority'. I think that we need to question as well the simplified notion of the relationship between Caliban and Prospero, as that between colonised and coloniser. Yes that's a very important dimension, but let's take a step back, let's think about the relationships in terms of learning, and power and authority. Who possesses the books. Prospero possesses the books. Caliban says first possess his books, that's how you get hold of power and authority, Caliban knows that. So again, he has a sense of knowing what he wants within a social hierarchy, which puts him alongside other figures throughout Shakespeare's canon. People like the Porter in Macbeth, and of course the rude mechanicals in Midsummer Nights Dream as well.