
Shakespeare and National Traditions

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Shakespeare in History, History through Shakespeare: *Caliban by the Yellow Sands*

The commemoration of the three-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 1916 coincided with a moment of heightened tensions within American society. The economic depression of 1914 brought to a head anxieties concerning unemployment, inadequate labour conditions, and the unequal division of wealth, which had already been experienced at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, the first decades of the twentieth century witnessed an exceptionally high influx of what John Higham calls "the new immigration": newcomers from southern and eastern Europe (Higham 159). These new immigrants now vastly outnumbered those from northern and western Europe (Germany, Scandinavia, the British Isles, and the Low Countries), who had previously formed the majority of American immigration. This shift in the composition of the immigrant body contributed to the development of new forms of American nativism, increasingly expressing nationalist feelings in racial terms. Nativists such as Madison Grant represented the new immigrants as belonging to inferior races which threatened the "the man of the old stock" with being "crowded out" of America (Grant 81). Moreover, in 1916 America had not yet joined the First World War which was raging in Europe, but the possibility of the country becoming involved in the conflict was looming, casting doubt on the loyalty of non-native born Americans. These factors, as Coppélia Kahn points out, "intensified an ideological ambivalence at the core of the concept of Americanness" around 1916 (Kahn 258).

This was the climate in which the Shakespeare Celebration Committee of New York City invited Percy MacKaye, a prominent intellectual and man of

the theatre, to write a play which would constitute part of American celebrations of the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death. The resulting piece, performed in front of thousands of spectators between 24 May and 5 June 1916 at New York Lewisohn Stadium, was *Caliban by the Yellow Sands*, described on the title page as "a Community Masque of the Art of the Theatre" (MacKaye title page). The play is a fascinating example of a Shakespearean appropriation intended for a particular historical moment and specific socio-political purposes. Not only does it comment on the contemporary situation, but also intervenes in it, proposing solutions to current problems, most notably, as Thomas Cartelli points out, the integration of the immigrant masses into American society (Cartelli 63). This paper investigates two interconnected methods which *Caliban by the Yellow Sands* employs to respond to the historical moment: the play's representations of history and its uses of Shakespeare and the Shakespearean canon.

In his preface MacKaye explicitly states that the play is part of his project for "Seeking solution for the vast problem of leisure" (xviii). He is looking for a form of popular pastime appropriate for the heterogeneous urban masses of the early twentieth century, a form "adapted to democratic expression and dedicated to public service" (xxii), an art form that will improve the public and promote social cohesion. This is how he sees the aim of the Shakespeare Celebration of 1916: "to help unite all classes and all beliefs in a great coöperative (sic) movement for civic expression through dramatic art" (xx).

The form MacKaye chose in pursuing this goal was a "Community Masque" – a huge, outdoors production, involving over thirty professional actors for the speaking parts and about 1500 amateurs drawn from New York communities, who performed non-speaking roles (Cartelli 63, Green 59). Locating the first production of the play in New York is significant not only because, as Kahn points out, the city was "the notorious point of entry for millions of immigrants" (258). Equally importantly, New York constituted a microcosm of the processes of intermingling of the old and the new immigration, a case study in the changes in the composition of the American people. Madison Grant singled the city out in his scathing denunciation of what he saw as the degeneration of American racial purity: "New York is becoming a *cloaca gentium* which will produce many amazing racial hybrids and some ethnic horrors that will be beyond the powers of future anthropologists to unravel" (Grant 81). By proposing to involve a wide selection of New York communities in his masque, MacKaye aligned himself with the progressive-minded social reformers, who believed in the possibility of improving the ignorant masses through art and education, rather than with the proponents of the theories of ingrained racial differences.

The main plot of the play (the Masque Proper), loosely based on *The Tempest*, consists of Prospero, Ariel, and Miranda's efforts to civilise the wild

Caliban, who in MacKaye's text is the son of Sycorax and the monstrous, dark god Setebos. Even though Prospero overthrows Setebos' idol, his priests, Lust, Death, and War, remain to tempt Caliban repeatedly to relapse into his savage ways. Prospero, Ariel, and Miranda's civilising method is the art of the theatre: the elevated trio present to Caliban three Interludes, consisting of "ritualistic glimpses of the art of the theatre" in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Elizabethan England (xxix).

The Masque Proper, involving the professional actors, takes place on the raised middle stage, while the Interludes are performed by the community actors on the outer stage, occupying the main part of the stadium's playing field and representing "the Yellow Sands" (xxix). Significantly, those two spaces, according to MacKaye, belong to different temporal dimensions: the Masque Proper "is concerned [...] with no literal period of time, but with the waxing and waning of the life of dramatic art (and its concomitant, civilization) from primitive barbaric times to the verge of the living present" (xxix). By contrast, the Yellow Sands represent "the place of historic time" (xxix). In this way, the play juxtaposes the realm of historical particularity with a more universalising, evolutionary concept of time and history, in which Caliban represents "that passionate child-curious part of us all (whether as individuals or as races), grovelling close to his aboriginal origins, yet groping up and staggering – with almost rhythmic falls and back-slidings – towards that serener plane of pity and love, reason and disciplined will, where Miranda and Prospero commune with Ariel and his spirits" (xv). The latter idea of time transforms historical contingencies into a sort of psychomachia, in which both individuals and whole civilisations struggle against their darker side in a constant attempt to achieve perfection.

The two spatial and temporal realms described above, however, are not all that *Caliban by the Yellow Sands* presents to its spectators. Apart from the outer stage and the middle stage, the masque introduces an inner stage, located higher than the middle stage, behind the "Cloudy Curtains" and representing "the mind of Prospero" (xxix). Here Prospero conjures "visions" – scenes adapted from Shakespeare's plays other than *The Tempest* – designed to educate Caliban. They explain to him what he witnessed during the Intervals and calm him down after he responds to the Intervals in an inappropriate, barbaric manner. Consequently, the masque's space is divided into three areas, arranged in a rising hierarchy: on the lowest level, the outer stage (historical time), higher up, the middle stage (unspecified, universalised time), and on the highest level, the inner stage, on which the Shakespearean scenes unfold.

While the spatial hierarchy is clear, the temporal realm that the Shakespearean scenes represent is more problematic: they seem to hover ambiguously between the universal and the particular. In the preface, MacKaye situates Shakespeare on the side of the universal, rather than the temporal: "The art of Prospero I have

conceived as the art of Shakespeare in its *universal* scope: that many-visioned art of the theatre which, age after age, has come to liberate the imprisoned imagination of mankind from the fetters of brute force and ignorance” (xv, my italics). This is borne out in the Epilogue of the play, in which a pageant of “the creators of the art of the theatre from antiquity to the verge of the living present” appears (143). When the Elizabethan dramatists pass by, Shakespeare steps out, approaches Prospero and changes places with him, assuming his cloak, the mantle of his art. In this way, Shakespeare ceases to be a historical writer and becomes a semi-mythical and timeless figure of the master artist. As Cartelli argues, this triumph of the ideal over the particular suppresses historical contingencies and displaces them “to a Manichaeian struggle between forces of darkness and light” (76). As a result, the masque “offers only the most imaginary resolution to the social contradictions of the urban community of New York circa 1916” (Cartelli 72), a resolution based on suppressing the multicultural, conflict-ridden reality and promoting the supposedly ideal domain of Anglo-Saxon art and civilisation, epitomised by Shakespeare.

While this is undoubtedly the main thrust of masque, the Shakespearean scenes unexpectedly undermine it, probably against MacKaye’s conscious intention. Because they are played on the most elevated part of the stage and their dialogue consists of direct Shakespearean quotations, one would expect them to be the most removed from historical actuality and situated exclusively in the realm of the ideal. Surprisingly, this is not the case; instead, they are interconnected with the interlude scenes, which represent historical time. Each of the Shakespearean inner scenes loosely corresponds to the time, place or theme of a part of the interlude which precedes it. The first interlude, for example, represents ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, while the three Shakespearean scenes shown in response are taken from *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Julius Caesar*. Thus, each scene from Shakespeare both mirrors and comments on its corresponding interlude scene from the realm of historical time.

Moreover, some of the Shakespearean inner scenes are more concerned with particular historical moments than their corresponding interludes. The Egyptian interlude, for instance, consists of communal worship of the god Osiris, a dramatic ritual which would have been re-enacted time and again according to the change of the seasons. Its counterpart is a scene depicting the aftermath of Antony’s defeat by Octavius Caesar at Actium, a specific moment in history. This historical moment is represented through an excerpt from *Antony and Cleopatra* (3.2; MacKaye 41–46). As far as history goes, the interlude seems to be concerned with cyclical, non-specific, ritual time, while the inner scene is confined to particular historic time.

Furthermore, Cartelli is not entirely right when he argues that MacKaye's Shakespearean allusions are "selectively drawn from the spaces of Shakespeare's art that are the least closely linked to matters of social and political concern, largely from the most unproblematic scenes of the 'romantic' tragedies, 'festive' comedies, and late romances" (Cartelli 76). Such scenes are present, yet quite a few of MacKaye's Shakespearean sources are plays concerned with history and have marked socio-political significance. The scenes from *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Henry V* are all related to war, a subject highly relevant in 1916. In addition, the *Antony and Cleopatra* episode depicts an alluring and exotic Egyptian female seducing a noble Roman male from his warlike and patriotic duties, a pertinent theme in a period of anxieties concerning immigration and the purity of American race. In another scene, taken from *The Merchant of Venice* (5.1), Lorenzo explains the harmony of the spheres to Jessica: a Jewish woman listens silently to a lecture from a man who has removed her from her own culture – a poignant picture in the historical period described by Henry James as "the Hebrew conquest of New York" (qtd. in Cartelli 77). The episode from *Romeo and Juliet*, with its madly passionate lovers hiding their liaison from their warring families who are tearing civil society apart with their vendetta, reminds us of another dominant group of immigrants, the Italians, and the tensions between ethnic and racially divided immigrant communities.

If the Shakespearean scenes included in the masque are not intrinsically removed from the domain of historical particularity, what is it that makes them more universal and ideal than the interludes and justifies their place in the realm of highest art, in the "temple" of Miranda beyond the "Cloudy Curtains" (36)? Part of the answer lies in the fact that speeches by Prospero, Ariel, or Miranda have been added to tease out the "universal" moral of some of the Shakespearean scenes. Nowhere is this more evident than when Miranda explains to Caliban the purpose of the forthcoming episode – Henry V's rallying speech to his troops at Harfleur:

So you may learn, good friend, how noblest natures
Are moved to tiger passions – by a painting
Called Honor, dearer than their brothers' lives. (136)

Here, a historical event is retold through the medium of Shakespeare, with a gloss on how to interpret it: not in terms of the contingencies of the specific socio-political moment, but in universalising terms, such as the vagaries of human nature, nobility, passion, and a misconceived concept of honour. History is transformed into a general moral lesson with the help of a guided reading of Shakespeare.

Prospero explains this process in terms of transforming fruit into wine:

So, Ariel, I have harvested for thee
 These orchards of mine art, and let thee taste
 Their varied fruitages, some that have ripened
 In climes auspicious, some that are part decayed.
 Now from three vineyards – Egypt, Greece, and Rome –
 I will distill a varicolored wine
 For Caliban to drink. So, steeped in spirit,
 Haply he also shall see visions. (34)

The metaphor implies a transformation of imperfect material into something more refined and noble. The last two lines, however, have a rather unexpected ring to them: they sound more like a description of inebriation than education. Considering that drunkenness was one of the vices that social reformers of the time sought to eliminate through introducing the masses to art (Levine 203), it is rather strange that MacKaye chooses to describe a man exposed to Shakespeare as “steeped in spirit” to the point of seeing visions. It seems that civilising a savage through the medium of Shakespeare may produce an almost intoxicating, perception-altering effect.

While MacKaye’s project transforms history from a set of particular events into a grand moral narrative, the recipients of the project – Caliban and those he stands for – are to undergo a transformation, too. Throughout the masque, Caliban is referred to in dehumanising and contemptuous terms: “lump of earth” (48), “brute” (48), “beast” (29 and 35), “monster” (26, 59 and 61), “howler at heaven” (25), “lapsing ape” (73), and, repeatedly, “slave” (47, 75 and 113). These phrases are evocative of the discourses of colonialism and racial superiority, bearing out Higham’s argument that, in racial terms, the early twentieth-century American nativism associated the new immigrants from the southern and eastern Europe with the black inhabitants of America and the Oriental people perceived as the “Yellow Peril” (Higham 165–73). Similarly, as Trachtenberg points out, even the “native” American destitute – railroad strikers or tramps – were liable to be viewed as “savages” (Trachtenberg 71). The discourses of economic and educational disadvantage interpenetrate with those of the alleged racial and evolutionary inferiority.¹

The ostensible aim of Prospero’s education is to make Caliban “rise / To lordly reason” (26) and to set him free through teaching him the art of the theatre. This is what Prospero promises when he introduces Ariel as Caliban’s tutor:

¹ Interestingly, as Kahn points out (269), African-Americans were absent from the groups involved in the production of *Caliban by the Yellow Sands*, as were the immigrants of Chinese and Japanese origin. This Eurocentric bias leads one to speculate whether, consciously or not, the organisers of the masque saw the southern and eastern Europeans as more liable to be civilised than the black and Oriental minorities.

If thou obey him
And learn my art, thou shalt go free like him. (39)

Prospero's education system is not benign, but a "carrot and stick" method, as he hastens to add:

If not, thou shall be spitted on a tooth
More sharp than Setebos. (39)

Prospero lends his staff, embodying his artistic power, to Ariel, to "use it as a rod / To instruct this bungling cub of Setebos" (49), and later he raises it in order to use it as an instrument of punishment: "To teach / This unwhipt hound – to howl" (114). Thus, the art of the theatre, epitomised by Shakespeare, assumes an ambiguous position in the masque. It holds a promise of liberation, but it can also serve as a tool of repression and subjugation. Prospero explains to Caliban:

'Tis mine art, not me,
Reigns as thy master. Master it, and go free. (83)

Caliban, however, is never allowed to master Prospero's art. Whenever he attempts to do so, he repeatedly relapses into the savage state of serving Setebos, wreaks havoc, and has to be contained by Prospero's allies. As Kahn argues, Caliban and his ilk – the immigrants crowding into America – are supposed to revere, rather than rival, the English-speaking culture of which Shakespearean drama is the alleged epitome (Kahn 145). At the end of the masque, Caliban is shown crouching at Shakespeare's feet, calling him "master" and begging for "more visions" (145). He is transformed into a humble and passive consumer of high art, yearning for its heady effects.

The representation of Caliban's transformation is tied in with the masque's representation of Shakespeare. As Cartelli demonstrates (74–81), MacKaye promoted "a construction of Shakespeare that was consistent with the paternalistic ideology of his own social caste" (82). That ideology assumes a reverent attitude toward Shakespeare, seeing in him a writer elevated above the vulgar masses and, if approached in the correct manner, capable of civilising them.² In order for that civilising process to occur, however, Shakespeare has to be "mediated by fellow initiates", that is, explained to the uninitiated by the members of the elite, such as MacKaye himself (Cartelli 82).

This approach, while seeking to place Shakespeare's cultural authority firmly under the elite's control, contains implications that undermine its own efficacy. The chief problem is that it exposes the fact that Shakespeare depends on

² For a more extended discussion concerning the gradual evolution of American attitudes to Shakespeare that transformed him from a "popular playwright" into a "sacred author" who could only be understood by the elite, see Levine 13–81.

interpretation: his meaning is not “universal” in the sense of being already given, timeless, and fixed, but may change with individual readings. This is clearly shown in the masque when Caliban repeatedly reacts to Shakespearean scenes in ways contrary to those intended by his tutors. Instead of recognising the moral of each scene, he succumbs to passions which the scenes are meant to criticise and exorcise. Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in his response to the last inner scene, Henry V’s “Once more unto the breach, dear friends” speech. When Caliban asks why Prospero will show him this “vision”, Miranda explains the didactic purpose of the exercise:

Perchance that you,
Born of a tiger’s loins, seeing that picture,
May recognize an image of yourself
And so recoil to reason and to love. (136)

The pacifistic intention of the show is reiterated by Ariel, who introduces it with the words:

Image of Strife, may never more
Your like draw near!
Pageant of long-forgotten war,
Appear! (137)

By witnessing the horrors of war, Caliban is expected to recognise his own propensity for violence and renounce it in favour of reason and love. However, the effect is exactly opposite. Caliban, enraged by what he sees as mockery of himself and aroused by the warlike cries of “God for Harry, England, and Saint George!”, replies with his own call to arms:

Ho, God for Caliban and Setebos!
War, War for Prosper’s throne! Miranda’s shrine! (139)

He is joined by the army of War and the Powers of Setebos, and a battle ensues, complete with detonations, “fireworks and bombs” (139). Prospero’s troops are defeated and taken captive, and Miranda – not for the first time – is threatened with rape.

Despite Miranda and Ariel’s tutelage, Caliban reacts to *Henry V* in his own, bellicose way. This foregrounds the fact that even the supposedly highest form of art – Shakespearean drama – has potentially multiple meanings. Ironically, the play which MacKaye chooses to discredit war, *Henry V*, has often been used as a pro-war, patriotic mouthpiece, in appropriations ranging from Olivier’s 1944 film to more recent castings of George W. Bush as the warlike Harry (Newman, Partridge). Indeed, as Balz Engler demonstrates, during the First World War both the British and the German sides used the play to support their own agendas. The printed programme of London celebrations of the

Shakespeare tercentenary included “Notes on Shakespeare the Patriot”, supported with “passages mainly from *Henry V*” (Engler 103). Meanwhile, in Germany, Rudolf Brotanek argued that “in our statesmen the feeling of fellowship with the people and of responsibility towards God is still so strong as in the soul of Henry V, as studied by Shakespeare” (qtd. in Engler 103). In MacKaye’s masque, as in the British-German contest over the ownership of the Bard, Shakespeare, instead of being a guarantor of stable and unified signification, emerges as a figure caught up in the processes of interpretation and appropriation. He is “up for grabs”, to be employed in the service of sometimes diametrically opposed ideologies.

Thus, the masque transforms history through carefully guided readings of Shakespeare. At the same time, it transforms Shakespeare from a historical writer into the timeless figure of the master artist. However, since the actual effects of his plays are shown to be multiple and even contradictory, Shakespeare becomes a strangely malleable figure, available for appropriation. Despite glorifying the Bard, the masque, perhaps unwittingly, empties him of inherent meaning and transfers his power to those who interpret him. In this context, the moment in the Epilogue when Prospero and Shakespeare exchange places becomes poignant: Shakespeare steps out of history, but at the same time becomes fictionalised, transferred to the same plane of existence as his creations, Miranda, Ariel, and Caliban.

Before the Epilogue can happen, though, Prospero and his followers have to be liberated, since Caliban’s military victory after the final inner scene left them in his clutches. Their release and the final resolution of conflict are accomplished by the Spirit of Time, “a serene female Figure, rising majestic from the altar” in the middle of the “Yellow Sands” (142). With this, the action transfers to the outer stage, the domain of historical time. Now, however, time seems to be conceived of in evolutionary, teleological terms, as the Spirit of Time explains:

To-day and Yesterday I am To-morrow:
Out of my primal dark
You dawn – my joy, my sorrow. (142)

The Spirit of Time declares:

So out of War up looms unconquered Art:
Blind forces rage, but masters rise to mould them.
Soldiers and kings depart;
Time’s artists – still behold them! (143)

In the grand finale, she brings forth the pageant of national theatres, with “the creators of the art of the theatre from antiquity to the verge of the living present: the world-famed actors, dramatists, producers, musicians, directors, and

inventors of its art” (144–45). Despite his professed commitment to “a drama *of* and *by* the people, not merely *for* the people” (xviii), in his epilogue MacKaye stages a triumph of individual “masters” of theatrical art, with Shakespeare as their pinnacle, rather than examples of popular or communal drama. This is not surprising when we consider the masque’s representation of Prospero’s art as a force that can both liberate and subjugate, and which can wreak havoc at the hands of the unworthy. Such art needs to be placed under the control of those deemed suitable – the Shakespeares and MacKayes of the world.

This may be why MacKaye chose to model his “drama of democracy” on arguably the least democratic dramatic form, that of the court masque. Like its Stuart counterpart, MacKaye’s masque attempts to construct community based on a strict hierarchy, and to transform historical contingencies into universal truths. Such operations, however, are bound to produce ambiguities and fault lines. In MacKaye’s masque, these are manifest chiefly in the ambivalent representation of Shakespeare as, at the same time, the powerful master artist and a curiously insubstantial figure, whose work only fully comes into being with each interpretation. While in the masque Setebos is represented by an idol and Sycorax is played by a “super-puppet” (xvi), Shakespeare also acquires features of both an idol and a marionette.

Simultaneously, the masque itself is a contradictory enterprise, ostensibly promoting democratic “drama *of* and *by* the people” (xviii), while, as Kahn demonstrates, subjecting its community actors to most rigid control which left little space for their own creativity (Kahn 275). However, contingencies of time and place will not be controlled and the uncouth Calibans will have their say: every night of the masque’s performance, the amateur actors waiting for their entries staged a burlesque of the play, involving a parody of MacKaye and other elevated masters involved in the production (Gordon 9–17).

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