 Context activity

Having listened to and read Ariel and Caliban’s first scenes with Prospero in Act 2 scene i, read the following information about the play’s context. What parallels can you see?

The Tempest was probably written in 1610–1611, and was first performed at Court by the King’s Men in the fall of 1611. It was performed again in the winter of 1612–1613 during the festivities in celebration of the marriage of King James’s daughter, Elizabeth. The Tempest is most likely the last play written entirely by Shakespeare, and it is remarkable for being one of only two plays by Shakespeare (the other being Love’s Labor’s Lost) whose plot is entirely original. The play does, however, draw on travel literature of its time—most notably the accounts of a tempest off the Bermudas that separated and nearly wrecked a fleet of colonial ships sailing from Plymouth to Virginia. The English colonial project seems to be on Shakespeare’s mind throughout The Tempest, as almost every character, from the lord Gonzalo to the drunk Stephano, ponders how he would rule the island on which the play is set if he were its king (retrieved from [Sparknotes](http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/tempest/context.html)).

During the late 1500s, Queen Elizabeth I granted a number of English explorers permission to establish colonies in North America, although most attempts failed. In the early 1600s, under King James VI, English colonies were firmly established in North America and the Caribbean.

The use of indigenous and/or African slaves in this creation of colonies is believed to have existed since the 1400s. England began investing in this slave trade under Queen Elizabeth, and became the biggest trader of slaves throughout the 1600s. Britain became a ‘key player’ in the North American slave trade. In the 1700s, it is estimated that between 6 to 8 million Africans were transported to North America as slaves on British boats. Many believe this figure to be a large underestimate.

The British slave trade came to a ‘formal’ end in 1807, although continued illegally for many years after. In Africa most of all, the slave trade brought much destruction. Millions of people were killed or displaced, and their way of life changed forever. After the slave trade, Africa was divided into smaller countries and regions by European powers, with no regard for language groups, tribal kingdoms, and so on. The consequences of this can still be seen across Africa today.

Answer the following:

1. how does Prospero talk to and treat Ariel and Caliban? Give examples.

1. Prospero promises to set Ariel free if s/he does what he asks with the shipwrecked men. Why might this have been ‘controversial’ in Shakespeare’s context? What does this have to say about the common idea that Shakespeare was ‘ahead of his time’?

1. Read the following quotes from Act 2 scene I, and explain how Shakespeare is commenting on the issue of slavery in his context. What comments is he making?

Prospero to Ariel: “Dull thing… If thou more murmur’st, I will rend an oak and peg thee in his knotty entrails till thou hast howled away twelve winters”.

No Fear: “Stupid thing… If you complain any more, I’ll split an oak tree and lock you up in it till you’ve howled for twelve years”.

Caliban to Prospero: “This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother, which thou takest from me… And here you sty me in this hard rock, whiles you keep from me the rest o’ th’ island”.

No Fear: This island belongs to me because Sycorax, my mother, left it to me. But you’ve taken it from me… you pen me up in this cave and don’t let me go anywhere else on the island”.

Prospero to Caliban: “Thou most lying slave, whom stripes may move, not kindness!”

No Fear: “You liar, you respond better to the whip than to kindness!”

Hint: What is Prospero saying about his society? What perspective is he showing to his audience?