
Extremes of Gender and Power: Sycorax's Absence in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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In William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero and Sycorax are extreme ends in the spectrums of power and gender. The patriarchy that Prospero enforces is not an independent or coherent system; rather, it reacts to its opposite, which Sycorax symbolizes. Although some dismiss Sycorax as "long dead by the time the play's events take place" (Thompson 339), she still shapes the characters' perceptions of power and gender. While one can analyze male characters directly by their actions on stage, one can analyze Sycorax only by her influence on these characters. With Sycorax absent, Prospero envisions her as his female opposite. Through Prospero, Sycorax symbolizes everything that may question patriarchy. Sycorax exists only in male characters' accounts; however, Sycorax influences the men's perception of power because she is absent.

In *The Tempest*, the only woman on stage is Miranda, who is both assaulted and honored for her virginity. The lack of women on stage leads Ann Thompson to wonder, "what feminist criticism can do in the face of a male-authored canonical text [*The Tempest*] which seems to exclude women to this extent" (339). Women are so utterly missing on stage that Stephen Orgel calls his essay "Prospero's Wife" merely a "consideration" of "related moments and issues" (1). According to Orgel, *The Tempest* provides enough evidence about the women in the play for us to speculate about them, but not enough for us to make any justified conclusions or arguments. *The Tempest* does not provide us with enough evidence to analyze Sycorax like one analyzes the male characters physically present on stage; however, the male characters, especially Prospero, continually recount and emphasize Sycorax's absence. *The Tempest's* dramatis personae names only one woman, yet the possibility of women in power is present. Prospero is a white, male patriarch, and Sycorax is a woman, possibly of color. Yet, their genders push them into opposing extremes, and this opposition creates tension in the patriarchy and space for potential female power.

As a powerful woman, Sycorax exemplifies anti-patriarchal ideas in early modern England, when patriarchy was the norm (or even ideal),

but an unsteady one that faced opposition on a daily basis. Female power was an available concept that manifested itself in various outlets, including Renaissance literature. Phyllis Rackin argues that Renaissance literature anticipated “modern constructions of gender and sexuality,” and that daily affairs provided readily available models of female power (28). In accounting for the absence of women in Shakespearean plays, Mary Beth Rose argues that there were reasons beyond pervasive patriarchy, theater etiquette, or a shortage of young male actors to play female roles. While many assume that women were completely disempowered in early modern England, Rose claims that women were “buying, selling, and bequeathing property and actively negotiating the marriages of their children, as well as planning for their education” (293). Similarly, Rackin argues that Shakespeare would have witnessed female agency within his home and town: “[T]he boy Shakespeare would have seen women presiding over other households, buying and selling in the local market and working on farms” (41). In fact, Shakespeare grew up in a predominantly female family where women controlled a considerable amount of money and property (33). Despite the patriarchal norm, Shakespeare was able to witness female agency and authority daily, and throughout his life. Anti-patriarchal ideas in *The Tempest* are not anachronistic; rather, they are a part of the environment that surrounded the creation of the play.

Sycorax, however, is not like the women in early modern England; she is not even physically present. Her absence is an extreme example of women lacking agency and representation. H el ene Cixous claims that the dichotomy of man/woman also creates “the proliferation of representations” (350), meaning that Prospero sees Sycorax as a representation of women and everything womanhood represents, in contrast to how he glorifies himself. As a woman, Sycorax is weaker, more evil, and more sexually deviant than Prospero. Cixous claims that these representations create gender stereotypes and give women little existence outside this dichotomy of man/woman (349). In the mind of the male characters, Sycorax is only a gender stereotype, or a symbol of Prospero’s views on women. Sycorax exists only as a contradiction to Prospero and his masculinity. Sycorax’s absence gives Prospero the opportunity to construct her fully into a symbol of the evil woman, the opposite of

himself; however, this construction also makes her an antagonist to Prospero and the patriarchy he represents.

Just as Sycorax is literally absent, women's lack of representation and agency made them figuratively absent in early modern England; however, women used their nonexistence to subvert patriarchal society. Sycorax exemplifies the same mindset: her absence leads Prospero to sabotage his own patriarchy. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford explain that, in the seventeenth century, women could twist the logic of patriarchy against itself by arguing that their lack of citizenship and rights excused them from society and its laws (Mendelson and Crawford 55). Women's vague identity, and their absence from a male-dominated power structure, could scare men and provide opportunities for subversion. In early modern England, then, patriarchy supported itself with concepts that undermined its existence. As in early modern England, Prospero's patriarchy becomes a dependent, self-contradicting system. Prospero turns Sycorax into a symbol for ideas that threaten his own patriarchy, especially maternal succession, a concept that would reverse the island's hierarchy and limit his power.

As Cixous explains, men categorize and define women through a network of gender differences. Gender determines the degree of one's power. At one end of the spectrum is Sycorax, the disempowered, demonized woman; at the other, Prospero, the ruling patriarch. Yet in early modern England, this logic categorizes women as representations of all that opposed men and evaded patriarchal society. In constructing Sycorax as his evil opposite, Prospero attempts to legitimize his patriarchy in contrast to her; however, as Prospero's evil opposite, Sycorax is a threat to Prospero's authority.

In *The Tempest*, gender is only one opposing force between Prospero and Sycorax. Gender combines with race to determine the degree of power each person holds. Many of today's critics view Prospero as an aggressive upholder of patriarchal and colonial power. Ania Loomba bluntly states that Prospero uses "language of misogyny as well as racism" (328). Both Loomba and Rachana Sachdev define Sycorax as black and claim that her racial identity colors her gender identity: "Therefore Prospero as colonialist consolidates power which is specifically white and male, and constructs Sycorax as a black, wayward and wicked witch in order to legitimize it" (Loomba 329). According to

Loomba, Sycorax's race and gender oppose Prospero's. While Sycorax is a woman, possibly of color, Prospero is a white patriarch who censures the rule of Sycorax.

Sycorax is not present to represent herself; therefore, Sycorax exists purely through secondhand accounts that Prospero edits into slander. There is no evidence or description of Sycorax besides Ariel's accounts and perhaps Caliban's vague, early memories; nevertheless, Prospero embellishes and constructs the story of Sycorax and proves to be the chief source for what the audience knows. Orgel too notes that, though Prospero learns about Sycorax from Ariel, he has Sycorax "insistently present in his memory" (4-5). He speaks Ariel's memories for him: "Imprisoned thou didst painfully remain / A dozen years; within which space she died" (1.2.279-80). Prospero tries to remind Ariel about Sycorax, suggesting or at least creating the possibility that he has added elements to the story originally unknown to Ariel: "Hast thou forgot / The foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy / Was grown into a hoop? Hast thou forgot her?" (257-59). Then he commands again: "Once in a month recount what thou hast been, / Which thou forgett'st. This damned witch Sycorax" (263-64). Every month, Prospero must remind Ariel of his own memories. Oddly, Prospero repeatedly asks Ariel if he has forgotten the story he originally told Prospero. Prospero questions Ariel, trying to outline and embellish Sycorax's story as if Prospero knows best: "Where was she born? Speak. Tell me" (261), followed by "O, was she so?" (262) and "Is not this true?" (268). Prospero interrogates Ariel without waiting for him to respond, as if Prospero is the authority of the story. Prospero cannot remember more than Ariel, because he never met Sycorax. Yet Prospero retells Ariel's story back to Ariel. Prospero recounts Sycorax's story with an authority he lacks, making his account more of a construction.

Prospero lacks firsthand observation or concrete evidence about Sycorax; thus, Prospero constructs Sycorax as simply his opposite and tool. According to Loomba, Sycorax is Prospero's "other," which he constructs in order to "legitimize his takeover" (328). Because Prospero never saw Sycorax, his detailed descriptions of her are partly his construction, which he manipulates for his benefit. Thus, his retelling emphasizes her supposed evilness and, by contrast, his goodness. When he describes Sycorax's magic, he describes his abilities as more powerful

than hers. His is the magic that “Sycorax / Could not gain undo” (1.2.291-92). Prospero claims that Sycorax could never defeat his magic, and, to his convenience, she is not there to prove him wrong. Since Sycorax is absent, she becomes the platform for Prospero’s ideas of gender, and she highlights both his desire for power and his fear of losing that power.

Prospero constructs Sycorax as evil by projecting his anxieties about women and power onto her. Using Loomba’s “language of misogyny,” Prospero calls Sycorax a “foul witch,” “damned witch Sycorax,” and “hag” (1.2.258, 264, 270) in his first discussion of her. When describing the men who betrayed him, his words never reach this extreme, but he uses such language to describe a woman he never met. As Orgel argues, Prospero’s “memory” of Sycorax is utterly self-constructed yet oddly angers him. Orgel explains that for Prospero, Sycorax “embodies to an extreme degree all the negative assumptions about women” (5). He cannot mention her name without a sexist slur. He sometimes even omits her name and uses the slur instead, as if *witch* were synonymous with *Sycorax*. Prospero exchanges Sycorax’s name for sexist slurs because Sycorax is interchangeable with Prospero’s negative perception of women, and his insults are gendered. For Orgel, Prospero’s outbursts reveal anger about women’s potential power; contrastingly, Loomba explains Prospero’s anger as “anxiety” about Sycorax’s remaining power (328). Loomba and Orgel are both correct: Prospero is anxious about Sycorax because she symbolizes women in power, and that remains a fear for Prospero, whether he can consciously admit it or not.

In demonizing Sycorax and projecting his fears onto her, Prospero only creates her into something powerful enough to incite fear. Although constructed and absent, Sycorax is a serious threat, because Prospero names her a witch. Attempting to make her out to be as evil as possible, Prospero endows Sycorax with his greatest fear: losing his patriarchal power. In calling her a witch, Prospero reveals his anxiety about women, especially their potential power to challenge patriarchy. *Witch* was a common insult in early modern England and was usually directed towards women because women were believed to be “desirous of power” (Mendelson and Crawford 71). Gendered insults “built on specific fears.” Most of all *witch* meant the “mirror reversal of all that the patriarchy deemed good in a woman” (69). It was a name for women who threatened to upset the patriarchy. In calling Sycorax a witch, Prospero is identifying

her as a threat to patriarchy, and his anger shows that the threat is serious enough to enrage him. In trying to condemn Sycorax, Prospero shows that her power remains in a new form despite her absence. Prospero makes Sycorax into more than just anxiety.

As Prospero's self-constructed opposite, Sycorax is a symbol of all that undermines him. She is no longer a person, but a symbol of all that can question Prospero. Therefore, whenever someone combats Prospero, that person invokes Sycorax's name. Calling upon her perceived power to threaten patriarchy, Caliban uses his mother to curse Prospero, calling on "As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed" to "Drop on you both!" (1.2.324-26) and "All the charms / Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!" (342-43). Caliban does not need to describe her or even recall her right to the island. Sycorax is such a powerful symbol that her name alone is a curse. She remains powerful in the minds of Caliban and Prospero as a symbol of all that opposes Prospero's beliefs and values.

Because Sycorax embodies Prospero's fears of powerful women, she is associated with ideas that oppose Prospero's beliefs and values — especially maternal succession, a concept that would reverse the island's hierarchy and limit Prospero's power. In the play, property rights are synonymous with the right to rule, and with the right to rule, one decides each inhabitant's personal rights. Critics like Loomba assert that Prospero's claim to the island is colonial. Moreover, it is also patriarchal because it dismisses matrilineal succession. While Prospero claims a Eurocentric, colonial right to the island, he also argues against inheritance through the mother.

Again using Sycorax as a symbol, Caliban calls upon her to combat Prospero and to argue for maternal succession. Caliban claims, "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me" (1.2.334-35). In these lines, Caliban claims the island using only maternal succession to argue his point, although Caliban "could derive it [the island] from the mere fact of prior possession" (Orgel 5). Instead, Caliban invokes his mother to question Prospero's power: he claims to have inherited the island from his mother, and he assumes that this inheritance is legitimate. As Miranda's assailant, Caliban is not enlightened about gender; he also uses women as tools, so, in the same way that he assails Miranda, he invokes Sycorax's name in questioning Prospero's power. Symbolizing all ideas that oppose Prospero, Sycorax is

more threatening to Prospero than any other argument against him and his rule. Prospero responds by talking about Caliban's character, diverting the argument away from the possibility of matrilineal succession. Prospero's response reveals the potency of Caliban's argument: Prospero never addresses maternal succession but instead changes the subject to Caliban's behavior. Sycorax is Caliban's claim to the island, an alternative power play; through Sycorax, Caliban outlines the possibility of matrilineal succession and in the process questions Prospero's claim, which depends on conquest. If succession trumps conquest, matrilineal succession would invert the hierarchy of the island: Caliban as leader, Prospero as his follower, and Miranda inheriting nothing from her now-powerless father and dead mother. While Prospero dismisses matrilineal succession to legitimize his rule, Caliban uses Sycorax to subvert Prospero's claim. Sycorax establishes Caliban's argument for matrilineal succession, a concept that clashes with patriarchy and would overthrow Prospero. Sycorax is a threat because she is a symbol of a different power structure.

Sycorax subverts the ideology behind Prospero's patriarchy not only by matrilineal succession but also by her sexuality. Sycorax represents for Prospero an unfettered female sexuality that breaks the gender boundaries, threatening greater female autonomy. Sycorax represents an alternative to the chasteness that Prospero imposes on Miranda. Prospero's obsession with Miranda's sexuality demonstrates the value of chastity in a patriarchal society. With her chastity determining her future, Miranda is objectified and dependent. Prospero warns Ferdinand that if he "break her virgin-knot" before marriage, he will condemn the couple with "Sour-eyed disdain" and barrenness (4.1.15-20). Prospero obsessively protects Miranda's virginity, making it more important than her future happiness. Prospero's treatment of Miranda reinforces virginity as the key to a woman's value and future. Upon meeting Miranda, Ferdinand informs her and Prospero that he will make her "The Queen of Naples," but only "if a virgin" (1.2.451-53). Ferdinand's proposal wages Miranda's future on her virginity. Miranda's virginity is not her preference but a commodity that men may control or own. Because of the men's patriarchal views, Miranda is restricted in her sexuality, which is constrained by the men's desire for her virginity. Yet Sycorax exemplifies an alternative to the sexuality Prospero advocates.

While Prospero tries to align Miranda's sexuality with his values, his story of Sycorax only undermines these values. As Prospero's evil opposite, Sycorax symbolizes all of his negative assumptions about women; therefore, he constructs her sexuality in ways that oppose his patriarchal views on virginity. Sycorax is not alive to command, celebrate, or denounce Caliban's attempt to rape Miranda; however, the men's story of Sycorax lives, and it presents for its own benefit a view of sex and female sexuality in contradiction to the typical view of sexuality the men support. Sycorax becomes the "witch," the "blue-eyed hag [who] was hither brought with child" (1.2.264, 270), or, more accurately, the powerful female with an unfettered sexuality. According to Prospero, Sycorax arrives on the island pregnant and without any mention of a husband. Her pregnancy demands that she be seen as sexual, but the text offers no social context for her sexual activity. As Miranda must make a spectacle of marriage to legitimize her future sexual relationship with Ferdinand, the circumstances of Sycorax's pregnancy remain unmentioned. Thus, Prospero defines her as wretched regardless of the sort of sexual relationship — whether consensual, violent, spontaneous, or longstanding — that brought about Caliban's conception. Prospero, Ferdinand, and Caliban glorify virginity, but Sycorax symbolizes a woman who is powerful despite conceiving without being securely accounted for in the usual socially-sanctioned narratives. Sachdev argues that Sycorax sexually deviates from the European norm. Sachdev makes a valid point that Sycorax is "the deviant, powerful, 'monster-like' female," while Miranda is "a chaste, obedient, and dutiful daughter" (224). Sycorax is not only a "hag" but also "blue-eyed" (1.2.270), perhaps implying dark circles under the eyes believed to signal pregnancy.¹ Since Prospero tells the story, he demonizes Sycorax with words like "hag"; however, this only highlights her sexuality for all to see, including Miranda. Prospero's story accidentally portrays Sycorax as an independent woman who remains powerful after losing her virginity, whatever the circumstances of the sexual encounter.

In *The Tempest*, the concept of strong female power is problematic if one considers a female character's presence on stage as the only indicator of her influence. Although Sycorax exists only in the male characters' accounts of her, their idea of her affects their perception of power. While at one extreme Prospero enacts patriarchy, at the other

extreme Sycorax symbolizes everything that questions his patriarchal power. Prospero constructs Sycorax in contrast to himself, but he only exposes the contradictions of his patriarchy. Attempting to condemn Sycorax as a “witch” and a “whore,” Prospero instead creates the model of a powerful woman who breaks gender restrictions. Absent, Sycorax can exist as an idea, a contradiction that twists the logic of patriarchy against itself. As an idea, Sycorax is Prospero’s greatest enemy, an invisible assailant that is not physically present for him to defeat or appease. Because of Sycorax’s absence, she and Prospero become the extreme opposites of power and gender in *The Tempest*.

Notes

1. See Gerald Graff and James Phelan make this association between blue-eyedness and pregnancy in their footnotes. See William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Gerald Graff and James Phelan (Boston: Bedford/Martin's, 2000), 23.

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