

The smells of *The Tempest*

Carol Mejia LaPerle

In contexts whereby critiques of systemic racism are censored, paying attention to the olfactory cues in *The Tempest* provides a subtle but potent examination of racializing logics. Enslaved by Prospero and abhorred by Miranda, Caliban is called a lying slave, a hag seed, a monster, a villain. With so many insults unleashed by the European castaways, it is easy to gloss over the moment Caliban is called a *fish*. When shipwrecked sailors come upon him, they establish his identity by how he smells:

What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish—a very ancient and fishlike smell, a kind of not-of-the-newest-poor-John. A strange fish.

(2.2.24-27)

The scene portrays a visceral reaction to smell that assumes something so dissimilar to oneself, so pungent to one's senses, as to constitute a different species altogether. Trinculo concludes that the creature before him simply lacks humanity.

In assessing odor based on European cultural references, he exercises an unquestioned superiority over Caliban. The moment normalizes a power imbalance between the one who assigns a foul smell and the object of that accusation, revealing the ways in which the regulation of the olfactory serves to enforce social hierarchies based on class and race.

It is worth noting, for instance, that Ferdinand and Miranda see, but do not smell, each other. Unlike the lower-class characters whose bodies are ill-smelling because of their association with Caliban, Miranda's allure is that Caliban's stench does not stick to her. Part of the fiction that Miranda and Ferdinand's romance mobilizes is that their white aristocracy has no smell.

The regulation of the sensorium overlaps with the maintenance and deployment of Prospero's power. The olfactory is weaponized to punish the mutinous three—Trinculo, Stefano, and Caliban—by converting them into stinky animals, as described by Ariel:

...calf-like they my lowing followed, through
Toothed briars, sharp furzes, pricking gorse and thorns,
Which entered their frail shins. At last I left them
I'th'filty-mantled pool beyond your cell,
There dancing up th' chins, that the foul lake
O'erstunk their feet.

(4.1.175–184)

“Sharp” and “pricking” objects penetrate “frail shins.” They suffer physically with fatigue and lacerations while undergoing the humiliation of “lowing” in the roughest of landscapes. Ariel deploys the island’s resources to degrade and penalize the schemers, culminating the reprimand with a marination in a foul lake. Indeed, the most enduring aspect of their maltreatment is their “over-stunk” feet.

Beyond degradation and discomfort, stink prompts self-disgust. Trinculo complains that “Monster, I do smell all horse piss, at which my nose is in great indignation” (4.1.199–200). This is often performed with comedic effect when the character smells himself and declares that *he* is the one who reeks. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “indignation” as the action of counting or treating a person or thing as

unworthy of regard. Thus, the rebels acquire an inescapable smell contemptuous even to themselves.

Ariel's punishment demonstrates the disciplinary function of smell. While the regulation of the olfactory reflects broader systems of classification and control, *stink* is frequently considered a physical shortcoming or personal flaw. The accusation is a disparagement experienced as if from inside: as originating from the surface and the depths of the individual's body. To put another way, the disagreeableness of the conspirators' smell is an offense articulated as coming from *their* feet, from *their* skin, from *their* bodies. But odor is the means for Ariel to mark and discipline those bodies. The rebels' dehumanization is a form of social control that deploys sensory perception.

With this in mind, we might reflect on how our 21st-century olfactory judgements—so visceral, so immediate—serve to reinforce inequity. The act of labelling someone as smelly is often a reflection of cultural prejudices that establish hierarchy based on race and class. It is a gatekeeping mechanism that distinguishes between insider and outsider status.

A close reading of the olfactory as tools of regulation and exclusion in *The Tempest* invites critical thinking and self-reflection. Where state legislative provisions ban explicit discussions of equity and inclusion, this approach exposes discriminatory structures that operate based on race and class. You might ask students—indeed you might ask yourself—to revisit those moments when you turned your nose up and away from someone.

What social hierarchy are you assuming?

What disciplinary force are you wielding?

What forms of exclusion are you reinforcing?

How does the attribution of malodorousness reflect the kind of judgements underpinning prejudice—the judgement that decides who does, and who does not, belong.