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But What of Female Desire?: Miranda, Sycorax, and Female Audiences of *The Tempest*

Some feminist critics of *The Tempest* seem to be concerned with whom female audiences should identify and whether female spectators even have the possibility of a pleasurable viewing of the play due to the lack of female characters on stage. Ann Thompson ends her article “‘Miranda, Where’s Your Sister?’: Reading Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*” with two main unanswered questions: first, she wonders if “it is possible for a staging of *The Tempest* to convey anything approaching a feminist reading of the text;” and second, “what kind of pleasure can a woman and a feminist take in this text beyond the rather grim one of mapping its various patterns of exploitation” (412). This calls into question whether or not Miranda is a heroine worthy of a positive feminist reading, but the answer is much more complex than one might think. To argue yes would be to assert that Miranda has some form of control over her narrative within the play, but readers and viewers know that this is impossible in terms of this particular Shakespearean drama: Prospero is in complete control of *The Tempest*’s universe considering the events of the play itself have been completely fabricated by himself, and the play functions as a platform for him to tell his story. To argue no would be to assert that female audiences of *The Tempest* have to resolutely believe that there is no character with whom they can identify within the play. So how can the female spectator navigate herself through a piece of literature that gives women such a limited space for movement, both literally and figuratively?

A potential answer lies first in further examination of Sycorax's role in Prospero's story. It is wholly significant to note that the only descriptions the audience receives of Sycorax's character is from Prospero, not even the enslaved Ariel speaks of her depravity and torture—and the audience only receives Prospero's convictions against her as a way to remind Ariel of her evil ways, to tighten the reign he has on his servant through comparisons:

Thou, my slave,
 As thou report'st thyself, was then her servant;
 And, for thou wast a spirit too delicate
 To act her earthy and abhorred commands,
 Refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee. (1.2.271-74)

In fact, Sycorax died long before Prospero encounters the island, but strangely, none of the characters question his descriptions of her. Sycorax, a “blue-eyed hag” (1.2.270) with an “unmitigable rage” (1.2.277) that influences her “sorceries terrible” (1.2.265), serves not only as a foil to the pure Miranda, but also the would-be benevolent Prospero. Ania Loomba acknowledges the juxtaposition between “the white, virginal, and obedient Miranda” and Sycorax as well as Sycorax's function as Prospero's other: “his repeated comparisons between their different magics and their respective reigns of the island are used by him to claim a superior morality, a greater strength and a greater humanity” (393). Unlike the dark Sycorax, who punishes Ariel by trapping him into a tree, Prospero rescues him and dangles the promise of freedom to Ariel. Loomba goes on to define these differences between characters in colonial and patriarchal terms, where “Prospero as colonialist consolidates power” that is “specifically white and male,” while also “construct[ing] Sycorax as a black, wayward, and wicked witch” as a way to legitimize Prospero's usurpation of the island” (Loomba 394). Indeed, without the narrative of

overcoming Sycorax, Prospero's claim to authority lacks substantial evidence; the continuation of his narrative depends on his ability to overcome the remnants of Sycorax's power on the island, or essentially, his ability to overcome and best a woman. Ultimately, Sycorax is silenced first by Prospero. After her death, her narrative has been absorbed into his, and even her offspring comes under his power.

However, the failure to extend analysis beyond the point of Prospero's foil means that Sycorax is silenced yet again—this time by critics of the play who fail to see the significance of her character. Critics and audiences alike wonder about Miranda's desire, who is another woman silenced by Prospero, but what of Sycorax's desire? It simply cannot exist in *The Tempest*. As previously stated, without Sycorax to whom he can compare himself, Prospero has no authority over Ariel, Caliban, the island; and even worse, the play has no plot without her. The events that transpire up to the moment where Ferdinand and Miranda meet—the shipwreck, the characters washed up on different parts of island—have been entirely fabricated by Prospero, just as the events that lead to the eventual reconciliation between Alonso and Prospero. However, Prospero needs to have already overcome the obstacle of Sycorax and her magic before his plan can progress. In “Desire in Narrative,” Teresa de Lauretis explores the way female desire functions in within film, though the same logic can be applied to the theatre. She draws upon the myths of Perseus and Oedipus, claiming “Medusa and the Sphinx, like the other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else's story, not their own; so, they are figures or markers of positions—places and topoi—through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning” (109). The fact that Sycorax arrives on the island already pregnant indicates something of her desire, but her death is necessary for Prospero to vilify her. Thus, Sycorax must join the mystical ranks of the Sphinx and Medusa who exist

voiceless inside a narrative that is entirely male: “As for the Sphinx, she is long gone and little more than a legend in the world of the tragedy... She only served to test Oedipus and qualify him as hero. Having fulfilled her narrative function...her question is now subsumed in his; her power, his; her fateful gift of knowledge, soon to be his” (de Lauretis 112).

Going beyond Sycorax’s desire, the question of Miranda’s must also be brought to light to examine what kind of space female desire occupies within the male narrative, since though both characters are voiceless and female, Sycorax never makes an appearance on stage. If narrative is a story that has a beginning, rising action, a climax, and a resolution, then narrative itself *is* desire. This desire translates into desire for completion (*i.e.* the events of *The Tempest* must end in Prospero’s favor on Prospero’s terms). Female desire need not be understood by Prospero, other characters, or the audience—it must remain in the background with its passivity or it will be utterly vanquished, like Medusa, the Sphinx, and Sycorax. Any threats of female autonomy within the narrative subsequently become threats to male desire, threats of castration, and anxieties regarding control (or lack thereof). Females, and therefore female desire, need to remain passive in narrative for male desire to progress the play’s plot: “They are obstacles man encounters on the path of life, on his way to manhood, wisdom, and power; they must be slain or defeated so he can go forward to fulfill his destiny—and his story” (de Lauretis 110).

Nonetheless, if audiences of the play were forced to name Miranda’s desire, it would be to please her father by marrying and bearing her husband’s children. So, like Sycorax, the play is entirely dependent on Miranda’s lack of desire to rebel and willingness to submit herself to her father and then Ferdinand thereafter. She ultimately becomes a part of the play’s backdrop as Prospero’s “property, to be exchanged between father and husband” (Loomba 396).

The threat of other male characters' desires poses a major issue for Prospero. The characters are almost obsessed with female virginity and sexuality. The possibility of Caliban raping Miranda "interferes disturbingly with the image of Miranda as a chaste and fertile wife" (Thompson 407). This is unnerving for Prospero, a symbol of masculinity and power, because if Caliban had succeeded, it would have indicated a lack of control over Caliban on his part; Caliban raping Miranda would have resulted in Prospero's emasculation. Also, preserving Miranda's chastity is necessary for her role in Prospero's plot because she is the bargaining chip used to help restore him to order—her virginity is vital to his political gains. Prospero is not only in control of Miranda's sexuality, but he is in control of Caliban's as well. Neither Caliban nor Miranda have the freedom to act upon their desires without Prospero's consent. Ferdinand, the future king, does not even have control of his desire and must adhere to Prospero's law to the point where he willingly submits himself into a servant-like position and vows not to violate Miranda's "virgin-knot before / All sanctimonious ceremonies" (4.1.15-16). Furthermore, if Miranda does not submit to her father, she will end up like Sycorax, who serves as a warning of uncontrolled female sexuality.

So, where does this leave twenty-first century female audiences of the play? Thompson notes that past audiences of *The Tempest* saw Miranda as "too ethereal," "tend[ing] to be more popular with male than with female readers;" however, females in the previous decade "find Miranda an extremely feeble heroine and scorn to identify with her," and "even nineteenth-century female critics, who on the whole participated enthusiastically in the trend of aggrandizing and romanticizing Shakespeare's heroines, could not find a great deal to say for Miranda" (404-5). It is my belief that these views of Miranda are still relevant and applicable to audience because again, it all boils down to desire—something that Miranda does not have

through the course of the play. If desire is narrative, then Prospero's desire is the entirety of the play. In fact, to identify solely with Miranda would be to identify with the play's liminal space, and a pleasurable viewing of the play requires audiences to be able to identify with Prospero regardless of their gender—it is only Prospero's desires that come to fruition by the end of the play, and to identify with Miranda would mean to identify with patriarchal terms of feminine desire; in de Lauretis's words, "women *must either* consent *or* be seduced into consenting into femininity" (134). No matter how one looks at the issue at hand, *The Tempest* was not written by a woman or for women, and the female roles were likely played by men or young boys. However, for females to identify only with Prospero would be a potentially masochistic and nihilistic act. Unlike female desire within the play, female desire of the audience must be able to transition between active (Prospero) and passive (Miranda), or between protagonist and the plot's background:

I am not advocating the replacement or the appropriation or, even less, the emasculation of Oedipus. What I have been arguing for, instead, is an interruption of the triple track by which narrative, meaning, and pleasure are constructed from his point of view. The most exciting work in cinema and in feminism today is not anti-narrative or anti-Oedipal; quite the opposite. It is narrative and Oedipal with a vengeance, for it seeks to stress the duplicity of that scenario and the specific contradiction by which historical women must work with and against Oedipus. (de Lauretis 157)

Unlike Sycorax who completely rejects male prescribed femininity or Miranda who completely absorbs it, female audiences must ultimately be able to navigate their way in and out of the terms

of what it means to be a woman and how to grapple with desire defined by this specific piece of literature written by a man for men.

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