

# Import of “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty” in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*

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## Abstract

This article is an attempt to probe the preconceptions prevalent in the most perfect of Shakespeare’s plays *Tempest*. Since the inequity of the playwright’s approach towards the characters is more pronounced, a genuine effort to bring it out has been initiated herewith. Keats is the proponent of the most popular line “Beauty is Truth, Truth beauty” which ignites many literary minds with sparks of ontological and epistemological questions and the search for the rationale behind it and its connotation remain an ongoing process. The article uses the etched line of the romantic poet to state that the concept is not a new one since the Bard of Avon had already employed it in a unique way in his last play *The Tempest*. It also rationalizes the way in which Prospero ill-treats and exploits the natives - Caliban and Sycorax - and compromises with the renegades from Naples which substantiates the Eurocentric White man’s bias against the black and the consequential racial legacy of ‘otherness’.

**Keywords:** Epistemological, Inequity, Ontological, Otherness, Pardon, Redemption, Renegade

## 1. Introduction

‘Beauty is Truth, Truth beauty’<sup>2</sup>, the penultimate line of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” had set the literary world afire as lots of images and impressions woven by the literati fascinate generations of readers and aesthetes. Though the words of Keats impregnated with deep thoughts were penned later, the concept has been engendered in the literary minds across the globe ever since Shakespearean times. William Shakespeare, the favorite son of the holy muse innately believed in the Keatsian concept but in a singular manner. Keats viewed the concept of ‘beauty’ as a kind of totality whereas Shakespeare in his play *The Tempest* uses it in a White man’s perspective which is at the most prejudiced. The Truth alluded in Keatsian poem is comprehensive and all inclusive while for the playwright the same is constricted. For him, the fair and the beautiful are true and veritable, revealing that Truth is

a select word correlated with all that is fair and white. This infers that all that are not fair are fallacious and beyond cure and that depravity is inborn in them. There cannot be a better text to ferret out the alternate implications of the terms beauty and truth than in the ultimate play of the bard *The Tempest*. It is a play that manifests the saying ‘Face is the index of mind’ and also brings out the virtues of beautiful beings. Though sinned, there is always a possibility of redemption for the chosen people of Naples. But the case applies not for the black and the unrefined as the playwright avers that ugly ‘things’ like Caliban is beyond change. In a way Prospero, the protagonist and victim of treachery, exhibits similar mindset in the island. The readers are coerced to hate Caliban by series of blackened scenes. This article ferrets out the exclusivist tendencies of the playwright, who places the Eurocentric world view that all that is white is beautiful and this alone could legitimately be acknowledged as true.

## 2. Beauty meets Truth

The *Tempest* as a play takes place in an island that is deserted and exotic with lots of superhuman elements. Prospero, the uncrowned monarch of the island with a firm grip on the nature and spirits of the isle has a daughter blessed with beauty and discerning innocence. When the play begins, a flurry of activities takes place due to the imminent shipwreck wrought out by the friendly spirit Ariel. Alonso, the King of Naples is a victim of the wreck who along with his crew and nobles is washed ashore stranding in different parts of the Island. Ferdinand, the 'beauteous' Prince is brought near the abode of the charming Miranda with a specific plan to kindle love. On a different plane, Caliban, the shapeless ugly 'thing' is striving hard to gain freedom from the 'invader' Prospero. Amidst all these actions, the merger of beauty and truth takes place. In course of the plot, the readers are made to believe that only beautiful beings can be veritable and all wicked ones are repulsive in looks. If at all any beauteous being is wicked, it is an aberration. Here beauty is not about the mind, it is all about white skin eventually establishing that truth is a physical concept. Shakespeare uses his quill to unite the two lovelorn hearts of the beauteous pair. Miranda has never seen a human being except her father, and the moment her eyes fall on the Prince, she assumes him to be a spirit. The 'spirit' mentioned here is divine in form and the dramatist colors him with the essence of beauty. Prospero's readiness to pair his daughter with the Prince is in itself an indication of his acceptance of things that are fair. Though King Alonso betrayed him, Prospero is all set to pardon him and let his son marry his daughter. As mentioned earlier, the errors of the King are just an aberration as he belongs to the 'beauteous' race. He can choose truth conducive to his aims and ends as there is no universal law to measure its genuineness. Miranda is overawed by Ferdinand and her father eases the situation by giving his form a touch of reality:

This gallant which thou seest  
Was in the wreck; and, but he's  
Something stained with grief that's  
Beauty's canker, thou mightst call him  
A goodly person<sup>1</sup>.

The playwright has optimally used words like beauty and good. It is to be realized that there is no much difference between the words 'good and truth' and 'good and beauty'. The quote is an indirect implication of the fact that all things white and fair are true as they are good.

Ferdinand is good because he is fair and when Prospero makes this statement, it needs to be understood that he had not met him for years together. Since it is more than a decade it is even doubtful if Prospero knows that the King has a Prince. Moreover, the King himself had not been true then, and had he been so, he would not have approved the deceit that was played on a true person like Prospero. But despite all this discord, Prospero addresses Ferdinand as a beautiful true person, which in a way makes the readers perceive the White man's prejudice against the colored lot.

## 3. Tryst with Truth

Miranda, the embodiment of beauty is also shown as the manifestation of truth. Her father Prospero calls her "Cherubim" who propelled him to live when he was thrown out of Naples. She is shown as a heaven's gift that gave him the needed fortitude to survive. Thus the usage of the word "Cherubim"<sup>1</sup> is a wonderful proof to strengthen that "beauty is truth, truth beauty"<sup>2</sup>. An angel is not only beautiful and immaculate but also true and by calling her an angel, the playwright proves that the power of beauty could sustain a person even in an adverse situation. Shakespeare's tryst with beauty continues throughout the play and by aligning innocence with beauty and fair skin, he in fact elucidates the White man's Truth. But the truth proclaimed by Keats and that which is delineated by the playwright vary. For Keats, it is a psychic one as he claims that only in things of the highest order beauty and truth reside and only highly perceptive minds could feel it. While nature is sublime, only men with insightful eyes could realize the difference and the degree of sublimity in it. For the romantic poet, beauty is one single entity that spreads like a light wherever the all encompassing truth allows it. In the same natural uninhabited landscape and desolate atmosphere, Truth in the form of innocence sticks unto Shakespeare's Miranda, whereas in the case of Caliban, the same atmosphere breeds contempt and ill feeling. This is the reason why despite her prolonged stay, she never raises any question regarding her past to her father. She innocently states,

"More to know  
Did never middle with my thoughts"<sup>1</sup>

By making Miranda utter these words, Shakespeare provides fodder to the perception of 'innocence' attached to the lead female.

## 4. Beauty Versus Virtue

By setting Ferdinand in the vicinity of Miranda, Prospero facilitates the dawn of love between both and here beauty and truth are the seeds that bring out love in the young hearts. Her first look at the prince is quite amusing as she calls him a spirit and it is the father who refutes her impression by stating that the man is a human being. Having received the needed reassurance, she admires Ferdinand straightaway and extols him as something divine. When she says that she had not seen any natural thing as noble as he, it is a clear rehash of the Keatsian line “beauty is truth, truth beauty”. It is an open declaration of physical admiration for a person who is naturally fair-skinned and this makes him noble without any display of virtuous deeds. Prospero’s plan to unite his daughter with the prince is based on the White man’s Eurocentric Truth and despite the sufferings at the hands of the King of Naples, Prospero senses the prevalence of truth in the prince just because he is fair skinned. This makes him emboldened to stage a benign coup. So, it is obvious from the play that Shakespeare gives weight to the beauty and truth factors, which are directly proportional to each other. The firm conviction of truth and beauty in terms of fairness of skin is deeply ingrained in the Eurocentric Western minds for centuries. The medieval practice of forcing a homely looking unmarried girl to nunnery goes on to affirm the set minds of the English society. Unfortunately, it is more blatant here, as Caliban and Sycorax stand for ugliness and therefore have no positive virtues in them. The ugly look of Caliban is reiterated by the dramatist at regular intervals and it is not only Prospero who detests the ‘creature’, but Miranda too utters caustic remarks on his looks. She says, ‘Tis a villain, Sir, I do not love to look on’<sup>1</sup>.

Though a super natural touch is given to Caliban, there is every reason to believe that he is a ‘native’ of the island who is attributed with bestial qualities by the father and the daughter. It is an irony that Miranda calls him a Villain when the real villains had descended on the island from Naples. Moreover, she is too arrogant to use expressions like ‘It’, though he had not harmed her in any way except being fascinated by her charm. So in a way even Caliban is inclined to adore beauty. His ugly looks are such that she even refuses to look at him. The quote is a clear proof to showcase the lop-sidedness of the playwright who calls him an untrue object while

eagerly befriends the ace rivals who forcibly evicted him from his dukedom. Prospero debases Caliban with a lot of provocative usages like ‘slave’, ‘Thou earth’<sup>1</sup>, ‘tortoise’<sup>1</sup>, ‘poisonous slave’<sup>1</sup>, ‘devil’<sup>1</sup> and so on. These multiple curses are made with an intent to strengthen the conviction that unpleasant looking ones are untrue and evil. Though Caliban tries to argue over the ownership of the island, the protagonist chides him by labeling him as a filthy creature. Here, the intent is not to defend the behavior of Caliban, but to showcase the perception of the playwright on beauty and truth. While he trusts not Ferdinand so as to leave him alone with his daughter, he punishes Caliban for trying to disturb Miranda. It is obvious in the course of the play that pardon is immediate for the fair skinned beings, while it is a delayed or in fact a ‘denied’ one for the ugly ones.

It would be worthwhile to compare the treatment meted out to Caliban with that of Ferdinand. Miranda, innocent as she is, speaks about her lover in the following way, “There’s nothing ill can dwell in such a temple: If the ill spirit have so far a house

Good things will strive to dwell with it.”<sup>1</sup> ‘Temple’<sup>1</sup> here denotes the fair physique of Ferdinand and such a beauteous body can never have anything ill or false in it. Such a physique can hold only truth, and even the vilest spirit would turn good if it dwells in such a beauteous body. So, the playwright is quite clear in attributing truth to beauty and falsity to ugliness. Of all the words used by the dramatist, the word ‘fair’ is prominent as it implies the relationship between beauty and color. Ferdinand appears to be good for Miranda because of his fairness and nothing else. She firmly believes that such a fair being could commit no ills. Unfortunately, she seems to have forgotten the sufferings undergone by her father due to the ills committed by the fair beings of Naples. The irony is that even when her father Prospero recounts the coup, she is pretty poised without any display of anger and irritation. At the end, she accepts Ferdinand despite her knowledge of his antecedents.

## 5. The Appeal of Fair Skin

In The *Tempest*, Shakespeare’s concept of beauty is confined to human looks and so the admiration and adoration of fair skinned people in the play is highly subjective. This in a way stunts the ability to sense the implications of the whole concept of beauty and truth. While dealing with

the adversaries from Naples, the evil Sebastian, the vile Antonio and the pretentious Alonso are let off casually by the magical wand that bore the brunt of cruelty as far as Caliban is concerned. Prospero was not just exiled, but was expected to starve and die along with his small babe. The deed was so cruel that it can in no way be compared with the crude and uncouth activities of Caliban. The trio - including the King - was bereft of empathies, but still the playwright's benevolence is evident through his broadminded reprieve of the villains. The contrasting expressions used for Miranda and Caliban are a clear case of the White man's prejudice in determining the truth factor. Alonso who glimpses at the girl, exclaims if she were a 'goddess', while the same King is shocked to find Caliban - a being that is 'strange' 'a thing'. Thus the blending of beauty with truth is not a new factor in the Eurocentric Western literature, since English litterateurs have always located truth in the fair facade of appearance alone. Truth is an extensive, expansive, far reaching, multi dimensional factor which cannot be constrained within the cocoon of fair skin and white masks.

## 6. Conclusion

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Though twentieth Century has silenced the subaltern

voices in different strands of the society, still the disparity of coloured origins persists. From the Grecian times, the poets carry the baton of responsibility with them, and till now they are seen as the light givers. While the 'two' great personalities in Western literature have dealt with the same concepts of Beauty and Truth, their approach towards them differ drastically. While Keats saw beauty as wholeness without any distortion, the Bard of Avon broadened the difference as the power of beauty over truth is more pronounced in the play *Tempest*. The question of the legacy of Prospero and Caliban regarding acknowledging and accepting the 'other' stays as enigmatic as it always has been.

## 7. References

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