Taking Nussbaum’s pluralism and really running with it, I want to say a bit about the virtue of those we might call monsters. For one, there’s Frankenstein’s, whose will to social sympatico leads him to the mastery of language, then to an ideation of the post-Romantic supreme supreme: matched love, one-to-one. The Creature’s woe is that he cannot make his bride himself, but must instead rely on the generative skill of his master. Though he may apperceive virtuously, he hasn’t the instrumental technique.

In his valence with Galatea, Polyphemus is another who ventures without fortune to access human society and love. Let’s say that Polyphemus’ virtue is not quite as cerebral. It is technical rather, insofar as his archetype produces a serious attempt at lyric. Of course, as in Frankenstein, the interface of creation burns up, and Polyphemus concludes his song with a concrete, physical emission: he chucks a boulder and kills Acis. There’s a bit of textual blur, then, in reading Renaissance versions which compact Polyphemus’ low art into verse which is all the same formal, mellifluous and, importantly, reflective of the author’s own poetic virtue.

Can we understand either Frankenstein’s Creature or Polyphemus to be virtuous? Or do their respective narrative conclusions, in which they both realize a capital evil, negate the value of their skill or their seriousness – if they do not come to use their capacity for good for good, what is it worth? And if they do not come to a social, comedic ending with the world around them, who is culpable? No doubt, they are not “in concert,” but rather in disharmony.

There is a third and final creature whose muddy prostration in the Mediterranean sun concerns us more directly. About 15 years before the publication of Luis de Góngora’s celebrated Polifemo and a little more than 200 before Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, there was Shakespeare’s Tempest, and there was Caliban.

Mooncalf, cambion, fish-man, man-fish – whatever Caliban is, he is Other: other than human and, in the regard of his master Prospero, other than the world of goodness. Caliban’s posture is that of one locked beyond heaven’s gate, sealed in the cave as everyone else walked out in the path of Christ. Even in the summary reconciliation at the play’s end, the moment when perhaps Caliban will be forgiven or freed, Prospero annihilates Caliban’s being: “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.”

If empathy for Caliban is complicated by the charge of his attempting to sexually assault Miranda and his conspiracy to slay Prospero within the narrative, by contrast the verse of the play becomes an inscriptive-performative space for Caliban to once or twice speak serene and unroll the virtue of his natural poetry. If I may read from the play:

Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again

In her article “Creature Caliban,” Julia Lupton reads this poetic dimension of Caliban’s person as one, perhaps the one, positive imprint of his tutelage under Prospero, that of expressive language. As with Polyphemus, the unstructured, unconsummated making of poetry (making of making), the very process of creation, may be the closest Caliban gets to his own virtue.

Without society’s audience, can the exiled and oppressed be virtuous? How does human alienation here bring us to socially destructive outcomes? We’re meant to understand that the presumption of virtue today is democratic, that anyone can cultivate themselves to be anything and that that is *good*; our institutions should guarantee that ideal. Part of the question today is if they do.

It is a massively imperfect analogy, but I’ve dug myself too deep to not use it now: I have been Caliban, and I have had my own Prospero’s, some of whom are in this room today. That is not to say there are wizards among us or that I was sired by a devil – none of that is confirmed. It is to say, rather, that I am no longer the same savage, hungry 5-year-old I was when I started this long day called education; I learned a little. It is to say that I am still on the verge of mastery, behind the post. It is to say that I have seen the dizzying magic of what mastery looks like in studying the humanities, both in the text and in the lecture. It is to say that my teachers and my mentors have demonstrated possibility to me beyond what I could have imagined on my own island.

Forever ago last year, I decided to make my busy self busier and become a French major, and the department was kind enough to let me in. I’m infinitely enriched and infinitely thankful for the chance to be a scholar (in the pupa stage), to be here now. For that reason, I care all the more that the system we’re working within is accessible, that the gate of humanistic education be open and wide.