

INTRODUCTION

The Tempest is an extraordinarily obliging work of art. It will lend itself to almost any interpretation, any set of meanings imposed upon it: it will even make them shine.
 (Anne Barton)¹

I've never felt so strongly in a play that the meaning does not belong to the actor's perception of what the play is . . . The audience's imagination is much, much less controlled by the actors, I think, in this play than in almost any other.
 (Sir Ian McKellen)²

Anne Barton's oft-quoted observation on the critical fortunes of *The Tempest* is amply borne out in the history of its reception. It has at various times been read as a romance of reconciliation, a Christian allegory of forgiveness, a meditation on the powers of the imagination and the limits of art, a psychological drama of fatherhood, a play about Jacobean politics, and a dramatisation of colonialist or patriarchal ideology (to name but the commonest approaches). Not all of these readings have been favoured at any one time; the play's critical history demonstrates very clearly the ways in which what is taken as the play's dominant meaning depends upon the historical and cultural situation of the observer or critic. But the play's indeterminacy is also written in to its narrative, in the very different perceptions that characters have of the island on which they are stranded, for example, or in the variety of ways in which Caliban is described. It might seem that in performance many of the ambivalences that a reader might note will be resolved. The stage setting must be fixed, Caliban must be costumed, the airy spirit must be embodied. But Sir Ian McKellen's comment, reflecting on the problems of acting the part of Prospero (illustration 1),³ suggests that the play's elusiveness is not simply a consequence of readerly ingenuity, but is fundamental to an audience's experience of the performed play itself even after directorial decisions have been made.

One aim of this introduction is to represent and attempt to explain the range of readings, stagings and responses that *The Tempest* has provoked in the course of its journey from the seventeenth century to the present. But Shakespeare's play itself draws upon, moulds and responds to other texts both classical and contemporary with it; it participates in and reflects on issues and debates current at the time of its composition; and it was designed for performance in particular theatres within their specific conventions of performance. Many of the characteristics of the play that have made its varied reception possible derive precisely from the interplay of these factors at the time of the play's composition.

¹ Barton, p. 22. ² Interview with the editor, February 1999.

³ In the production by Jude Kelly at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds, 1999.

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1 Sir Ian McKellen as Prospero in the production by Jude Kelly at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds, 1999

The Tempest was performed at court on ‘Hallomas nyght’, 1 November 1611.¹ Whilst it is conceivable that this was its ‘opening night’, it would have been unusual if the play had not already been performed publicly by the King’s Men.² The earliest date for its composition has usually been set as 1610, largely on the grounds that the reports reaching London in that year of the wreck of Sir Thomas Gates’s ship in the Bermudas, and the providential survival of his company, were a specific inspiration for the action of the play (but see below, pp. 9–12). Its placing as the last of the four plays categorised as ‘romances’, however, also owes a good deal to the

¹ E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 2 vols., 1930, vol. II, p. 342. The performance may have been in the Banqueting House.

² Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague and Shakespeare’s Theater*, 1991, p. 203, suggests spring or autumn 1611 for its first performance. The fact that the only recorded performances were at court, in 1611 and again in 1613, has led some to see it as having been designed specifically for court performance.

way in which its central character offers a figure readily interpretable as standing in some way for the dramatist himself. Generations of critics since Dowden in the late nineteenth century have read the play biographically, and seen it as a summation and a distillation of Shakespeare's dramatic career. This image of the author-as-Prospero bidding farewell to the stage has been potent in a variety of contexts. If on the one hand it has provoked an overly reverential attitude to the play, it has also fuelled Lytton Strachey's critical conclusion that Shakespeare 'was getting bored', and Anthony Dawson's provocative attack on it as 'Shakespeare's most consistently overrated play'.¹ This same belief, however, has been vital to the imaginative success of some of the rewritings and adaptations of the play. Auden's poetic commentary, *The Sea and the Mirror*, for example, focuses on a Prospero ready to renounce his magic and face death, and meditates upon the nature of a poetic career; Peter Greenaway's 1991 film, *Prospero's Books*, is suffused with intimations of endings, and in 1996 Neil Gaiman concluded the series of *Sandman* graphic novels with *The Tempest*.² For theatre practitioners, directors and actors alike, the play has been used as a sign of an ending. Peter Brook, for example, considers that the play 'is [Shakespeare's] complete final statement'.³ Peter Cheeseman, the founder and director for many years of the Victoria Theatre in Stoke, and its successor in Newcastle-under-Lyme, chose to direct the play as his valedictory production in 2000, and Mark Rylance signed off as Artistic Director at Shakespeare's Globe by playing Prospero in 2005.⁴ In fact, Shakespeare continued to write collaboratively in at least three more plays, but the persistence of the perception that *The Tempest* was the grand finale to a writing life all too easily obscures the fact that in many respects this is as experimental a play as he ever wrote and that it breaks new Shakespearean ground in a number of different ways.

Sources and contexts

Not the least unusual feature of *The Tempest* is that – like very few other of Shakespeare's plays – it has no single predominant narrative source.⁵ It is generally

¹ Lytton Strachey, 'Shakespeare's final period', in *Book and Characters, French and English*, 1922, pp. 47–64; Anthony B. Dawson, 'Tempest in a teapot: critics, evaluation, ideology', in Maurice Charney, ed., *'Bad' Shakespeare: Revaluations of the Shakespeare Canon*, 1988, pp. 61–73. See also the negative comments of John Barton, reported in Bate and Rasmussen, p. 139, and Teddy Jefferson, 'Rorschach Tempest or *The Tempest* of William S. performed by flies on the erection of a dreaming hyena', *SQ*, 61 (2010), 78–107.

² See Annalisa Castaldo, "'No more yielding than a dream": the construction of Shakespeare in *The Sandman*', *College Literature*, 31 (2004), 94–110; Julia Round, 'Transforming Shakespeare: Neil Gaiman and the sandman', in Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams, eds., *Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformation of Original Works*, 2010, pp. 95–110.

³ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, 1968, p. 96. See also, for example, G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life*, 1947, ch. 5.

⁴ See Gordon McMullan, 'The Tempest and the uses of late Shakespeare in the cultures of performance: Prospero, Gielgud, Rylance', in Paul Yachnin and Patricia Badir, eds., *Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance*, 2008, pp. 145–68, and his rich general exploration of the topic in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 2007.

⁵ *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Titus Andronicus* are the others generally accepted to be in this category.

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agreed, however, that Shakespeare makes substantial and substantive allusion to Virgil, Ovid and Montaigne, and (probably) to reports of the wreck of the *Sea Venture* in the Bermudas. More generally, the play belongs, with the other ‘late’ plays, to the genre of ‘romance’, in a tradition extending back to late Greek writing and enjoying a revival in the later years of Elizabeth’s reign in works such as Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*. For both its content and dramaturgy, the play draws on the Italian *commedia dell’arte*, and on the distinctive genre of the court masque, which Shakespeare’s friend and rival Ben Jonson was developing for the Jacobean court at precisely this time.

Imitation was the foundation of a writer’s training,¹ and such imitation might initiate various relationships with an originating text, ranging from insignificant echo, through passing allusion, to a sustained dialogue.² Indeed, the recitation of lines from the play at the opening and closing ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympics demonstrated quite clearly how a contextless quotation can work to bring into play the cultural reputation and significance of the cited author, without in any way expecting the audience to register that the quoted passage, from 3.2.127–35, is actually spoken by the ‘monster’ Caliban, nor, in the light of the ceremonies’ cost, to remember Stephano’s immediately following comment about having his music for nothing. In considering *The Tempest*’s own relationships with its various sources and antecedents, then, it is important to establish a clear sense of the different relationships that may subsist between text, source and context, and of their varied implication for our response to the play. Whilst the most fleeting of citations may be of interest in mapping the mind of an author and suggesting his or her creative preoccupations, in the theatre it is only when a text assumes an audience’s recognition of its source that the relationship between the two itself becomes an essential constituent of meaning. This play uses its sources and analogues in a variety of ways, and we begin with those texts to which Shakespeare makes unmistakable direct allusion.

VIRGIL, OVID AND MONTAIGNE

Virgil’s presence in *The Tempest* is announced by a number of clear recollections. Ferdinand’s first comment on seeing Miranda: ‘Most sure the goddess / On whom these airs attend’ (1.2.420–1) echoes *Aeneid*, 1.328; Francisco’s speech at 2.1.108–17 draws details from the description of serpents swimming towards the shore in *Aeneid*, 2.203–8;³ and Ariel’s vengeful appearance as a harpy in 3.3.52 *SD* parallels the Celaeno episode in Book 3. (See Appendix 2, pp. 272–4 for texts.) How far these references actually bring Virgil’s text as a whole into substantial dialogue with Shakespeare’s play, however, is a matter of debate, since the single famous phrase ‘O dea certe’ had become sufficiently disconnected from its original context to be intellectual common property, while the context of Francisco’s speech is so unlike

¹ As Jonson noted in *Discoveries*: ‘The third requisite in our poet or maker is imitation, to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use.’ *Jonson*, vol. VII, p. 582.

² See Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*, 1982, ch. 3.

³ Pointed out by Donna B. Hamilton, *Virgil and ‘The Tempest’: The Politics of Imitation*, 1990, pp. 21–3.

that of the Virgilian original as to suggest that Shakespeare was simply consulting his commonplace book for a treatment of the topic ‘swimming’.¹ Even in the harpy episode Prospero emphasises, in praising Ariel’s ‘grace’, his spirit’s difference from the disgusting Virgilian prototype, and it is to the subsequent allegorising of the mythic figure of the harpy that we seem to be directed.² (See Commentary and illustration 2.)

The most incontrovertible link, however, is that made by Gonzalo’s likening of Claribel’s arrival in Tunis to that of Dido in Carthage, which seems, as Jonathan Bate puts it, to be ‘vigorously waving a flag marked *Aeneid*’.³ The subsequent wrangling with Antonio, Sebastian and Adrian (2.1.70–81) about the famous queen then sets up a contest between Virgil’s story and the older historical account of Dido (see Commentary), and it is the tension this establishes between a view of the Carthaginian queen as an icon of idealised chastity, on the one hand, and of illicit sexuality, on the other, which is of most consequence for the story of Ferdinand and Miranda. They are in part defined through the way their relationship is linked to, but distinguished from, Virgil’s epic. The cave in which Dido and Aeneas consummated their love is first invoked, only to be dismissed, as Ferdinand asserts that ‘the murkiest den’ (4.1.25) will not tempt him to lust. It is, however, then teasingly recalled by the cell in which Ferdinand and Miranda are finally revealed, and a potential parallel with the classical lovers is intensified in Miranda’s challenge to her future husband, ‘Sweet Lord, you play me false’ (5.1.172), since the adjective ‘false’ was frequently and formulaically applied to Aeneas. The affinity, however, is quickly repudiated, and the reversal of the Virgilian story is reinforced in the mythology of their betrothal masque, where Venus, who had presided over Dido and Aeneas’ union, is banished, and they are blessed by Juno, Aeneas’ enemy. An audience capable of recognising these cues would readily respond to Ferdinand and Miranda as a revised, antithetical version of Virgil’s lovers.

Critics have elaborated and debated the implication of the Virgilian connection.⁴ So, for example, the storm at the play’s opening has been related to the storm which initiates the epic’s action (see illustration 3), and the interrupted journey of Alonso from Tunis to Italy has been regarded as paralleling Aeneas’ journey from Troy to Rome.⁵ Virgil’s epic theme of the founding of a nation has been linked to the colonial enterprises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (as it was in the period’s discussions of imperial expansion). Barbara Mowat suggests that this last

¹ See below, pp. 91–2.

² See Anthony Di Mattio, ‘“The figure of this harpy”: Shakespeare and the moralized Ovid’, *N&Q*, n.s. 38 (1991), 70–2.

³ Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 1993, p. 243.

⁴ J. M. Nosworthy, ‘The narrative sources for *The Tempest*’, *Review of English Studies*, 24 (1948), 281–94. Jan Kott, ‘The *Aeneid* and *The Tempest*’, *Arion*, n.s. 3/4 (1976), 424–51, and ‘*The Tempest*, or repetition’, *Mosaic*, 10.3 (1977), 10–36; Hamilton, *Virgil and The Tempest*; Heather James, *Shakespeare’s Troy: Drama, Politics and the Translation of Empire*, 1997; Margaret Tudeau-Clayton, *Jonson, Shakespeare and Early Modern Virgil*, 1998.

⁵ But see David Scott Wilson-Okamura, ‘Virgilian models of colonization in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*’, *ELH*, 70 (2003), 709–37, which argues that Carthage, rather than Rome, was Shakespeare’s Virgilian model.

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In repetundos, et adultores.

OF Virgins face, with winges, and tallants strong,
 Vpon thy table, *PHINEVS* here behold,
 A monstrous *Harpie*, that hath praied long,
 Vpon thy meates, while thou art blind, and old,
 And at all times, his appetite doth serue,
 While vnregarded, thou thy selfe dost sterue.

The Courtes of Kinges, are said to keepe a crew
 Of these * still hungry for their private gain:
 The first is he, that carries tales vntrue,
 The second, whome base * bribing doth maintaine,
 The third and last, the Parasite I find,
 Who bites the worst, if Princes will be blind.

*Ouid: Metam:
 lib: 6.*

* *Hirudines rariorii. Cic: ad Atticum 1.*

* *Nihil in penatibus eius sit venale, aut ambitioni pervium. Tacitus Annal: 13.*

Basilie: Doron.

B: Martian: in Alleg:

*Insidit dapibus volucris foedissima Phineu
 (Harpyiam vocitant) vngue rapace tuis:*

*Crimina qui defert, repetundos, Onato nocentur
 Vile genus fucos, quos alit Aula suos.*

*Est et apud Reges rudis, invida, rustica turba,
 Histrion, scurra, quibus virtus odiosa, Poetas
 Mille modis abigunt, vt quando cadavera corvi
 Invenere, fugant alias volucresque feraeque.*

Salomone

2 This rather domesticated and disconsolate harpy is from Peacham's *Minerva Britanna*, 1612. The allegory suggests it stands for the rapacious favourites of kings



3 The storm in Book 1 of Virgil's *Aeneid* from an early edition of 1502. Juno, Aeneas' enemy, instructs Aeolus, the god of the winds, to raise the storm, and the four winds in the top left-hand corner may be said to 'blow till thou burst thy wind' (1.1.7)

link places ‘sixteenth-century New World exploration, expansion and plantation within the old, old story of finding, conquering and dominating New Worlds’.¹ But not everyone has found these claims persuasive. Jonathan Bate, for example, argues that ‘it is extremely difficult to make the pattern fit’. For him, it is Ovid, rather than Virgil, who is the more significant influence.²

The single direct verbal borrowing from Ovid is Prospero’s renunciation of magic in 5.1.33–57. His words are taken from *Metamorphoses*, 7.197–209, and Shakespeare drew on Golding’s translation in composing his own version of the speech. (See Appendix 2, pp. 273–4, for the text.) Given the prominence Medea’s speech had both in the literature of magic and on the stage,³ it is certain that a significant number of the original audience would immediately have recognised its classical provenance, and been able, therefore, to register Prospero’s significant departures from its original. So, for example, where Medea summons the ‘spirits of the groves and of the night’ to ‘be present’ in order to aid her magic, Prospero loses the syntax of the sentence, and forgets to give the ‘elves’ he apparently invokes any action to perform. This prepares for the departure from Ovid that no moderately learned member of the audience could possibly miss: Prospero’s renunciation of his magic. At the most obvious level, then, just as Ferdinand and Miranda are ‘not-Dido-and-Aeneas’, Prospero is ‘not-Medea’. But the effect of this invocation is more complicated than that. As Prospero begins the speech, and as the fact of its recollection of the archetypal witch becomes apparent, we respond directly to its power and intensity, and once Prospero amplifies Medea’s claim to have ‘made the ghosts walk’, so the potential blasphemy of his magic power becomes frighteningly apparent. Through variation of an extremely well-known original, the issue of the legitimacy of Prospero’s magic is brought sharply into view, not simply as a matter of debate but as something experienced by the audience. It is indeed a test for any Prospero to find a way to deliver this soliloquy. Many attempt something like a continuous *crescendo* from a quiet, almost whispered opening, and none more thrillingly than Derek Jacobi at Stratford in 1982, a performance which intensified a sense of Prospero’s attachment to the magic he was about to renounce. To the issue of magic we will return, but, as with the *Aeneid*, the next question is how far the dialogue with the classical poet extends beyond this specific reference. Jonathan Bate sees in *The Tempest* both a characteristically Ovidian emphasis on metamorphosis (imaged, for example, in the song ‘Full fathom five’), and a substantial recollection of Ovid’s Silver Age of agriculture and marriage in the masque of Act 4.⁴ The classical poet’s Golden Age is invoked by Gonzalo’s speech in 2.1, with its vision of a world of communal ownership and an absence of the need for law and regulation.

¹ Barbara A. Mowat, “‘Knowing I loved my books’: reading *The Tempest* intertextually”, in Hulme and Sherman, pp. 34–5.

² Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, p. 244.

³ It is used, for example, in Jonson’s *Masque of Queenes*, lines 218–47, and Middleton’s *The Witch*, 5.2.25–9, as well as being cited in witchcraft treatises.

⁴ Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, pp. 239–63. See also Raphael Lyne, ‘Ovid, Golding, and the “rough magic” of *The Tempest*’, in A. B. Taylor, ed., *Shakespeare’s Ovid*, 2000, pp. 165–30.

The wording of Gonzalo's speech, however, is taken directly from the version of Ovid's vision contained in Montaigne's essay 'Of the Cannibals'.¹ Montaigne is clearly Shakespeare's 'source' here, and may just possibly be the source for two other brief moments in the play.² It is extremely unlikely that Shakespeare expected the audience to recognise any of these allusions. He is not conducting a *dialogue* with the French author as he undoubtedly is with Ovid and Virgil. Yet there is a strong case for arguing that Montaigne was at least as significant to Shakespeare as the classical authors. Montaigne's account of the inhabitants of the Americas, from which the passage comes, is explicitly interested in the nature of tale-telling and the veracity of report. He claims that the source of his information about the cannibals is a man who had lived there for twelve years and, in a passage which resonates powerfully with Shakespeare's play, Montaigne discusses the nature of the testimony he received:

This servant I had, was a simple and rough-hewen fellow: a condition fit to yeeld a true testimonie. For, subtle people may indeed marke more curiously, and observe things more exactly, but they amplifie and glose them: and the better to perswade, and make their interpretations of more validitie, never represent things truly.

These words are not only particularly relevant to the brief mention of traveller's tales as the lords contemplate the strange shapes in 3.3, but also hint at the radical uncertainties about what it is to report truly that pervade the play. Montaigne, furthermore, uses the figure of the cannibal to conduct a sceptical critique of the political and social structures of European society, bringing his essay within the orbit of the period's discussions of colonialism. It is Montaigne's exploratory habit of mind, his capacity for seeing many sides to any problem and his refusal to make simple judgements that are echoed in the openness to interpretation of Shakespeare's play.

NARRATIVES OF COLONISATION

Malone was the first to argue that Shakespeare's play was influenced by the reports of the wreck of the *Sea Venture* on the coast of the Bermudas in 1609, the company's escape from death and their final arrival in Virginia in May 1610.³ Subsequent scholars have suggested that three texts in particular were absorbed by Shakespeare: Sylvester Jourdain's *Discovery of the Barmudas* (1610), the Council of Virginia's *True Declaration of the State of the Colonie in Virginia* (1610), and a letter by William Strachey, known by the title of *True Reportory of the Wrack*. This letter is dated

¹ *Essayes*, vol. 1, no. 30. On Montaigne's influence on the play, see Arthur Kirsch, 'Montaigne and *The Tempest*', in Gunnar Sorelius and Michael Srigley, eds., *Cultural Exchange between European Nations during the Renaissance*, 1994, pp. 111–22. For a more general study of the relationship between them, see Peter Mack, *Reading and Rhetoric in Montaigne and Shakespeare*, 2010.

² See Eleanor Prosser, 'Shakespeare, Montaigne and the "rarer action"', *Shakespeare Studies*, 1 (1965), 261–4; Gail Kern Paster, 'Montaigne, Dido, and *The Tempest*: "How came that widow in?"', *SQ*, 35 (1984), 91–4.

³ Edward Malone, *An Account of the Incidents, from which the Title and Part of the Story of Shakespeare's Tempest were Derived*, 1808.

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15 July 1610 and exists in both shorter and longer versions, but was not published until 1625 in *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. It is assumed, however, to have been available to the playwright in manuscript.

Unfortunately, discussion of the question whether Strachey's letter was Shakespeare's source has become inextricably entangled with the 'authorship debate'.¹ For if the play depends upon a source that dates from 1610, then the claims for the Earl of Oxford's authorship of the plays are utterly unsustainable, since he died in 1604. This subtext accounts for the ferocity with which the matter has recently been debated.² It is likely that these narratives of the apparently miraculous preservation of Sir Thomas Gates, Sir George Summers and their company were available to, and did influence Shakespeare, and it is indisputable that for an audience in 1611 the parallel would have given the play an irresistible topicality, yet the case for these texts as specific verbal sources is not provable beyond doubt. Strachey's account of the storm is itself a variation on a standard set-piece topic,³ and, as the Commentary indicates, many other literary parallels are close to Shakespeare.⁴ But whatever view is taken of the precise relationship of Shakespeare's play to these pamphlets, they are at the very least examples of the many works concerned with colonial adventure – both Spanish and English – which were available to Shakespeare and undeniably affected the play in important ways.

The argument that the action of the play and the issues it raises are connected to the colonisation of the Americas has become, in the last forty years or so, the dominant critical perspective upon it. The history Prospero and Caliban relate in 1.2, of a friendly relationship deteriorating into one of rebellion and domination, is paralleled in many accounts of Spanish and English dealings with the native populations of South and North America, and the way in which Trinculo and then Stephano see Caliban as a potential exhibit from which they can derive profit (a perception repeated by Antonio at 5.1.265) alludes unmistakably to the way in which Native Americans were indeed shipped back to England as 'booty of a successful voyage'.⁵ Most powerfully, whereas Prospero in his brief narrative to Alonso casually asserts that he arrived upon the island 'To be the lord on't' (5.1.162), Caliban's cry – 'This island's mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak'st

¹ The controversy on authorship, particularly fierce in the USA, has been fanned by the film *Anonymous*. The best studies on the matter are James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (2010), and the downloadable book, *Shakespeare Bites Back* by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells at <http://bloggingshakespeare.com>

² This exchange was sparked by the Oxfordian Roger Stritmatter, whose 'Shakespeare and the voyagers revisited', *Review of English Studies*, 236 (2007), 447–72, is answered by Alden T. Vaughan, 'William Strachey's "True Reportory" and Shakespeare: a close look at the evidence', *SQ*, 59 (2008), 245–73 and Tom Reedy, 'Dating William Strachey's "A True Reportory of the Wracke and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates": a comparative textual study', *Review of English Studies*, 251 (2010), 529–52. See also David Kathman's Shakespeare Authorship website: <http://shakespeareauthorship.com>

³ As Barbara Mowat points out ('Reading *The Tempest*', pp. 31–2).

⁴ See Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1977, pp. 278–83; Arthur F. Kinney, 'Revisiting *The Tempest*', *Modern Philology*, 93 (1995/6), 161–77.

⁵ Kinney, 'Revisiting *The Tempest*', 167. See Alden T. Vaughan, 'Trinculo's Indian: American natives in Shakespeare's England', in Hulme and Sherman, pp. 49–59.