

Shakespeare, Empire, and the Trinidad Calypso

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Abstract

Carnival and calypso are such defining aspects of Trinidadian identity that an examination of the presence of British historical, cultural, and literary influence on the music reveals much about not only the reception and the treatment of Shakespeare in the Caribbean, but also the ways in which Trinidadians saw themselves in the imperial project and in the struggle for independence. This paper traces the development of calypsos from Trinidadian French Creole (Patois) to English, showing the ways in which English language and literature (and specifically Shakespeare) became synonymous with prestige and learning, even as they provided material for social protest and satire. The paper also provides a critical survey of how calypsonians adopted, adapted and appropriated Shakespeare in their songs, especially in the period before Trinidad and Tobago became a Republic in 1976; thereafter, themes became less centered on British history and the literary canon.

Calypso is often referred to as the national song of Trinidad. It is associated most strongly with Carnival and has a long history that began in the time of slavery on the plantations. Calypso took the form of social commentary and satire, as calypsonians would comment on the politics and current events in their society. This is why it came to be regarded as "the people's newspaper" (Thieme 2012, 446-58) and "an integral part of the institutional memory of the Caribbean region" (Saunders 2007, xx). According to calypso researcher Gordon Rohlehr, calypso is "one form of documentation [. . .] that can tell us from inside what people were thinking about" (quoted in Jacob 2011). Furthermore, "The Trinidad Carnival and the calypso are both theaters in and metaphors through which the drama of Trinidad's social history is encoded and enacted" (Rohlehr 2004, 213). An examination of engagements with Shakespeare in the Trinidad calypso, therefore, gives us a good sense of not only how Shakespeare was received and understood in pre-independent Trinidad, but also the social and political climate of the time. This essay traces the linguistic development of calypsos, showing the ways in which English language and literature — and specifically Shakespeare — became synonymous with prestige and learning, even as they provided material for social protest and satire. Shakespeare became the subject of the calypsonians of the day, who used the writer and his works to various effects in their own songs of political and social commentary,

their own songs of resistance and identity. Shakespeare became the vehicle through which British language, culture, and education were both reified and resisted. This essay provides a critical survey of how calypsonians adopted, adapted, and appropriated Shakespeare in their songs, especially in the period before Trinidad and Tobago became a Republic in 1976; thereafter, themes became less centered on British history and the literary canon.¹

"Meté limyè Inglich Kalipso": From Patois to English

Trinidad French Creole or Patois had been the language in which calypsos traditionally were sung.² The earliest French Creole songs were called *carisos* and were the forerunners of the calypso. These songs accompanied the kalinda or stick-fighting competitions in which chantwells would sing songs, to which the competitors would chant, dance and fight. These chantwells can be considered early calypsonians in their roles as commentators and haranguers. Their songs, usually delivered extemporaneously, became testimonies about manhood, strength, and identity and served as ammunition in a calypso war in which chantwells tried to outdo each other. After emancipation, the calypso became more associated with Carnival, which previously had been the purview of white Creole upper classes but then changed to a festival largely celebrated by underprivileged blacks (the *jamette* Carnival).³ In the weeks leading up to Carnival, calypsonians would gather in makeshift tents in barrack yards to practice and perform. As Carnival became more socially accepted among the middle and upper classes towards the turn of the century, the calypso also became more popularly associated with the festival, and the calypso tents became more organized and more permanent (Rampaul 2008; Elder 1966 and 1973; The Roaring Lion 1987; Rohlehr 1990; Warner 1985). This acceptance of calypso by the more privileged classes had another significant influence on the development of the calypso: songs sung in English, the language now associated with prestige and learning, replaced the old Patois calypsos. Moreover, references to English Literature (and Shakespeare, in particular) became especially significant, and began appearing in songs. The transition from Patois to English calypsos is, therefore, an important and useful way of tracing the increasing popularity and significance of Shakespeare in Trinidadian society.

One reason for the eventual predominance of English was the bad reputation old Patois calypsos received from the press as "grossly indecent in nature" (*Port of Spain Gazette*, 17 February 1898, quoted in Cowley 1990, 140) and the consequent police attempts to ban them. However, as the reception of Carnival changed towards the turn of the century, attitudes to the calypso also seemed to change. In 1900, for the first time the *Port of Spain Gazette* published a full-length calypso under the heading "Carnival Songs."⁴ Even so, the editor saw fit to qualify his position on

the printing of the song: "For ourselves we fail to see either rhyme or reason in it; but doubtless its composer and his party appreciate it." Indeed, on 7 February, the same newspaper reported that the bands were to sing "patriotic tunes in English, a decided improvement on the old *patois* style." However, the printing of a predominantly English calypso was perhaps significant to future compositions. It was recorded for posterity and served as an example for calypsonians to emulate. Print media carried more intellectual and political weight than oral culture.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, education in the English language gained momentum as the British sought to anglicize Trinidad, which had been dominated by French culture and the distrusted Roman Catholic Church. The British did not want to be considered foreigners in their own land (Koningsbruggen 1997, 44; Hill 1993, 44; see also Gallagher 1991), especially in the period after emancipation when the ex-slaves, now new British citizens, were in dire need of cultural indoctrination lest they threaten British control of the colonies. As Kathleen Drayton writes, "English teaching was the means whereby the values of the metropolitan country would be transmitted and made acceptable as superior values to the subject population. The English Language itself was assigned a superior status, both in relation to other existing European languages [. . .] and also to the languages spoken by the vast majority of the population" (Drayton 1990, 201). School students became enamored with the sound rather than the sense of words (Warner 1985, 35; Rohlehr 1990, 56), and writers such as Shakespeare were held up as examples to be emulated in the Royal Readers. According to Harry Pitts, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Patois came to be considered "old-fashioned", and "a calypsonian's success depended upon his mastery of the English language. [. . .] The ability to use high-sounding English words and phrases was much admired by audiences and a particularly impressive display was rewarded by cries of 'Hear English man! Hear English!'" (Pitts 1962). Donald R. Hill points out that "by about 1905 [calypsos] were sung mostly in English" (Hill 1986, 97) and that "[m]ore than any other institutional change, the steady growth of English literacy [. . .] directly influenced the development of calypso in that language" (Hill 1993, 46).

Historians suggest different sources for the first English calypso. The first song sung completely in English is usually taken to be "Governor Jerningham," by Persecutor (Norman le Blanc) in 1898, according to Lord Executor (Brereton 2004, 62; quoted in Cowley 1990, 145). This song was a reaction against the move by the British to abolish the Port of Spain City Council (Warner 1985, 67). However, Mitto Sampson cites an earlier calypso, a white chantwell by Cedric Le Blanc in 1873 (Pearse 1956, 261). Donald Hill lists Julian Whiterose, Norman le Blanc, and Henry Forbes the Inventor as the three chantwells who distinguished themselves by singing

primarily in English at the turn of the century (Hill 1993, 92). Kim Johnson adds to the list George Adilla (The Duke of Malborough) and Philip Garcia (Lord Executor) (Johnson 1988, xviii).

Johnson significantly points out that the "background and education" of these "middle class singers [. . .] allowed them to sing oratorical calypsos of 'Shakespeare, Byron, Milton and Scott,' in English to the music of cuatros, guitars, chac chacs, and clarinets" (Johnson 1988, xviii). According to Hollis Liverpool, the calypsonians "showed their vocabulary power by trying to appropriate and master the language of the schoolmaster and of the traditional English bards" (Liverpool 2003, 29). This delight in grandiloquence transferred to the calypso form as English became the preferred language of learning, and a means of "polish[ing] up the reputation of calypso" (Koningsbruggen 1997, 45). As the *Argos* newspaper reported on 15 February 1912, the calypsonians "try to outclass each other by exhibiting the amount of scholastic training they possess." The report names, particularly, Lord Executor, "at whose command the others surrender verbally" (quoted in Cowley 1990, 182).

With the advent of WWI, renewed patriotism for England further fueled the desire to sing calypsos in English. Moreover, the English elite, who had previously avoided Carnival, began giving prizes at calypso competitions. To maintain their distance from the ordinary man on the street, they claimed that they could not understand Patois. Calypsonians, therefore, "began to employ 'big English' (high sounding words and phrases)" to impress them (Cowley 1990, 198). Patois was seen as a subversive secret language, used by the underclasses to attack the authorities. In the 1930s, there were attempts by the Colonial Secretary's Office to censor calypsos of their Patois words, and "[i]t was only when English replaced patois in the lyrics that a good deal of the suspicion and hostility vanished" (Koningsbruggen 1997, 44 and 49).

The transition from Patois to English was, therefore, an important development, as calypsonians soon came to compete with each other based on their fluency and command of the English language. The ability to quote Shakespeare and other writers became the measure of intellect and language competence. Knowledge of the British literary canon and the display of this knowledge were ways in which the calypsonian could demonstrate his superiority in song.

Calypso as Caliban's Curse

Bill Ashcroft writes that language is "the most emotional site for cultural identity but also one of the most critical techniques of colonization and of the subsequent transformation of colonial influence by post-colonized societies. [I]t is incontestable that language is the mode of a constant and pervasive extension of cultural dominance — through ideas, attitudes, histories and ways of seeing — that is central to imperial hegemony" (Ashcroft 2009, 1, 2). However, Sean Hawkins and

Philip D. Morgan argue that although English was "a marker of a cultural legacy [. . .] it should not necessarily be seen as a sign of imperial domination or colonial control" (Hawkins and Morgan 2004, 25). In fact, Ashcroft's central thesis of his book, *Caliban's Voice*, in which he uses Caliban as a metonym for the colonized person, is that "colonial languages have been not only instruments of oppression but also instruments of radical resistance and transformation" (Ashcroft 2009, 3). However, he limits Caliban's curse to a repetition of Prospero's language and a "subtle acceptance of his domination," which traps him into becoming "an evocative and controversial symbol of post-colonial resistance" without "the power of reply" (2009, 30, 17). In his study, Ashcroft therefore proposes to follow Caliban beyond the play, beyond the Shakespearean imagination [. . .] to see what he actually does with Prospero's language" (Ashcroft 2009, 13).⁵

While this pursuit is reasonable, Caliban's cursing itself, his railing against the establishment, might involve creative transformation of language, as well. As Patricia Saunders argues,

Calypso music emerged in response to a cultural climate that demanded creative modes of expression that could both resist and record the historical and political changes taking place in Trinidad [. . .] But this musical form also created a space for the musician to expose the limitations and playfulness of "formal" language (the Queen's English) and the ways in which speakers and singers could make their own meaning beyond the formal boundaries of what colonial education provided. (Saunders 2007, xvii, xviii-xix).

Indeed, calypsos were often characterized by their use of several rhetorical styles, such as double entendre ("symbols and metaphors to disclose and disguise at the same time" [Koningsbruggen 1997, 56]), *picong* (stinging remarks or insults), *fatigue* (teasing), *grand charge* (a gestural and verbal posturing including threats and boasting), humor, parody, and hyperbole, through which they were not only subverting colonial institutions in their invective, but also using language on their own terms to their own purposes. All of these tropes may be subsumed under *the joke*, "always a subversive mode of behavior," as Christina Brännmark suggests (1994, 91-92).

Furthermore, because many calypsos take the form of dramatic monologues or dialogues, this "has resulted in the proliferation of 'I' narrations by means of which the calypsonian speaks his own mind in his own voice, 'enters' the minds of others, and creates scenarios which add to his credibility as an eyewitness or a man with inside information" (Regis 1999, 212). This first-person narration becomes a sort of mask behind which the calypsonian can either hide or reveal his opinions. The calypsonian, like Caliban, could use the English language to curse the same structures that exploited them and kept them oppressed. Shakespeare, who came to be seen as the

ultimate symbol of the greatness of the English language, was therefore simultaneously seen as an institution to be revered and emulated, but also to be mocked, ridiculed, questioned.

Shakespeares of Calypso

Calypsonians took their art very seriously, and the song, especially in its extemporaneous form, was a way of demonstrating the fluency, intelligence, and ingenuity of the performer. In early English calypsos, one way of demolishing a contender was to attack his facility with language, as this was one of the defining aspects of an effective calypso. According to George Maharaj, "Mastery of English was seen as a sign of sophistication and calypsonians vied with the other to cram as many polysyllabic words into their songs as possible" (Maharaj 2004, 41). Lise Winer dubs this overwrought language "Rococo English" (Winer 1993, 279) and cites the grand charging duet "Asteroid," by Atilla the Hun (Raymond Quevedo) and the Roaring Lion (Rafael de Leon), released around 1934, as an example:

Lion:

[. . .]

On grammatical subjects I will now state
 Inviting lexicographers who can debate
 With ramsomfousis asceticism
 They may try to argue but are bound to run
 Through the extensive alteration of anklyosis
 And my encyclopaedic analysis
 That makes me a man of psychology
 And I can always sing grammatically.

Atilla:

Your nonsensical oration fills me with disgust
 If there is a thing I greatly detest
 Is to hear the English language badly expressed
 You are brutalizing etymology
 And crucifying syntax and orthography
 For you are no man of psychology
 And you will never sing grammatically
 [. . .](Winer 1993, 279-80)

Some of the extemporaneous *picong* exchanges that took place in the calypso tents also survive and give us a clear indication of the importance of language and learning to the artform. Following is an extract by a very early (1918) song by Oliver Cromwell the Lord Protector ("Chinee Patrick" or Patrick Jones), in which he criticizes Lord Executor for "perceived deficiency in grammar":

You the Lord Executor
 Tonight you have to surrender
 Your verses are congested with phrases that are meaningless
 Your sentences are worthless and grammarless
 Now you're condemned I spread the news
 For the English language you now abuse.
 Bad teaching and training have you lamenting (Regis 2013)

Although Lord Executor's reply was not recorded, Louis Regis surmises that "Executor, himself an educated and articulate kaisonian [. . .] who is regarded as the master of extempo [. . .] must have made appropriate rejoinder in the grand tradition" (Regis 2013). However, in Atilla the Hun's record of the "tongue-lashing" or fatigue he received from Executor a decade later, the connection between a sound education, competence in language, and the British canon was clear:

I admire your ambition, you'd like to sing
 But you will never be a calypso king
 To reach such a height without blemish or spot
 You must study Shakespeare, Byron, Milton, or Scott
 But I'm afraid I'm casting pearls before swine
 For you'll never inculcate such thoughts divine
 You got a good intention. (Regis 2013)⁶

According to Executor, knowledge of the British literary canon was not only necessary to a good education, but also crucial to the success of a calypsonian. British poets were revered as masters of the English language, worthy of emulation, evident in the metaphorical use of "pearls," whereas the calypsonians who were ignorant of them were uncouth "swine." The rhyming of "swine" and "divine" is particularly effective as it juxtaposes the calypsonians and the British poets, and constructs them as diametrically opposed through hyperbole.

Although light-hearted and humorous, these songs also point to certain anxieties about language at the heart of this grandiloquence among calypsonians. Indeed, as Koningsbruggen argues, the penchant for long words and elaborate expressions was often a way of masking

insecurities about fluency in the English language, especially in a context where Patois was the widely spoken language and English was the language of formal education (Koningsbruggen 1997, 46). At the same time, these calypsonians were appropriating the English language to comment precisely on the language situation in Trinidad. Their use of language was not limited to repetition and parroting; Rococo English or "big English" was a deliberate and creative manipulation of language to the calypsonians' own purposes. It was used either to demolish an opponent by the display of verbal virtuosity, or to unmask language attitudes and prejudices that existed in the changing society of the early twentieth century. The preoccupation with language, and especially "the difference between the vernacular and Standard English," continued in songs such as the Roaring Lion's "The English Language"; a calypso by the same name sung by The Mighty Spoiler (Theophilus Phillip) in 1952; Lord Alligator's "Trinidad English" in 1954; and The Conqueror's (Leroy Paul) "Trinidad Dictionary," which appeared in the mid-1960s. There were several other calypsos that explored this theme of language (Rohlehr 1990, 416).

English was preferred by the authorities and sponsors, but calypsonians used the language as a weapon, as well. The 1930s are usually regarded the "golden era" of calypso because, by then, recordings had begun to be made and distributed internationally. This had the effect of consolidating and establishing the form. Because calypsos acted as "editorial[s] in song" (Regis 1999, xi), calypsonians would take as their subject matter current events, and often sang out against political corruption and oppression by attacking institutions and individuals. They also sang about sex, scandals, and gossip that outraged the social authorities about whom these songs were often sung. In the 1920s to the 1940s, the colonial authorities reacted with measures to "set strict limits on freedom of speech and expression" (Rohlehr 2001, 16). The Seditious Publications Ordinance (1920) aimed at controlling the press and cinemas; and the Theatre and Dance Halls Ordinance (1934) prohibited "profane, indecent or obscene songs or ballads," songs that were "insulting to any individual or section of the community, whether referred to by name or otherwise," and "disorderly conduct" (Rohlehr 1990, 290 and 288-94; 2004b 171-74). This, however, did not stop calypsonians from criticizing and commenting on the politics of the day, including these attempts at censorship.

In a 1938 calypso "The Banning of Records," Atilla the Hun, relying on the established reputation of British writers, invokes Shakespeare specifically to strengthen his argument against the banning of calypsos:

"Honi soit qui mal y pense!" is my cry
 "Evil to him who thinketh evil!" says I
 It's known a man with a perverted mind
 With the most moral work, some fault he will find

If "Netty Netty" is indecent, then, I must insist
 That so is Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis"
 But o'er these writers they make no fuss
 But, poor we, they want to take our music from us. (Quevedo 1983, 158)

(A sound clip is available in the *HTML* version of this document.) Attila re-used and elaborated on these lines in his 1944 calypso, "Ubiquitous and Kaiso":

To say these songs are sacrilegious, obscene or profane
 Is only a lie and a dirty shame.
 If the calypso is indecent then I must insist
 So is Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*,
 Boccaccio's tales, Voltaire's *Candide*,
The Martyrdom of Man by Winwood Reid
 Yet over these authors they make no fuss,
 But want to take advantage of us. (Quevedo 1983, 158)⁷

The double standards of the censors are clear in their valorizing of British and European writings that the calypsonian argues are equally "indecent," "sacrilegious," "obscene," and "profane" as the calypso in their engagement with as risqué and satiric subjects. The tension between the local and the foreign was already being articulated as early as the 1930s, when Trinidad was still a British colony. The calypso, an indigenous art form, relied on the verbal skill of the calypsonian, and it performed very similar functions to the European texts referred to by Attila. Furthermore, Attila strikes another blow at the censors and their failure to see value in calypsos by quoting the motto of the Order of the Garter in the lines: "'Honi soit qui mal y pense!' is my cry / 'Evil to him who thinketh evil!' says I." Through the invocation of Shakespeare and the royal motto, Attila turns their symbols of cultural superiority against the British. According to Warner, Attila "touched on a fact of life in Trinidad, and in the Caribbean as a whole, namely the all-too-ready acceptance of that which is foreign and the quasi-total rejection of the indigenous" (Warner 1985, 69). Lennox Pierre, a contemporary solicitor, musician, and folklorist, made a similar argument against censorship. Again, Shakespeare is invoked:

Let us be honest with ourselves. What really is the difference between 'Venus and Adonis', and 'You Fool you don't need glasses to see?' They deal with the same subject and the themes are almost identical. Why should the former work have any greater claims to the title

art, simply because it's presented in a highly-polished style and by means of a recognised art form!

It is well to know that Shakespeare weaves his fable through 1194 lines of 10 syllables each, whereas *Invader* relates the same story (in substance, of course, which is all that really matters) in 40 lines, and tells it more succinctly and, to the West Indian mind, more convincingly.

Am I trying to belittle or to degrade Shakespeare? Is it my aim to elevate or immortalise *Invader*? Far from it. That is not my province. The seeming riddle can best be solved by a universal posterity when we are all cold and mute. (quoted in Quevedo 1983, 82)⁸

The comparison between calypso and these literary masterpieces was an attempt to place them on the same level in terms of their artistic value but also in terms of their playful and satiric functions. However, the reputation, significance, and origin of these canonical texts ensured that they were by definition superior. British and European Literature — with Shakespeare in the lead, of course — was Great Literature that was beyond criticism or censorship, whereas calypso, a lowly local form, was seen as inferior, distasteful, and expendable.

This association of foreign texts with a superior culture was also seen in Lord Executor's 1938 song, "Lajobless," appearing in the same year and featuring a young man "with book in hand," who is described as "esteemed" because he was studying Literature.⁹ One might also wonder whether the Roaring Lion's calypso of the same year, "Ba-boo-la-la," about a firebrand bent on burning cinema houses in Port of Spain, was a double entendre attacking the sanctity of British theatre and its association with empire:

Ah burn down the London Theatre, one!
 Ah burn down the big Empire, two!
 Burn down the London Theatre, three!
 You burn down the big Empire. (quoted in Liverpool 2003)¹⁰

(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)

Indeed, the Roaring Lion was the calypsonian who had a reputation for singing the most scandalous and outrageous songs, and many of his calypsos (including his 1937 "Netty Netty" about a prostitute and abortion, the song to which Atilla's song was referring) were banned for their subversiveness and perceived threat to morality. Following this, Roaring Lion sent a tongue-in-

cheek letter to the Colonial Secretary requesting permission to release six other songs that were "replete with archaisms that might have been derived from early nineteenth century British verse." His satirical intention was, however, lost on the authorities, who assumed that he was simple-minded (Rohlehr 1990, 304-305).

And yet, calypsonians' relationship with the empire was often ambivalent. The Roaring Lion's "Caroline" was, in fact, a re-make of an English folk-song, "Oh Where Have You Been, Billy Boy?" (Rohlehr 2004a, 214). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) More than that, Lion also came to disapprove of the tendency for calypsos after the 1970s to be "vulgar [and] artless." Rather ironically, in his 1974 song "Vulgar Calypsos," he complains:

Here is a ton load of vulgar songs every year
And not a verse of interest to the cultured ear. (repeat)
Lots of them are disgraceful, deprave and rude,
Senseless, shocking, and extremely crude.
To sing such songs one has to be insane,
Otherwise totally devoid of shame.

Chorus:

They wouldn't sing about Shakespeare, Pushkin, Dumas, and Dickens,
H. G. Wells, Madame Blavatsky, Horatio, and Kipling.
Voltaire, Molere and Dennis Didero,

Instead of the muck they call calypso. (quoted in Liverpool 2003, 68)¹¹

The Roaring Lion's use of Shakespeare and other British and European writers in his argument functioned in an almost diametrically opposed way to Atilla's defense of him just a few decades before. Atilla complained that while the calypsonians of the 1930s and 1940s would pour over books at the library researching the topics on which they sang, later calypsonians relied simply on gossip and scandal for their material (Liverpool 2003, 70). Lion's complaint signals that the period in which the showing off of one's learning by referring to British history and literature was coming to an end. Significantly, this period also coincided with Trinidad becoming a Republic.

According to J. D. Elder, Atilla and Lord Executor were "two singers of exceptional fame whose calypsos were of such musical excellence and whose ballads were so critical of the life and times in which they lived, that the social history of Trinidad and Tobago can hardly be written without mention of the influence their songs had upon the social and political life of the era in which they lived" (Elder 1962, 11-12). Elder's estimation includes the crucial function of the calypso as political and social commentary that captured historical snapshots of the times about

which calypsonians sang, but sometimes their songs also transcended the era in which they were born. For example, the Mighty Duke's (Kelvin Pope) 1968 "What is Calypso?" seemed to allude directly to Atilla's protest in these lines:

Of calypsonians there are different opinions
 Some people say we singing too smutty
 But with that I cannot agree
 Because if Calypso is smut well, now answer this
 What was Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*?
 Yet no one made a fuss
 So why try to point your finger at us? (The Mighty Duke 1968)

Atilla's stand against censorship was not forgotten even thirty years after his own song was banned. As recently as 2011, in a newspaper article in the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, the tension between freedom of expression and "laws of libel and obscenity" was put into context through the journalist's quoting of Atilla's song (Delblond 2011). Atilla's success at simultaneously demystifying Shakespeare (by comparing it to calypso) and elevating calypso (by comparing it to Shakespeare) is particularly interesting given that he came to be known as "the Shakespeare of calypso" by calypso historians and commentators (Homer 2012; Hill 1983, ix; Jones 1947, 57). Although this title came out of his reputation as one of the more learned and educated calypsonians, as is evident in his references to literary works, the title only reinforced the association of education with the British canon — the very point that Atilla was seeking to complicate in his song. Almost three-quarters of a century later, Atilla's song is still relevant to debates about censorship of calypso and the responsibility of the calypsonian, and Shakespeare continues to be invoked as an intellectual and cultural yardstick.

Shakespeare the Mad Man

Two notable calypsos focusing on Shakespeare appeared just before Trinidad gained its independence in 1962, and reflected a more sardonic tone towards British colonial education. In 1958, Lord Christo (Christopher Laidlow) sang "Shakespearean Quotations," written by Nelson Caton, in which he argues that Shakespeare's quotations are senseless. This was an important development in the history of calypsonians' engagements with the literary canon for a few reasons. First, this calypso took a different point of departure from earlier calypsos that reflected the tendency to see Shakespeare as spokesman for Britain, and as a writer worthy of adulation and emulation. Instead, it fit into the tradition of *picong* where a certain personage might be ridiculed

through invective and humor. Second, this song was perhaps the first calypso not simply to quote or refer to Shakespeare but to directly engage with the writer's work, and explore its relevance to and meaning in the Trinidadian context. Third, it seems to have been the inspiration for the later and more lyrically successful calypso, "Shakespeare the Mad Man," which appeared in 1961 and was sung by Nap Hep Burn (Randolph Nathaniel Hepburn) and written by Rocky McCollin. The fact that these calypsos were written and sung just before independence is also significant, as they reflect the political climate of the time. The songs of the day were themselves part of the political protest of empire. They signaled "a move from a respectable deference to colonial rule to a new postcolonial consciousness," as Ray Funk puts it (Funk 2007, 58). According to Frank E. Manning, "The calypsonian lampoons establish authority, invert normative systems to expose their underlying absurdity and injustice, and reveal the comic underpinnings and possibilities of situations that are usually taken seriously" (Manning 1986, 167-68).

By taking issue with different quotations by Shakespeare, Lord Christo argues that they do not make sense. He characterizes Shakespeare as "a long time fella" who "[u]sed to say big things without fear." The rebuttal to this long-established writer, whose confidence and knowledge were evident in the "big things" he could say "without fear," is a function of the calypsonian's assertion of his own right to comment on affairs of love, life, and even the work of the great "bard." He begins with the famous *Romeo and Juliet* quotation that suggests the arbitrariness of signifiers, and he attempts to demolish Shakespeare's argument by giving his own parodic examples of why the quotation does not work. He argues:

William Shakespeare didn't know the beat
 When he said, "A rose by any other name is just as sweet."
 But if chalk was cheese and cheese was chalk.
 If Britain was France and Spain New York.
 If Bea was John and John was Bea
 Then a woman would be mayor of New York City. (Lord Christo and His Orchestra
 1959)

(A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.) Lord Christo also gives the example of Mrs. Whittle, whom he did not like. But, according to Shakespeare, he argues, "if love was hate and hate was love / I would cherish Mrs. Whittle like a turtle dove." Moreover, since his girlfriend Rose left him to marry a Mr. Mose, he no longer feels the same way about her: "From then she is not the same / So sweet to me since she change her name." He concludes his argument suggesting that no one should listen to Shakespeare's stories and that Shakespeare could only have

written the line "A rose by any other name is just as sweet" because he had lost his sense of smell at a young age.

Another quotation with which Christo takes issue is *Othello's* "Who steals my purse steals trash." His issue with this line seems to be rooted in the same (feigned?) ignorance of metaphorical meaning in Shakespeare. But this is precisely what gives Christo the power to argue that Shakespeare's quotation is nonsense. By focusing on the literal meaning of the quotation, Christo can ridicule it and surmise that "If he said that his purse was made of trash / Then he used to use potato skin for cash." He also professes not to understand what Shakespeare meant by "All is well that ends well" and that if Shakespeare was alive in his time, he would be unable to sing about the tragic end to Romeo and Juliet's love. The calypsonian comes to the conclusion that Shakespeare was "crack in his head" and "really mad" because his work is irrelevant and erroneous in his experience. Admittedly, not all of Christo's arguments are logical, but the resistance to colonial domination by challenging the ultimate symbol of literary greatness through elements of fatigue, *picong* and parody makes this calypso important.

Nap Hep Burn's calypso, "Shakespeare the Mad Man," is more successful in its argument and logic, although it seems to have been directly influenced by Christo's. It makes references to the same "silly" (Nap Hep Burn 1961) *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* quotations with which Christo's took issue, and similarly seeks to prove Shakespeare's insanity, although it uses different arguments to do so. This calypso also attacks the literary greatness of Shakespeare by transposing the situations described by the quotations and the plays to a Trinidadian context to show that they would either not make sense there, or that they are not original stories, because those same situations exist in Trinidad. His arguments are made, then, through either the inability or the ability to identify with Shakespeare.

The calypso begins with a personal reaction to the *Othello* quote. The narrator suggests that Shakespeare must have always been "short of cash" (Nap Hep Burn 1961) to have invented that quotation and declares that it would not work for him, since his "purse always full of cash, plenty cash." The next quotation he "must attack" is actually not Shakespearean at all, but an Arabian proverb that says, "Four things come not back: the spoken word, the sped arrow, the past life, and the neglected opportunity." However, the calypsonian adds a fifth: "The fifth was meh Pa leave meh Ma since ah was small / And up to now meh Pa eh come back at all." Even though the source of the quotation is incorrectly attributed to Shakespeare, the attempt to measure the quotation's relevance to the narrator's own personal and social situation is important. It makes an at once humorous and serious comment on domestic situations of abandonment of mothers and children in Trinidad. The assumption that Shakespeare must have written the quotation because it is so well-

known also establishes the reputation and influence of Shakespeare (at least as a symbol) in the Caribbean consciousness.

The calypso next moves to the political sphere. It states that it is unnecessary to spend money on theater for entertainment because the politicians in Woodford Square, in the capital of Port of Spain, can entertain (and confuse) just as well:

You could bounce up Shakespeare daily in Woodford Square,
Is some big big quotation
When they holding their referendum,
A mouthful of air,
Those are the Shakespeares of Woodford Square. (Nap Hep Burn 1961)

(*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Woodford Square, dubbed the "University of Woodford Square" because it became the site of many public lectures and political rallies, gave several political activists a platform on which to air their views. In fact, Dr. Eric Williams, who went on to become the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, gave several important speeches in Woodford Square, including his famous "Massa Day Done" speech, which was delivered in 1961, the same year this calypso was released. This speech has been referred to as "one of the most devastating attacks on the deleterious psychological impact of colonialism on its victims" (Palmer 2012, 6). Now, because the calypso seems to be ridiculing the "Shakespeares of Woodford Square" who make empty promises, use clever-sounding words to impress the public but are only useful for their entertainment value, it might not have been directly referring to Williams. Instead, Williams's message about the end of colonialism and the importance of independence from British rule seems to be at the heart of this counter-discursive calypso. At the same time, we are left to wonder at the identity of the "certain politician" of whom William Shakespeare reminds the calypsonian — particularly since the name "William" *is* stressed in the song. But the effect of comparison of these politicians with Shakespeare is insult. They both "talk a lot of stupidity" — another way in which the narrator demystifies the great bard.

In 1965, the Mighty Sparrow released "Get to Hell Out," a subtle critique of Eric Williams's dictatorial tendencies. In that song, he quotes Williams, who was in turn quoting Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in his notorious "When I talk, let no damn dog bark!"¹² Brother Valentino attacks Williams's "badjohn rhetoric," to which Sparrow's song referred in his own 1973 song, "Barking Dogs." By then, there was a "chorus of dissent that had resulted in the unrest of the early 1970s", evident, for example, in the Black Power Revolution (Regis 2005, para.14). Valentino thus warns: "But the dogs, the dogs are barking too long / It is a sign that something is wrong."

"Shakespeare the Mad Man" moves from the political back to the social in its humorous attack on the *Romeo and Juliet* quotation through the description of a girl named Rose, whose poor sanitation leaves her smelling anything but sweet. The final verses focus on the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* to demonstrate Shakespeare's failure, not just as a source of good sense, but also as a writer of original stories:

Shakespeare the play writer
 That and all the man was a failure.
 He try to fool we
 With this nancy love story,
 Like how Romeo love Juliet;
 They die together we will never forget.
 But that story too damn lousy —
 That does happen here daily in Caroni.
 Because if Ramsingh love Beti,
 And they family can't agree,
 And they doh want the couple to get marry,
 If the lovers can't elope,
 Ramsingh will buy a piece of rope
 For he and Beti —
 Right there we get a next Shakespeare love story! (Nap Hep Burn 1961)

Referring to *Romeo and Juliet* as a "nancy story" (Anancy story) is significant because it places Shakespeare's play in a local context but, at the same time, ridicules it for being apocryphal. The fact that it is a story "we will never forget" establishes its prominence in the social consciousness and its canonical status in Trinidad. In the next breath, however, the calypsonian proceeds to show that it is a "lousy" story because it is a "daily" occurrence in Caroni, known for its high population of descendants of Indian immigrants. Despite his exaggeration about the frequency, the Indo-Trinidadian population has been stereotypically associated with suicide especially in situations of frustrated love. The calypsonian, therefore, employs stereotypical and identifiable Indo-Trinidadian names to spin his own tragic love story, one that was likely and actually did sometimes occur in Trinidad. According to Hep Burn's calypso, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is hardly special because Trinidad has its own true-to-life "Shakespeare love stor[ies]."

Calypso Romeos and Other Shakespearean Conceits

Shakespeare's Romeo also became popularly appropriated by calypsonians wanting to boast about their prowess in lovemaking. In none of these songs do we get an image of Romeo as a character at the center of a tragedy, as he was presented in Shakespeare's play. Instead, Romeo was more popularly appropriated as the symbol of the irresistible male lover. In his discussion of stickfighting and its connection between conquest of women and warriorhood, Rohlehr establishes the local and historical context for these appropriations of Romeo:

The connection between masculinity and the complex of warriorhood, conquest, control of territory, and acquisition of woman, became such a prominent feature in the formation of Trinidad for the first six decades after Emancipation that it was carried over into the twentieth century as a deeply inscribed and virtually immutable pattern [. . .] Kingship in Calypso has always required the incumbent to assume the mask of phallic potency. (Rohlehr 2004b, 199, 225)

For these calypsonians, Romeo became that mask. For example, in as early as 1939, the Roaring Lion, who "developed the reputation for entering a tent surrounded by a bevy of his 'lionesses'" (Rohlehr 2004a, 225), sang "I Can Make More Love than Romeo," a "self-celebratory" (Rohlehr 1990, 463)¹³ calypso in which he boasts that his popularity among the ladies was due, not to his many other attractive attributes — such as his good looks, his dancing skills, his ability to "quote more love verses than Byron and Scott" and to "quote Shakespeare and Longfellow to get the girls head hot," and his success as a calypsonian — but to his ability "to make more love than Romeo." (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Sexual prowess takes precedence over intelligence in this song — and yet his sexuality relies on familiarity with (at least the popular conception of) a fictional literary hero. The Lion himself describes this song thus: "The true calypsonian is imaginative and versatile, like the poet he is, very often overcome by the soft sylphs of poetic dreams. When in that mood he sees himself as someone high up amid the stars looking down with pity on the rest of the world" (The Roaring Lion 1987, 175). In Lord Melody's (Fitzroy Alexander) "Romeo" (possibly sung in the 1950s or 1960s), it is his female lover who compares him to Shakespeare's young lover as she begs him to give her a baby in order to secure his love and prove her fidelity:

The way you kiss me like Romeo,
 Don't ever leave me, don't let me go!
 I love you, Melody, please leave a baby,
 Please do —
 The image of you.

Darling, I love you! (Lord Melody 1961)

(*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Lord Kitchener's posthumous album *Calypso Romeo*, released in 2011 by Radiophone Archives, also features a calypso entitled "Romeo" (1950s) that was sung from the perspective of a woman who is struggling to resist the charms of the irresistible calypsonian. Although she is presented as coy, threatening to "tell [her] mammy" if he continues trying to touch and kiss her, her protestations are clearly not serious:

Don't try to kiss me, (Romeo)!

Don't try to touch me, (Romeo)!

For if I let you touch me, (Romeo)!

You may tell somebody, (Romeo)! (Lord Kitchener 2011)

(*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) In Lion's song, the narrator of the calypso characterizes himself as Romeo; in Melody's, it is the woman who regards her lover a Romeo; in Kitchener's song, it is less clear who is defining the male lover as Romeo, as the name is sung by the chorus singers, and not in the voice of the calypsonian who is reporting his lover's speech. Nevertheless, his characterization as Romeo is significant to his persona as paramour.

A few other calypsos, "Merchant of Venice" by The Mighty Zandolie (Sylvester Anthony), "King Liar" by Lord Nelson (Robert Nelson), and "Life is a Stage" by Brother Valentino (Anthony Emrold Phillip), appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. Like the Romeo calypsos, these songs did not engage with Shakespeare in the sustained way that Christo's and Hep Burn's did; they appropriated conceits from Shakespeare to create their own songs, which had little to do with Shakespeare as literary symbol and more to do with their own cleverness in presenting the material to their own advantage and purpose. Zandolie was popular in the 1960 and 1970s for his "smut" songs, and his "Merchant of Venice" fits this bill. The calypso turns on double entendre as Zandolie uses a pound of flesh as a metonym for sex. He declares that he will only lend money to women on one condition:

I am the Merchant of Venice

Lending money on interest is mih business

So if you want my money

Is a pound of your flesh for security! (The Mighty Zandolie n.d.)

Only the money-lending aspect of the tale and the iconic pound of flesh are needed for Zandolie's ribald song. (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*)

Nelson's "King Liar," appearing in 1977, plays on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, although it actually has very little to do with the play's plot. The song features a lying competition in which participants

vie for the title of King Liar by telling outrageous stories. One of the competitors in the lying competition is called Will, The Outrageous, who boasts that he knew a tailor who was so great, he "used to sew for Shakespeare, make suit for Hamlet." Although this sends the crowd wild, the main competitor Liar the Lion outdoes him and wins the competition. This song, like Zandolie's, was not attempting to make a political comment on colonialism; it was more of an entertaining song about "imaginative fantasy" (Regis 2013). Warner argues that, in this song, "the calypsonian succeed[s] in making the falsehoods memorable by their very distance from the credible" (Warner 1985, 144). The references to Shakespeare and Hamlet serve to distinguish reality from fantasy; Shakespeare, in fact, is presented as an equally fictional character as Hamlet in the song, as references to both are couched in a lie. At the same time, the skill of the tailor is meant to be measured by his association with these personages.

Finally, Brother Valentino's "Life is a Stage," also appearing in the 1970s, borrowed the famous theater metaphor from *As You Like It* to comment on the political and social situation of Trinidad. Arguing that everyone is simply playing a part, this song emphasizes role-playing and its function in society. Once again, this calypso does not deal directly with Shakespeare, although the metaphor establishes the main conceit and argument of the song.

Although these songs were not making direct political comments about Shakespeare, they were nevertheless important to establishing Shakespeare as important to the literary consciousness of Trinidadians in the colonial and immediately post-colonial periods. Audiences would not have been able to grasp the full meaning of the songs without having some awareness of the source of these references and allusions. Shakespeare was as much a part of the history of Trinidad as it was of England, and its various configurations in calypso attest to this.

Conclusion

The calypsos discussed in this paper are not the songs that often feature in academic writing about the evolution and political importance of calypso. However, they were significant to defining the particular context out of which they came. According to Rush, "from the heights of empire in 1900 to the independence era of the 1960s [. . .] West Indians used their understanding of Britishness first to establish a place for themselves in the British imperial world, and then to negotiate the challenges of decolonization. In this period, West Indians participated in a complex process of cultural transition — a struggle to re-define Britishness and their relationship to it" (Rush 2011, 1). Indeed, at the heart of these calypsos is an uncomfortable ambivalence: the calypsonians choose Shakespeare as their subject matter because he is "the great bard," even as they seek to demolish this very perception. These creative engagements with Shakespeare at a critical moment

in the country's history reflect the legacies of British imperialism, but also the attempts by early Caribbean artists to assert themselves by offering counter-discourses to the hegemony of British literature, as represented by the writer considered most canonical and most representative of British cultural and intellectual superiority.

Notes

1. I am indebted to George Maharaj and Louis Regis for their untiring work on the calypso and for their generosity and assistance with the sourcing of calypsos for this paper.
2. The phrase in the subtitle is patois for "Cast a light — a good spell — for English calypso!" from an early song, "Soffie Bellah" by Richard, Coeur de Leon (Norman le Blanc) and popularized by Lord Invader in 1939. See Hill 1993, 93, 226; "Soffie Bellah," Lord Invader, Decca 17429, Trinidad Feb. 6, 1939.
3. The word *jamette* comes from the French *diamètre* and referred to the classes below the respectable diameter of society.
4. This was also the first time that the song was referred to as a "calipso."
5. Although I am using Ashcroft here to frame my argument about calypso's creative appropriation of language, I acknowledge that there are problems with his argument. Ashcroft's reading of discourses produced by colonized people as Caliban's curse proves limiting. He "solves" this problem by imagining Caliban's life outside of or beyond the play; but it is the reductive characterization of colonized people as Caliban that causes the problem in the first place. Ashcroft's metaphor can only work if he imagines his way out of the trap.
6. Also *Trinidad Guardian*, 9 February 1964.
7. See also Quevedo 1983, 59-63 for Atilla's reply in the debate on the amendment of the Theatre and Dance Halls Ordinance that took place on 16 March 1951. Atilla had become an elected member of the Legislature in 1950.
8. The phrase "Fool you don't need glasses to see?" refers to "Glasses to See" by Lord Invader (1945).
9. Because this song is about a young man's encounter with a folkloric femme fatale in the forest, Rohlehr sees Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and other Western myths of the demon woman as possible antecedents (Rohlehr 1990, 170).
10. The *Trinidad Guardian*, 7 May 1937, carried a report about the arrest of two men, Vernon Legere and the Secretary of the Globe Theatre Ltd., Ramjohn Gokool, for attempting to set fire to the Empire Theatre. This may have been one of the events that inspired this calypso.

However, Hollis Liverpool names Ranny Phillip, owner and manager of the Rose Bowl Club in Belmont as the inspiration for this calypso (see Liverpool 2006, 7, 13).

11. See also *The Roaring Lion*, 171-72.
12. The Shakespearean quotation is "And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!" (1.1.94). Sparrow's version is "When I talk / No damn dog bark."
13. This song is alternatively cited as "The Power of the Lion — Calypso" in *West Indian Rhythm* (Liverpool 2006, 204).

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