On the properties of wild men: the bestiary men of
*De proprietatibus rerum* and Shakespeare’s Caliban

David Moses

This short article observes that while the figure of Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* satisfies colonial and postcolonial readings of the play which see him as the ‘colonial other’, Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ encyclopaedia *De proprietatibus rerum*, or *On the Properties of Things* (1245) in John Trevisa’s translation (1398), can be seen to provide a more detailed analysis of his form and function. It is all too easy violently to break the surface tension of medieval bestiaries with current literary theory, which ‘reveals’ hidden meanings apparently available only to a modern, sophisticated, readership. The ‘wild men’ of the *DPR* certainly support the validity of colonial readings, but in a similar mode reveal Caliban’s ‘animal otherness’ and his kinship with the fantastical hybrids associated with the medieval paradigm. The purpose of this article is therefore to draw attention to the wild men and hybrids of the *DPR* less as unobserved analogues for the figure of Caliban but as types of figurative and illustrative beings, and thus to contextualise him in their mode of ‘animal other’.  

The earliest critical claim for the impact of English translations of the *DPR* on the works of Shakespeare is 1897 when R. Steel notes its influence. Matrod’s statement of 1912 that ‘without the *DPR* the works of Shakespeare would not have existed’ is a notorious overemphasis, moderated by Boyer in 1919. Boyer recognises the importance of the *DPR* but delimits its influence to ‘a source of scientific knowledge for Elizabethan writers’ which subsequently offers a hermeneutic by which to explain ‘difficult’ passages in Shakespeare’s work. More recently, D. C. Greetham notes that the *DPR* has been tagged with the sobriquet of ‘Shakespeare’s encyclopaedia.’ John Hankins saw Batman’s edition as the analogue to Shakespeare’s thought on endless matters from the soul to the effect of the humours on the body. However, Batman’s efforts to revive interest in the medieval encyclopaedia were not successful enough to call for a second edition, and current thought is that the version most readily available

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2 I am aware that this argument is akin to post-structuralist assertions that reason has often been used to exclude, denigrate or silence opinions that differ from the dominant view: the ‘other’ side is always irrational. A recent edition of essays which look at animals from such perspectives, including animals in Nietzsche’s philosophy, and ‘animal being’ in Heidegger’s thought, is *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology, and Animal Life*, ed. by H. Peter Steeves (New York: State University of New York, 1999). It is not my intention to follow this line of thought here, my study being primarily pedagogic, and concerned with the relationship between medieval and Early Modern bestiary representations.


6 *Batman vpon Bartholome his booke De proprietatibus rerum*, (London: East, 1582, British Museum)

to Shakespeare may indeed have been the Trevisa translation, of which there were several printed editions (Wynkyn de Worde 1491, 1495, 1496?).

The strangeness of Caliban in *The Tempest* and the natural setting of the distant location, informs readings of the discourse of discover in Early Modern literature. This, though, can be seen to have very established origins in the fantastical half-men of the medieval bestiary as illustrated in the *DPR*, who always retain an intimation of metaphoricity, underpinned by the generic geographical ‘othering’ of the East. In the *DPR* Fauns, for example, are from Scythia: ‘also in sicia beþ bestes wiþ schappe of men and feet of hors’ (18: 48). When the home of the fantastical is not specified as India, Ethiopia too is a place of origin. In this sense, the monstrous exists at a distant location, though never here.

There is nothing new in the observation that the young nobles or ‘buds of nobler race’ in *The Tempest* are set against a ‘natural’ man in such a location. In courtly mode, digression to the natural is to be forestalled by the rehearsal of courtly values if these young aristocrats are to rehearse and establish their nobility. To demonstrate what they should not be, placed in an Edenic setting to evoke the site of man’s fall from grace, is the embodiment of post-lapsarian digression, Caliban. However, the figure of Caliban can be seen to reflect in allegory the state of fallenness of *all* men, in order to privilege spiritual and courtly ideals over uncomfortable physical realities and innate animal tendencies. In these terms the prescribed courtly ideal finds as its main binary opposition mankind’s fallen animal nature, embodied in the natural man.

Mankind, Aristotle tells us, has quiddity or defining essential characteristics, as an animal and at a biological level. In the *DPR*, the animal is always defined in relation to its highest point, mankind’s reason. This dichotomy of the bestial and the reasonable which becomes a doctrinal commonplace in Christian theology, is what Bartholomaeus refers to when he states that the ‘animal’ part of man (*Humo*) is of ‘þe erþe’ yet is also ‘Antropos’ or ‘arered vp’ to face his God, plainly glossing Aristotle in *Parts of Animals*.

*oþir bestis lokeþ donward to þe erþe, and God 3af to man an hi3e mouþ and hete hym loke vp and se heven, and he 3af to man visagis arerid toward þe stars. Also a man schal seche heven and nou3t putte his þou3t in þertþe and be obedient to þe wombe as a best. Isider spekeþ of double maner man, of þe inner man and vtter man (DPR 3. 1).*

This ‘double maner man’ of both inner and outer parts has reason or ‘vnbdoliche substaunce intellectual’. The soul is anchored to the material: ‘ioyned to þe body in twey maners’ which defines the soul as mover to the moved, controlling the body by reason ‘as a schipman is i-oned to þe ship’ (3. 1). But this body - soul duality is clearly metaphorised in the wild men and hybrids of the *DPR*, who seem in part to suggest reasonability, yet appear to be animals. Like Caliban they are too similar to man not to present potential or imagined threats, and must be distanced. For Caliban,
this integration means both enslaving him while revealing him to be a ‘thing of
darkness’, rather than a man aspiring to the light of Christian ascendancy.

As one of these metaphorical figures Caliban can be seen as the mobilisation of a set
of pre-existent rhetorical devices concerning Christian belief about the fallenness of
the animal and the nobility of the human soul. In another analogue, *The Mirrour of
Princely Deedes*, Devil’s Island is so named because of the monster Fauno who has
ravaged it. Fauno is the son of a wicked princess and a monster from the Atlas
Mountains brought to her by the devil. This ‘preternatural origin fits Caliban’s quasi-
symbolic function as the embodiment of sensual grossness and hostility to truth and
goodness.'

It also emphasises the way in which Caliban’s lineage is a travesty of the
noble pedigrees of the Milanese. Like Fauno of *The Mirrour*, the faun of the DPR and
Caliban are subjects of a debate about the identity of the wild man and his desire to
reproduce himself: ‘certeyn bestes bë ycleped *fauni* and *satiri* also and bë bestes
wonderliche yschape wiþ likeness and schappe of men but þay bë nought ful
partyn[er]s of resoun of mankynde’. Fauns have bestial wit alone and kill women by
the act of rape: ‘suche bestes bë ful lecherous, in so moche þat þey sleeþ wommen in
þe dede of leccery if þey takeþ hem walkynge in woodes’ (18:48). This reads like a
morality lesson about pastoral excursions, in which a courtly separation is the
prescribed antidote to a natural world which threatens to infringe its boundaries and
impinge upon the human with a version of what is already distinctly, in fact, human.
Prospero takes Caliban into his own cell as a reasonable fellow man, but denies his
humanity when Caliban ‘didst seek to violate / The honour of [his] child’ (I. ii., 349-
50). Left to his own devices Caliban would have populated his island with others of
his race.

The most outstanding analogous material between the two texts concerns language
and its transmission. Miranda admonishes Caliban with:

Abhorred slave,
Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! 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 would gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endow’d thy purposes
With words that made them known. (I. ii. 355 - 9)

Denying the native subject a legitimate language of his own is, of course, a primary
characteristic of the colonial encounter. Long before this discourse of discovery,
however, Bartholomaeus makes a striking observation about the way that the human
language of fauns is empty:

Certeyn bestes bë ycleped *fauni* and *satiri* also and bë bestes wonderliche yschape
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11 See also the *Pilosis*, an incubus whose name has the etymological derivation ‘doyng þe dede of
generacioun’ (18. 84) and the *onocentauro*, which ‘feyñeþ somdele þe schapp of mannes kynde’ (18.
79).
mankynde. And so þey beþ nought ytaught to speke by crafte nouþer by kynde, 
but þey han bestial witte and beþ sterne and cruel wip bestial appetite. And 
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divine; for nothing natural / I ever saw so noble’ (I. ii, 420 – 421). Caliban’s body however, is more subject to fallenness, like the hybrid he has webbed feet — the mark of Adam’s fall. In this way it is uncertain whether fauns, like Caliban, can make a man; they have an uncertain ontology where it is unclear whether a hybrid is a man in the making or unmaking, thus revealing human animality and its apparently transcendable categories.

‘Shakespeare’s encyclopaedia’, despite its claim to be ‘literal’, presents metaphorical material which expresses contemporary medieval theological values. However, these values are clearly transmitted and expressed in the Early Modern figure of Caliban. The striking contrasts established between ‘civilised’ and ‘natural’ men, Caliban’s implicit - though unexplained - sexual voracity, his physical hybridity, and the ambiguity as to whether he is a man in the making or unmaking suggest at least that he has much in common with the fantastical beasts of the DPR. In particular, the very cognate description of men who babble an English which they do not understand, may be seen to provide convincing enough analogous material, to present the case that a version of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ De proprietatibus rerum informs the creation of Caliban, not merely as colonial subject, but as the animal ‘other’, so unknowably different from what we might aspire to, yet uncomfortably close to what we really are.

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