Conquering Islands: 
Contextualizing *The Tempest* 

BARBARA FUCHS

It is an axiom of contemporary criticism that *The Tempest* is a play about the European colonial experience in America. While this perspective has generated enormously enriched readings of the play, it runs the risk of obscuring the complicated nuances of colonial discourses in the early seventeenth century. When is America not America? When it is Ireland, or North Africa, or Europe itself, or the no-man’s-land (really every man’s desired land) of the Mediterranean in-between. Just as the formal literary elements of a text—metaphors, puns, patterns—may signify in multiple ways, context, too, may be polysemous. By exploring other contexts for the insistent colonial concerns of Shakespeare’s island play, I hope to show how a multiple historical interpretation can unpack the condensed layers of colonialist ideology. This type of reading depends not only on recent *Tempest* criticism—what one might call the American readings—but on studies of England’s colonial role in Ireland. My aim is, first, to provide descriptions of the contemporary colonial contexts in both Ireland and the Mediterranean, which I believe shed light on the play, and, second, to suggest the advantages for political criticism of considering all relevant colonial contexts simultaneously. If, as I will argue, the superimposition of those contexts on the play reflects the way colonialist ideology is “quoted” from one contact zone to another in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, criticism that attempts to trace that ideology will gain from identifying precisely such layering of referents.1

My purpose in this essay is not to refute American readings of *The Tempest*; I agree with Peter Hulme that placing New World colonialism at the center of the play has made it a fundamentally more interesting and, at least for twen-

---

1 I would like to thank Stephen Orgel and Patricia Parker for their kind suggestions for this essay. 

I take the term “contact zone” from Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). Pratt uses this term to replace “colonial frontier,” a term “grounded within a European expansionist perspective” (6–7).

In her suggestive “Rogues, Shepherds, and the Counterfeit Distressed: Texts and Infracontexts of *The Winter’s Tale* 4.3,” (*Shakespeare Studies* 22 [1994]: 58–76), Barbara A. Mowat explores the “infracontexts” of *The Winter’s Tale*. In my analysis of *The Tempest*, I will show how such superimposition of contexts serves colonialist ideologies. In discussing what I shall call “colonial quotation,” I adhere to a wide definition of intertextuality as a relation between not only literary but also cultural texts. This notion of intertextuality recognizes that, as Roland Barthes argues, “The logic that governs the Text is not comprehensive (seeking to define ‘what the work means’) but metonymic; and the activity of associations, contiguities, and cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy” (“From Work to Text” in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, Josué V. Harari, ed. [Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1979], 73–81, esp. 76). Unlike Barthes, I perceive such symbolic energy as driving a particular ideological project.
tenth-century readers, a more relevant text. Instead, by highlighting the historical and political dimensions of the contemporary Mediterranean world and England’s colonial experience in Ireland, I hope to continue to historicize the colonialist discourse that American readings first brought to the fore. Even in highly suggestive and politically sophisticated readings of The Tempest, the Mediterranean often equals the literary, the Aeneid, the essentially European, functioning largely as a background to American news—what Hulme calls the first layer of a textual palimpsest. The new transatlantic colonial discourse works itself out against this background of the Aeneid and classical Mediterranean travels. Yet this critical privileging of America as the primary context of colonialism for the play obscures the very real presence of the Ottoman threat in the Mediterranean in the early seventeenth century and elides the violent English colonial adventures in Ireland, which paved the way for plantation in Virginia.

Although twentieth-century historians can speak of the Ottoman Empire in the early seventeenth century as having “passed its peak,” such a perspective was hardly available, as Samuel Chew points out, to contemporary observers of Islam’s might. As I hope to show, the sense of an Eastern empire encroaching on Europe pervades Shakespeare’s play, making the European “center” of the text simultaneously the origin of colonial adventure and the target of another empire’s expansionism. The general absence of Ireland from discussions of colonialism in the play is troubling, particularly since the devastation of a native population and its culture was more deliberate and vicious in England’s first plantation than in its later ventures in Virginia. As Paul Brown has suggested, there are strong analogies between Prospero’s island and Elizabethan Ireland, which locate them both “between American and European discourse.”

—§—

The Irish are the niggers of Europe, lads.

The Commitments

What are we to make of Roddy Doyle’s equation—his rather tongue-in-cheek justification for an Irish band’s focus on soul music? Doyle has found a parallel between the situation of African Americans within the U.S. and that of the Irish vis-à-vis postimperialist Europe. While his use of the ugly term niggers indicates the conflicive nature of such a comparison (in that the register of working-class/colonized solidarity fails to transcend racial prejudice, and in that the comparison problematically erases the presence in Eu-

3 William C. Spengemann, in A New World of Words: Redefining Early American Literature (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1994), points out that America “was in fact the source of the genre called ‘news’” (97).
4 See Hulme, 108–9.
rope of large black immigrant populations), Doyle’s comparison also parodies the discursive strategies of quotation which contribute to colonization. By comparing them to another oppressed population, Doyle establishes the right of the Irish to soul; ironically, the colonization of Ireland itself depended largely on strategies of comparison which represented its conquest as a repetition of earlier imperialist ventures to Africa and the Americas. As Nicholas P. Canny has pointed out, the colonization of Ireland functioned as an apprenticeship for England’s plantation in the Americas. I propose to focus here on the discursive dimension of this education—what I term colonial quotation.

By quotation I mean the references by colonial writers to the works of earlier explorers and planters as well as the larger rhetorical maneuver of assimilating the unknown by equating it with the already-known. Such quotation does not overlap perfectly with the notion of *translatio imperii*—the westward translation of Rome’s imperial tradition to the nascent European empires. However, the quoted discourse may use *translatio imperii* as its particular justification. The quotation of colonialist discourse from one instance to the next naturalizes expansion by bringing newly “discovered” lands and people under the conceptual domain of the already-known, the already-digested. Thus this particular kind of intertextuality advances a colonialist ideology.

The equation between prior and ongoing colonial encounters may be achieved by literal textual quotation of authorities, by referring to the colonist’s own previous experiences in another territory, or by reading a newly discovered culture as another manifestation of one already othered. Such a strategy underlies the remarkable encounter between Trinculo and Caliban in 2.2 of *The Tempest*, where the European does not know what the man/fish is but certainly knows what to *make of it*: a for-profit display like the multiple “dead Indians” in London fairs: “Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday-fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man—any strange beast there makes a man” (II. 27–30).

The context of exhibition that Trinculo quotes serves to frame the new and bring it under his dominion. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that the man “made” by such exhibition would be not Caliban attaining human status but Trinculo made rich. Although Trinculo claims to “let loose” his earlier opinion when he realizes that Caliban is alive, even calling him an “islander,”

---


10 In “Broken English and Broken Irish: Nation, Language, and the Optic of Power in Shakespeare’s Histories” (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 [1994]: 1–32) Michael Neill suggests how a different form of quotation might serve to counter colonialism. If, as he argues, Irish nationalism was produced by the same English nationalism that violently redefined and colonized Ireland, then perhaps the strategy of quotation need not work entirely to the conquerors’ advantage.


12 I find Brown’s identification of Trinculo with the “footloose Irish” (56) as a masterless barbarian unconvincing, given that Trinculo so clearly occupies the position of colonizer in this episode. This is not to suggest, however, that the text is not staging an anxiety about the English masterless classes.
the framework of exhibition is immediately reinstated by Stephano, who says he would take the monster home to present to a ruler or sell for profit (ll. 67–68, 74–75). Alive or dead, Caliban fulfills the role of spectacular other and, throughout the comic process of recognition by which Stephano and Trinculo discover him, occupies an abject position. His monstrosity corresponds quite neatly to the Europeans' expectations. For Caliban himself, of course, the situation is framed by Prospero's abusive treatment, which has scripted him as victim.

Caliban's cloak plays a central part in this complicated series of misrecognitions and discoveries, especially as a signal of the play's Irish context. The presence of the cloak does not prove such a context, but it suggests how English domination of Ireland might take cover in the text under precisely such details. The cloak, I would argue, is the only native artifact allowed Caliban. He first shrouts under it in order to escape detection by Trinculo, who he fears is a spirit in Prospero's service. Trinculo does discover him and immediately joins him under his 'gaberdine' to seek protection from the storm.15

There Stephano finds the two of them—a curious hybrid creature with four legs and two mouths, recalling Iago's characterization of Othello and Desdemona's marriage as a miscegenistic "beast with two backs." Such unhallowed combinations are precisely the issue here, as Trinculo unwittingly becomes monstrous in Stephano's eyes. Given England's anxiety over distinguishing savage from civilized, islander from colonizer in Ireland, it is possible to read this episode in Shakespeare's text as one of the indices of this colonial adventure.

The English conquest of Ireland was a messy affair. The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman conquest had provided England with a foothold in Dublin and the eastern counties—an area known as the Pale—while large portions of Ireland remained, literally and figuratively, beyond the Pale of English authority.14 Cruel attempts to control the island during Elizabeth's rule were both enabled and impeded by this earlier conquest. Over the intervening four centuries the Old English settlers had become in cultural terms all but indistinguishable from the Irish, which hugely complicated English attempts to fight the colonial war on cultural turf by proscribing Irish custom, dress, and social institutions. One of the earliest English statutes in Ireland, enacted in 1297, had required the English to "relinquish the Irish dress," while the Statutes of Kilkenny in 1366 had expressly linked English adoption of the "manners, fashion, and language of the Irish enemies" to the decay of "the said land and its liege people, the English language, the allegiance due to our lord the king, and the English laws."15 By the sixteenth century, despite such separatist legislation, Old English settlers had adopted many Irish ways. The


imperfect allegiance of the Anglo-Irish nobility to Elizabeth and to her metropolitan power was reflected in their rather less ambivalent embrace of Irish culture.

The Irish mantle became a particularly loaded signifier of such cultural struggles. In Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) the two interlocutors, Eudoxus and Irenius, propose several competing genealogies for such mantles. Irenius states that the Irish have such a custom “from the Scythians,” to which Eudoxus responds with a long history tracing the mantle from Jews to “Caldees” and Egyptians, through Greeks and Romans. But Irenius—who is given an extensive last word on the matter—cuts that history short:

I cannot deny but anciantly it was common to most, and yet Sithence disused and laid away. But in this latter age of the world since the decay of the Roman Empire, it was renewed and brought in again by those northern nations, when breaking out of their cold caves and frozen habitation into the sweet soil of Europe, they brought with them their usual weeds, fit to shield the cold and that continual frost . to which they had at home been enured; the which yet they left not off, by reason that they were in perpetual wars with the nations where they had invaded, but still removing from place to place carried always with them that weed as their house, their bed and their garment, and coming lastly into Ireland they found there more special use thereof, by reason of the raw cold climate, from whom it is now grown into that general use in which that people now have it; afterward the Africans succeeding, yet finding the like necessity of that garment, continued the like use thereof.

The mantle—house, bed, and garment—becomes inextricably linked to Irish transhumance, the seasonal movement of people and their livestock in search of pastures, one of the practices that most disturbed the English and which they associated closely with barbarity and “enormities unto that common-wealth.” Yet this history looks forward, too, by projecting the mantle from the Irish to the Africans, despite the logic of climatic determinism. Irenius does not deny the mantle a genealogy but simply replaces the history of civil peoples with one of savagery, setting the stage for the kind of colonialist quotation that I shall analyze below.

The discussion of the mantle continues at some length, with Irenius paradoxically providing more examples of the usefulness of such garments the more he seeks to criticize them. The perspective from under the cloak differs greatly from that outside it—as Irenius says, “the commodity doth not contravail the discommodity. . . . for it is a fit house for an outlaw, a meet bed for a rebel, and an apt cloak for a thief.” One’s appreciation of the mantle, then, will vary radically according to whether one is the persecuted or the persecutor. In Spenser’s description the mantle becomes the reified signifier of Irish resistance, which cannot be fully penetrated by English authority,

---

18 Spenser, 49.
19 Spenser, 51.
even with English ethnography leading the way. As Jones and Stallybrass argue, "The mantle represents Irishness as the refusal to adopt English order, English social categories, English style." Moreover, as one of the prime signifiers of Irishness, the mantle served to assess the extent to which earlier settlers had "gone native": the adoption of the mantle was presumably the culminating move in such acculturation. It is significant, then, that this problem is carefully avoided in Irenius and Eudoxus's discussion, as the latter moves quickly from the mantle to a warning about English use of the "glib," or long bangs over the eyes:

Sure I think Diogenes' dish did never serve his master more turns, notwithstanding that he made his dish his cup, his measure, his waterpot, then a mantle doth an Irishman, but I see they be all to bad intents, and therefore I will join with you in abolishing it. But what blame lay you to then glib? Take heed, I pray you, that you be not too busy therewith, for fear of your own blame, seeing our Englishmen take it up in such a general fashion, to wear their hair so unmeasurably long that some of them exceed the longest Irish gibs.

The Irish gibs, Irenius answers, are "fit masks as a mantle is for a thief." The subject of English mimicry of Irish fashions, however, has once again been carefully avoided. If, as Sir John Davies wrote, the Old English imitating Irish ways are "like those who had drunk of Circes Cuppe, and were turned into very Beasts," the real threat lay not in the power of the witch but in the fact that her colonist victims "tooke such pleasure in their beastly manner of life, as they would not returne to their shape of men againe." The metaphor takes on an interesting resonance if read back into Spenserian allegory in Book II of The Faerie Queene. In the Bower of Bliss, Acrasia/Circe's cup threatens not so much the disarmed knight (who can, after all, be disenchanted) as it does Grill, who stubbornly insists on going—and staying—native, famously refusing to be saved back into civilization.

The cultural warfare so well exemplified by Spenser's diatribe was just one front of attack in the English conquest of Ireland. As the violence escalated from the 1560s to the early part of the seventeenth century, anti-Irish rhetoric became ever more virulent, precisely to justify the widening attacks against Irish civilian populations. Ireland did eventually provide large estates for English gentlemen, but only after a bloody and extended struggle such as the English had not expected. Throughout this conflict, Ireland and America were both considered attractive options for expansionist ambitions; when particularly frustrated in their Irish campaigns, colonizers like Humphrey Gilbert and Walter Ralegh turned to America instead. Similarly, when the earliest English settlements at Roanoke proved impossible to sustain, such...

20 Jones and Stallybrass in Parker et al., eds., 166.
21 In discussing the contradictory English attitudes toward the mantle, Jones and Stallybrass note that "a miscegenation of clothes returns to haunt the colonizer" when a military supplier in Ireland suggests to Elizabeth that she provide her English troops there with an Irish mantle (Jones and Stallybrass in Parker et al., eds., 168). Although the authors read the episode as a sign of fragile English cultural identity, to adopt the mantle might also be to incorporate the enemy's tricks.
22 Spenser, 53.
23 Sir John Davies, A Discovery of the Reasons Why Ireland Was Never Entirely Subdued (1612), 182; quoted here from Jones and Stallybrass in Parker et al., eds., 163.
veterans of the American voyages as Thomas Harriot and John White tried planting in Ireland as an alternative.24

The connection between these desirable colonies as expansionist sites was established rhetorically at a number of levels. The description of dress—to return to our discussion of Caliban’s cloak—is one of the clearest instances of the quoting of a previous colonial experience in a new plantation. The English often perceived the Americas through an Irish filter. Thus Gabriel Archer described the natives’ leggings in New England as “like to Irish Dimmie Trouses,” and Martin Pring saw natives with “a Beares skinne like an Irish Mantle over one shoulder.”25 Even Powhatan’s dress was described by one of John Smith’s companions as “a faire Robe of skins as large as an Irish mantle.”26 As the comparisons expand beyond costume to other cultural practices, such as “wild” mourning, devil worship, and transhumance—all of which the English believed they had found on both sides of the Atlantic—it becomes easier to see how such comparisons contribute to the “othering” of a culture by assimilating it conceptually to one already subdued, if not conquered.27 The resulting quotations function as the colonist’s mirror image of miscegenation: instead of the confusion of racial boundaries that might actually threaten his dominion, he creates a purely rhetorical union of various colonial subjects. The others are insistently other but similar among themselves. I should stress, of course, that both the similarities and differences quoted belong to a constructed “text” of culture.28

Quoting from one colonial context to the other serves to domesticate the new—the American experience—and equate it with the already-advanced plantation of Ireland. Yet the considerable chronological overlap of European colonial experience in Ireland and America makes the temporal sequence more difficult to untangle. Although Ireland’s subjection is the primary colonial context for England in the 1590s and early 1600s, that conquest is in turn justified by comparing the English role in Ireland to that of the Spaniards in America.29 References to previous Spanish conquests introduce a kind of reciprocity in colonialist quoting, with Ireland as the middle term: the English quote the Spanish experience in America in order to justify England’s role in Ireland, and then transfer that Irish experience to Virginia. Yet the process of quotation must reach increasingly farther back in history for additional terms to substantiate the comparison. Thus the similarity between the English situation in Ireland and the Spanish Conquista—a problematic one considering Elizabethan propaganda against Spain—is reinforced by allusions to the Recconquista, or expulsion of the Moors from Spain, to further buttress colonialist apologias. Davies justifies the forcible transplantation of the Irish in Ulster by referring to “the Spaniards [who] lately removed all the Moors

24 See Quinn, 109ff.
26 John Smith, Works, 1608–1631, ed. Edward Arber (Birmingham: Privately Printed, 1884), 102; see also page 405.
27 Although I cannot address it here, such colonial quoting was also used to characterize African peoples newly encountered in the period, comparing them to the Irish.
28 Colonialism mediates English encounters with its several others, so that observation is never neutral or transparent. As Neill has shown, not only is ocular control essential to English domination in Ireland, but the construction of the Irish as different already brands them with a kind of guilt (26–27 and 6).
29 For a discussion of such triangulation, see Canny, “The Ideology of English Colonization.”
out of Grenada into Barbary, without providing them any new seats there."30

The end of the comparison gives away Davies’s conscience: Spain was far more concerned with preventing the return of the Moors expelled from North Africa than with their resettlement. In Ireland what to do with a starving peasant population forcibly removed from its land was a question not easily addressed.

Nicholas Canny finds the main source for the English/Spanish connection in Richard Eden’s translation of Peter Martyr’s De Orbe Novo (1555), which was probably familiar to English notables in Ireland in the 1560s.31 The Spanish conquest of the Americas became a model for the domination of savage peoples, so that the English comparison of their own role in Ireland to the Spanish conquests became closely imbricated with the construction of the Irish as barbarous. In this colonialist logic, once the Irish were thus characterized, they became appropriate subjects for the same treatment Native Americans had received at the hands of the Spanish. That the English reviled Spanish behavior, disseminating the infamous Black Legend of Spanish atrocities in the Indies, seems not to have impeded use of this model when the Irish situation made it expedient.32 English characterizations of Irish savagery, based on the natives’ supposed paganism and transhumance, proceeded apace: by 1560 Archbishop Matthew Parker could take such descriptions as a given, advocating the establishment of resident clergy in the north of England to prevent the inhabitants from becoming “too much Irish and savage.”33

In constructing the Irish as savages, the English placed them within a temporal framework in which Ireland existed at a stage of social development long since surpassed by England. Ireland required civilizing by England in much the same way that England had required colonizing by Rome.34 Sir Thomas Smith engaged in this rather partial relativism when he explained:

This I write unto you as I do understand by histories of thyngs by past, how this contrey of England, ones as uncivil as Ireland now is, was by colonies of the Romaynes brought to understand the lawes and orders of thannicient orders whereof there hath no nacon more strightly and truly kept the mouldes even to this day then we, yea more than tithalians and Romaynes themselves.35

The recognition of one’s own past in another by no means implies an acceptance of that other; it instead establishes a temporal dynamic in which that other must be made the same—forcibly brought up to date, so to speak. Here, England has already been civilized, having accepted the imposition of the

30 Davies to Salisbury, 8 November 1610, quoted here from Davies, Historical Tracts (Dublin, 1787), 273–86, esp. 283–84.
31 See Canny, “‘The Ideology of English Colonization,’” 593–94.
33 Matthew Parker, Correspondence (1833), quoted here from Quinn, 26.
34 This strategy for disarming criticism of colonialism has had a long life. Compare Joseph Conrad’s evocation of a “primitive” London in Heart of Darkness (New York: Signet, 1978) after eulogizing the Thames as the artery of commerce and empire, Marlow says, “And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth” and proceeds to evoke the Roman arrival in Britain (67).
35 Sir Thomas Smith to Fitzwilliam, 8 November 1572; quoted here from Canny, Elizabethan Conquest, 588–89.
Roman mold. This shapely civility then authorizes the imposition of a similar rule on Ireland, as *translatio imperii* becomes a kind of *translatio morum*.

English emphasis on the need to civilize the savage Irish partly replaces an earlier model of colonialist justification in which the Old English had argued that the Irish needed to be liberated from the tyranny of their own ruling class but were essentially fit subjects for English law and, indeed, desirable tenants or laborers. It is possible to read these shifting constructions of the colonial subject in the two depictions of islanders in Shakespeare’s text. Although Ariel need not be read as the co-opted native, as some modern rewritings of *The Tempest* insist, it is possible to view him as the colonizer’s fantasy of a plant, essentially accommodating, and useful subject. Of course, the play’s ironic presentation of Prospero’s fantasy shows the tensions inherent in this model. Ariel’s gratitude is never as complete or as certain as Prospero would wish. Perhaps, the text suggests, a liberated native tends to interpret liberation in terms rather different from those of his or her enlightened liberator. In the lively prehistory of the play, Prospero freed Ariel from Sycorax’s tyranny—wonderfully literalized in the pine trunk that bound him; but it is unclear whether subjugation to the new magician on the scene really means more liberty for the sprite.

Caliban, meanwhile, recalls the second model developed by the English to justify colonization: the Irish subject in need of civilizing. Miranda’s speech presents the colonizer’s story of attempts to civilize the native and locates the supposed intractability of Caliban in his lack of language (1.2.350–61). Consider her description of his inability to express himself:

> I pitied thee,
> Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
> One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
> Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
> A thing most brutish, I endow’d thy purposes
> With words that made them known.

((ll. 352–57))

Emphasis on the impenetrability of Caliban’s language—even he, according to Miranda, cannot understand it—evokes the English colonizers’ frustration with Gaelic as a barrier to their penetration of the territory. But Caliban cannot be “liberated” simply by being taught English. The end of Miranda’s speech betrays the unspoken half of the colonialist argument: if the native’s “vile race” makes him inherently unsuited to civilization, then violence is justified:

But thy vile race—
Though thou didst learn—had that in’t which good natures
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou

---


37 The English address the threatening incomprehensibility of the natives’ language itself through the mechanisms of colonial quotation. The term *hubbul*, originally used to describe an Irish war cry or outcry, migrates to Virginia, where Henry Spelman hears the Indians making a “whoopubb” (Smith, cv). The *OED* itself incorporates the strategies of colonial quotation, defining *hubbul* as “a confused noise of a multitude shouting or yelling; esp. the confused shouting of a battle-cry or ‘hue and cry’ by wild or savage races” (T:459, my emphasis).
Deservedly confined into this rock,  
Who hadst deserved more than a prison.  

(Il. 357–61)

Here the duplicitous logic of colonialist ideology is exposed: if one explanation for Caliban's subjection doesn't work, a more essentialist one will be found. Language is more useful than Caliban knows. My point is that the elements of colonialist discourse in the text do not apply to the Americas. It would be ridiculous to deny that the English experienced a similar or even greater disorientation when confronted with American languages and cultures than with Gaelic. Instead, I am attempting to display the layering of such contexts in the play, from the basic discourse of savagery developed by the English in Ireland to their eventual experiences in the Americas. To read only America in The Tempest is to ignore the connections that colonial quotation establishes between England's two main Western plantations, connections perhaps expressed most graphically in the instability of their geographic referents. In the first part of the seventeenth century, Ireland could be, as it was to Bacon, "the second island of the ocean Atlantic," or it could migrate to a completely different conceptual context, as in Fynes Moryson's description of "This famous Island in the Virginian Sea."38

---

This Tunis, sir, was Carthage.  

(2.1.82)

Even within these pages it has not been possible to separate Irish and Mediterranean colonial contexts without postponing the insistent presence of the latter, as the English in Ireland compare themselves to the Spaniards expelling the Moors and the Irish mantle is sighted not only in America but in Africa. Our inability to describe simultaneously the bewildering number of ways in which early modern Europe experienced other civilizations prevents us from uncovering all the connections among those experiences, but a focus on one area of contact should not preclude consideration of others. Ann Rosalind Jones has tried to bring together multiple cultural encounters by exploring the often-made comparison of Vittoria Colombina's Moorish maid Zanche to the Irish in Webster's The White Devil.39 The attribution to Zanche of both Irish and Moorish savagery is particularly evocative if we consider that two terms of the comparison represent, respectively, a newly established Western colony of England and an Eastern empire that was a threat to England. Such a conflation of attributes in the figure of the Moorish maid may suggest how the English import a gendered discourse into their cultural negotiations with the Moors in order to disable the Islamic threat.

Textual signs of English anxiety about Islamic power in the Mediterranean abound in the play, though critics generally relegate those signs to a literary register. When discussing the marriage of Alonso's daughter Claribell to the king of Tunis, Gonzalo points out that Tunis is, in a fundamental way, Carthage: "This Tunis, sir, was Carthage." Critics hastily explain Carthage,

38 Francis Bacon, The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon, 4th ed. (1686), and Fynes Moryson, An Itinerary (1617); both quoted here from Quinn, 121–22.
with its baggage of Virgilian associations, as though the mention of Tunis were self-explanatory.40 While some recent criticism has explored the early seventeenth-century construction of Islam in the English theater,41 there are specific textual traces of the imperial Ottoman threat in The Tempest. Even though by the 1580s trade was established between England and the Turkish world, the perceived menace of Islam was still great. Writing his Generall Historie of the Turks in 1603, Richard Knolles calls them “the greatest terrore of the world” and advocates the reading of his text because the Ottoman Empire “in our time so flourisheth, and at this present so mightily sweleth as if it would overflow all, were it not by the mercie of God.”42 The threat of Islam existed on two fronts: southeastern Europe (which will not concern us here) and the Mediterranean. Knolles shows great respect for Ottoman power on both land and sea: “With the great Ocean [the Ottoman monarch] much medleth not, more than a little in the gulfes of Persia and Arabia: most of his territories lying vpon the Mediterranean and Euxine seas. . . Now for these seas, no prince in the world hath greater or better means to set forth his fleets than hath he.”43

During the sixteenth century the Barbary Coast that figures so prominently in Shakespeare’s play had come gradually under Turkish power.44 In fact, Algiers, Sycorax’s home before her banishment, had been captured by the Turks in the 1530s. Charles V led an expedition against it in 1541 but without success. Tunis itself had very recently been the site of a European struggle against the Ottoman Empire: captured by the Spanish in 1572, it was reconquered by the Turks in 1574.45

Morocco had never been part of the empire, and a substantial diplomatic relationship developed between its rulers and Elizabeth, allied together against both the Spanish and the Turks.46 After James’s peace with Spain, England abandoned its rather fanciful plans for invading Spain with Morocco’s help and instead considered invading Morocco. Writing to King James, Henry Roberts suggested that the campaign be carried out with “Irish soldiurs and they of the Out Isles,” as “the countrey wilbee the better to bee ridd


41 It must be noted that the imperial name of Carthage itself travels far beyond the classical world. By the seventeenth century Cartagena was the name of both a city in Spain and a Spanish settlement in what is now Colombia. Orgel cites Richard Eden’s mention of this West Indies harbor as “Carthago” in The Decades of the New World (London, 1555), a translation of Peter Martyr’s De Orbe Novo.


43 Knolles, Aaaaaa6v.

44 See, for example, Prospero’s account of Sycorax (1.2.261–70) and the discussion of Claribel’s marriage to the king of Tunis (2.1.68–84 and 244–58).

45 For a concise summary of these events, see Chew, 551–55.

of them, for they bee but idle and will never fall to worke but steale as longe as they remaine in Ireland." 47 Once again the colonized—here proposed as mercenaries—return to English rhetoric as new conquests are envisioned.

The possibility of conquering Morocco, however remote, might account for the representation of non-Turkish Moors, in plays such as Heywood’s Fair Maid of the West, as embodying a "dangerous but effeminate otherness that finally renders them safely inferior to their European visitors," as Jean Howard puts it. 48 But Howard makes race the main cause of such a representation, minimizing the difference between Turks and Moroccan Moors in terms of an expansionist imperative. I think that the difference in terms of an imperial threat is fundamental: isolated Morocco could be an ally or, treacherously, could be turned into a colony; under the Ottoman Empire the rest of North Africa remained a much greater threat. Thus England’s willingness to consider Moroccan Islam a lesser threat than Spanish Catholicism: Morocco was not an expansionist power, or at least not in the direction of Europe.

The perceived threat from the Ottoman Empire itself, however, did not abate, even after the decisive victory at Lepanto. This 1571 naval battle was hailed as the triumph of Christendom over the Turks, but it was soon clear that the intra-European alliances necessary to mount a credible challenge to Ottoman power would not last. One textual record of the unusual place that Lepanto occupied in the history of the European struggle against Islam is King James’s epic poem on the subject, written after the battle and republished when he acceded to the English throne. 49 The poem caught Richard Knolles’s attention, and he dedicates his history to James, "for that your Majestie hath not disdained in your Lepanto or Heroicall Song, with your learned Muse to adornne and set forth the greatest and most glorious victory that euer was by any the Christian confederat princes obtained against these the Othoman Kings or Emperors." 50 Perhaps the most interesting signs of the European tensions that made the Lepanto victory unrepeatable appear in James’s preface to the reader, where he provides an extensive set of justifications for a Protestant monarch’s praise of the Catholic alliance: "And... I knowe, the special thing disliked in it, is, that I should seeme, far contrary to my degree and Religion, like a Mercenary Poët, to penne a worke, ex professo, in praise of a forraine Papist bastarde...." Although the extraordinary circumstances of the battle justify his praise of Don Juan of Austria "as of a particular man," James suggests, the reader should not extrapolate from that praise any sympathy for the Catholic League: "Next follows my invocation to the true God only, and not to all the He and She Saints, for whose vaine honors, DON-IOAN fought in all his war." 51 In James’s ambivalent un-writing of the poem’s epic praise, we see reflected the fragility of the European unity that had led to the great naval triumph.

In the years after Lepanto, as English trade with the Turks was gradually established, England developed a complex relationship to the Ottoman

47 Henry De Castries, Les Sources Inédites de L’Histoire du Maroc (1918); quoted here from D’Amico, 38.
48 Howard in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 113.
49 For the poem's publication history and an account of the battle as the background for Othello, see Emrys Jones, " ‘Othello’, ‘Lepanto’ and the Cyprus Wars," SS 21 (1968): 47–52.
50 Knolles, A3.
threat. While a healthy respect for the Turks' imperial might prevailed, Islam (especially in the Moroccan version) also became a term in an elaborate set of rhetorical constructions which played it off against Catholicism as a lesser, or merely equivalent, evil. An observer like Knolles, however, thought that Spain, given its American riches, was the most appropriate power to deal with the Turkish emperor:

There remaineth only the king of Spaine, of all other the great princes either Christians or Mahometanes (bordering upon him) the best able to deal with him; his yearely reuenewes so farre exceeding those of the Turkes...

Knolles suggests that the Spanish have the best chance of defeating the Turks but regrets that their resources are spread too thin over their many possessions "for the necessarie defence and keeping of his so large and dispersed territories."58

For England the situation vis-à-vis the Turks was further complicated by piracy in the Mediterranean. As the sixteenth century drew to a close, petty piracy gradually replaced large naval encounters.54 English merchants were prey to Barbary pirates from Algiers or Tunis, but English piracy also flourished, glorified during Elizabeth's reign as privateering against the Spanish and alternately condemned and condoned once peace with Spain had been reached. When English pirates fell out of favor at home, they "turned Turk." Purchas locates the scandalous confusion of Moors and English renegades in Algiers, which he calls "the Whirlepoole of these Seas, the Throne of Pyrace, the Sinke of Trade and the Stinke of Slavery; the Cage of uncleane Birds of Prey, the Habitation of Sea-Devils, the Receptacle of Renegadoes of God, and Traytors to their Country."55 But the figure of the English renegade seemed threatening, I conjecture, mainly because it shattered the carefully constructed mirroring of Barbary Coast pirates in English privateering. As long as this mirror image was maintained, the English could imagine a role for themselves in controlling the Mediterranean. Once English pirates became, effectively, outlaws and went over to the other side, England was at a disadvantage, having no official expansionist presence in such contested territory. This complicated background of piracy on the sea and traditional Islamic expansionism on land lies behind the Algiers described as Sycorax's birthplace in *The Tempest*, 1.2. Yet even that origin is made more complicated by the location of the main action of the play on an island somewhere between Tunis and Italy.

In some ways the Mediterranean islands themselves were the most volatile territories in the region. Malta had withstood the Turkish assault in 1565, but the Knights of St. John had moved there only when it proved impossible to defend Rhodes. Cyprus, too, was in Turkish hands, as even the victory at Lepanto had proved insufficient to reconquer it. All the islands were especially vulnerable, of course, to pirate raids. Any island imagined in the Mediterranean at the time of the play, then, would be understood to exist in a hotly

52 Knolles, Bbbbbv.
53 Knolles, Bbbbbv.
55 Purchas, quoted here from Chew, 344.
contested space, permanently threatened by the Ottoman Empire if not directly under its control.

If one focuses on Tunis and the threat it posed to the Christian areas of the Mediterranean, the indecorous marriage that sets the royal party in *The Tempest* on their journey becomes ever more outrageous. If the marriage of Desdemona to Othello is controversial, it could at least be partly redeemed by the fact that Othello the Moor fights against the Turks on the side of Venice. To marry a daughter to the king of Tunis, while perhaps expedient in political terms, is a far more radical move than to pair her off in some convenient European alliance. To Lynda Bose’s argument that “the black male-white female union is, throughout this period and earlier, most frequently depicted as the ultimate romantic-transgressive model of erotic love,”56 I would add that the chastening tragic end of Othello cannot be discounted as one vision of such unions. The threat of violence to Christian women from irascible foreign husbands is well chronicled in Knolles, who tells the story of Manto (Figure 1), a Greek lady taken prisoner by the Turks, who marries Ionuses Bassa, an official in Suleiman’s army. After an initial interlude of married bliss, Bassa, “after the manner of sensuall men still fearing least that which so much pleased himselfe, gaue no lesse contentment to others also,” becomes madly jealous.57 Manto tries to leave him and return to her country but is betrayed

---

56 Bose in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 41.
57 Knolles, 557.
by a eunuch, whereupon her husband kills her. This story could have served as a source for Othello; whether or not it did so, it highlights the dangers that Europe imagined for a woman married into the empire of Islam. Such a union would probably be more acceptable in European eyes when (as with Othello fighting for Venice or the Prince of Morocco coming to Belmont to woo Portia unsuccessfully in The Merchant of Venice) it involved the domestication of the foreign male rather than the removal of a European woman to North Africa or Asia Minor. As Sebastian points out, rubbing salt in Alonso’s wounds:

Sir, you may thank yourself for this great loss,
That would not bless our Europe with your daughter,
But rather lose her to an African,
Where she, at least, is banished from your eye,
Who hath cause to wet the grief on’t.

(2.1.121–25)

The description of Claribel’s forced marriage recalls grim accounts of Christians captured by Barbary Coast pirates rather than stories of transgressive romance. Sebastian continues to insist upon the near-sacrificial nature of the union:

You were kneeled to and importuned otherwise
By all of us, and the fair soul herself
Weighed between loathness and obedience at
Which end o’th’ beam should bow. . . .

(ll. 126–29)

What does this marriage tell us, then, about the sexual politics of the play as a sublimated arena for imperial struggles? Knolles suggests the reason for the Claribel-Tunis union when he describes Naples as the European border of the Ottoman Empire. Alonso is thoroughly chastised for his decision to marry off his daughter (presumably to contain Islamic attacks on Naples), but the reproaches come from one who wishes him ill and would usurp his crown. The thoroughly negative characterization of the island conspirators somewhat re-legitimizes the marriage, since it is mainly Sebastian who condemns it. Yet the most telling reaction to the supposed alliance with Tunis comes when Sebastian and Antonio discuss murdering Alonso for his crown. At this point Claribel entirely replaces her Moorish consort, as her femaleness is used to fix Islam firmly in Africa. When Antonio asks Sebastian who, after Ferdinand, is next in line to the crown of Naples, Sebastian answers “Claribel.” Antonio then places Claribel at a further and further remove from the crown by insisting on the impossible distances that separate her from Europe:

ANTONIO

She that is Queen of Tunis; she that dwells
Ten leagues beyond man’s life; she that from Naples
Can have no note unless the sun were post—
The man i’ th’ moon’s too slow—till newborn chins
Be rough and razorable; she that from whom
We all were sea-swallowed, though some cast again—
And by that destiny, to perform an act
Whereof what’s past is prologue, what to come
In yours and my discharge.
SEBASTIAN

What stuff is this? How say you?

'Tis true my brother’s daughter’s Queen of Tunis,
So is she heir of Naples, 'twixt which regions
There is some space.

ANTONIO

A space whose every cubit
Seems to cry out, 'How shall that Claribel
Measure us back to Naples? Keep in Tunis,
And let Sebastian wake.'

(2.1.244–58)

Sebastian’s commonsense rejoinder about “some space” is perfectly reasonable, considering that the distance from Tunis to Naples, as Stephen Orgel points out, is three hundred miles.\(^58\) But what interests me here is the incredible amplification of space that Antonio imagines, as he expands the Mediterranean into an immense ocean. His hyperbole not only makes the crossing impossible but also neatly obscures its possible agents. Although Antonio measures the length of the voyage by a man’s lifespan, by the man in the moon’s speed, and by the time it takes for a baby boy to reach manhood, the actual man Claribel has married is nowhere to be found in the passage. Presumably, however, the king of Tunis would support his royal consort’s claims to a European throne; perhaps his interest in conquering that throne justified the marriage in the first place. Antonio’s exclusive focus on the possibility of Claribel’s return should thus be read as a strategy for containing the role of Islam in the play. In a perverse metonymy, the European woman, instead of her threatening husband, becomes “Tunis.” Unlike “Norway,” “Denmark,” “Morocco,” “Aragon,” and other heroic national appellations, the name of “Tunis” signifies only an infinitely distant Claribel. Much as the Turks in *Othello* are conveniently drowned in a single line of dialogue—“News, friends: our wars are done; the Turks are drown’d” (2.1.202)—in order to allow the domestic action to proceed, Antonio’s relocation of Claribel to faraway Tunis and his erasure of her husband define the power struggles within the play as essentially European, regardless of the place where they are occurring. Of course Alonso’s party is itself an exception to the supposed impossibility of getting to Tunis. Antonio admits this but points to their being “sea-swallowed” on their return. And yet the very urgency of the conspiracies on the island would indicate that the Italians have little doubt they will eventually return home. The play’s containment of “Tunis”—a pressing, contemporary imperial threat—by focusing on Claribel’s distance rehearses the earlier containment of a historical empire, Carthage, through the jocund references to “Widow Dido” in 2.1.

In *The Tempest* gender does the work of imperialism rather than of discovery.\(^59\) The containment of the Islamic threat to European sovereignty or Mediterranean expansion plays itself out once again in the peculiar story of Sycorax’s banishment from Algiers. This expulsion functions as a screen for European fears of Islamic control of the Mediterranean islands. Sycorax—cast as too awful even for the rough society of Algiers—is banished, as Prospero (whose source for this knowledge is somewhat unclear) tells Ariel, “For mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible / To enter human hearing” (1.2.264–
65). Yet her banishment was a commuted sentence; her life was spared “for one thing she did”—that is, her pregnancy. This ascription of mercy to the Algerians, reflecting European law, effectively replaces the Barbary pirates or Ottoman galleys—whose power so impressed Knolles—with the flimsy bark of sailors on a charitable mission who deposited the pregnant Sycorax on the island. Again, the metonymic reduction of Islam to the figure of the witch is perverse, for what is at stake in the Mediterranean is not the “Satanic” side of Islam—which Sycorax might represent—but its military might. The rewriting of Islamic expansionism into an errand of mercy operates once again through a female figure—a type of containment far more subtle than the effeminization Howard points to in Heywood’s play, or even than the commonplace associations of the East with luxury and sensuousness. Here the female figures take the place of the threatening Moors, so that the latter are disarmed at a remove. By indirectly neutralizing the threat of Islam, the text of *The Tempest* prevents any direct engagement with its forces, addressing instead a female version, which is more easily conquered, at least in rhetoric. As the action of the play proves, Sycorax represents a temporary presence rather than an effective Islamic conquest of the island; her son Caliban loses it immediately to the Europeans. Moreover, this second instance of containment through figuration is presented by Prospero, who, whatever his colonialist failings, clearly represents a center of moral authority in the text. Thus it is not only conspirators who turn to the feminine as a strategy for ensuring European power: Prospero’s story emasculates Algerian naval power just as Antonio and Sebastian’s fantasies erase the king of Tunis.

The gendered dynamics of Mediterranean containment in the play recall the more common gendered colonialist trope of ravishing a newly discovered land. Clearly this particular island no longer has her maidenhead; she is thoroughly known by Caliban, who was familiar with her secrets even before Prospero arrived, and who showed Prospero “all the qualities o’th’ isle” (1.337). Instead of rhapsodizing the European rape of the island, then, the text provides as counter-metaphor another rape—Caliban’s attempt on Miranda—as colonialist justification (II.347–48).60 Caliban’s attack on Prospero’s daughter once more genders the colonizing impulse; here it is the defense of the European woman that justifies repression of the non-European.

The triad of female figures which I have considered (two of them absent, two largely submissive daughters) thus participates in the text’s containment of Islamic expansionism and its more complex espousal of European colonialism. The rhetorical representation of the women, through hyperbole, metonymy, and the anti-metaphor of Miranda’s near-rape, performs European imperial goals at the discursive level, and it is only by interrupting that performance through, for example, a consideration of the play’s multiple contexts that the illusionism can be examined.

Thus the discursive work of gender functions as yet another set of colonialist strategies. Much like the use of quotation which I identified when discuss-

---

60 In another variation on this theme, the natives’ alleged sexual violence toward the Europeans’ intended land was sometimes offered as a colonialist justification, as in Purchas’s description of the vulnerable Virginia: “... howsoever like a modest Virgin she is now vailed with wild Couerts and shadie Woods, expecting rather rauiishment then Mariage from her Natiue Sauages...” (4:1818).
ing the connections between English experiences in Ireland and America, these rhetorical strategies in *The Tempest* make sense only when viewed from the perspective of multiple contexts. Europe’s experience of being another empire’s goal was closely bound up, temporally, materially, and rhetorically, with its burgeoning experience of empire-building; it is no wonder, then, that the multiple dimensions come together in a text as complex and polysemous as *The Tempest*. By purposely conflating and collapsing these contexts, I have attempted to give a political reading of the play which insists on what Richard Knolles would call “the four parts of the world,” in order to prevent Shakespeare’s island play from itself becoming isolated somewhere in the Americas.