



The representation of the witch Sycorax in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare: the othering of the foreign body, women and maternity during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras

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The Representation of the Witch Sycorax in *The Tempest* by
Shakespeare:

The Othering of the Foreign Body, Women and Maternity during the
Elizabethan and Jacobean Eras

Supervisor: Dr Morgan Dickson



2021-2022

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Introduction

E.M.W. Tillyard, a renowned Early Modern scholar, argues in one of his best-known works that ‘the greatness of the Elizabethan age was that it contained so much of new without bursting the noble form of the old order’.¹ Indeed, the Early Modern period in England, like in other European countries, was an era of (re)discoveries. From the discovery of the New World and the beginning of colonialism and the Scientific Revolution to the Reformation or the Union of Scotland and England in 1603 when James I succeeded Elizabeth I, a remarkable number of changes – be it social, religious, or scientific - happened in a short period of time. Yet Tillyard suggests that however big these changes might have been, there was still a sense of continuity at the time through the idea of order. He develops the idea of a ‘cosmic order’² as a kind of hierarchical system controlling the state of the world inherited from the Middle Ages and argues that people were afraid of disruptions impeding that very system. Because of the numerous discoveries that took place during the Early Modern period – discoveries that undoubtedly led to new ideas and thus to changes from the past – the leading religious and governmental authorities put an emphasis on this idea of order as a means of keeping society in control. In times of change, a conservative backlash and high numbers of persecutions are often observed in society as a result of the fears accompanying these changes.³ This statement appears even truer when applied to the Early Modern period in the Western World, at a time when a high level of public unrest was observed as a result of wars, pandemics and famines – bringing to mind the bowls of the apocalypse – and led to widespread fears and anxieties⁴ amplified by the

¹ Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ Horsley, ‘On the Trail of the “Witches”’, p. 17.

⁴ Piot, *La Diabolisation de la Femme*, p. 34.

shifting economy moving from a feudal system to the beginning of capitalism⁵ on top of all the other novelties. All of these aspects can explain the importance given to the idea of order and control as the backbone of a harmonious society.

The hovering fear of disruption might account for the raging witch hunts that occurred at the same period and targeted mostly women. In Europe, seven to eight out of ten persons under trial for witchcraft were women.⁶ According to Ostorero, the definition of ‘witch hunt’ can be worded as follows: the process through which a group of people is designated as public enemy by the use of denunciation and stigmatisation in order to exclude them from society.⁷ The expression ‘witch hunt’ actually appeared later in time than the Early Modern period and can be used to designate persecutions targeting other groups than witches but following the same process. Paired with the idea that in times of trouble and fear, society looks for scapegoats – or more generally enemies – to explain and take responsibility for their misery,⁸ it is no surprise that witches became the new scapegoats after Jews, lepers and heretics.⁹ They were branded as the enemy to be disposed of in order to restore social order because the rumours that developed at the time concerning their powers and crimes could be linked to these societal problems. For example, on a popular level, famines could be explained through their power of causing crops to fail. On a religious level, their condemnation for worshipping demons and Satan served the purpose of showing the power of the Church in its quest for religious homogeneity and hegemony. On a scientific level, their use of spells or traditional remedies in medicine could be seen as a hindrance to the developing medical profession based on books and formal education, especially in the field of midwifery. The fact that women were overrepresented in witch trials can be explained by several interrelated reasons. Women have

⁵ Horsley, ‘On the Trail of the “Witches”’, p. 17.

⁶ Porret, ‘L’Europe des milles bûchers’, p. 50.

⁷ Ostorero, ‘La sorcière’, p. 36. Reworded by me from the original (in French): ‘processus de dénonciation et de stigmatisation d’un groupe désigné comme ennemi public ou déviant afin de l’exclure du corps social’.

⁸ Piot, *La Diabolisation de la Femme*, p. 34.

⁹ Ostorero, ‘La sorcière’, p. 36.

historically held a very distinct place within patriarchal structures and societies, and during the Renaissance, their identity was always construed / defined in relation to a male family member,¹⁰ a position that illustrated their dominated status.¹¹ Consequently, they could not exist on their own in theory. Women who did not conform were persecuted, even executed in some cases. In this respect, witch hunts acted as both a preventive and a controlling measure, insomuch as women who threatened the patriarchal order were disposed of and those who might have represented a potential threat were scared into conformity. Moreover, women stood even more at the margins of society after having lost their economic and productive place in society ‘through curtailment of their roles in the trades’,¹² which gave them no choice but to depend on someone else – a male family member preferably, to conform to societal expectations – and made them an easy target. Also, women were considered to be the weaker gender and their religious faith was thought to be inferior to that of men. In her thesis, Baldo even mentions the reflection done on the word ‘femina’ which could be explained as a composition of ‘fes’ and ‘minus’ as in ‘lesser faith’.¹³ Because of this, they were seen to be more prone to demonic influences and to entering contracts with the devil and as a consequence, they were more easily blamed in cases of suspected witchcraft.¹⁴

At the same time, and quite paradoxically, a growing interest in the occult, the supernatural and the unexplained emerged, especially with the dawn of freak shows and the discovery of new wonders following the beginning of colonisation. The Early Modern period saw the rise of a certain enthusiasm for the extraordinary and the gory.¹⁵ Although their popularity peaked later in time, freak shows and cabinets of curiosities started to develop. On this subject, Půtová writes that ‘Renaissance cabinet collections included bizarre and monstrous

¹⁰ Duarte, ‘Demonizing and Silencing Powerful Women’, p. 6.

¹¹ Orgel, ‘Shakespeare, Sexuality and Gender’, p. 222.

¹² Merchant, ‘The Scientific Revolution’, p. 2.

¹³ Baldo, ‘Discours de l’Inquisiteur’, p. 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁵ Hocmard, *Shakespeare, Thèmes et Etudes*, p. 17.

artefacts' and that 'freak shows included presentation of members from non-European ethnic groups, physically different people whose appearance caused amazement, wax figures and exotic animals.'¹⁶ A clear link between colonialism and freak shows is drawn here. In addition to this, she explains how this fascination was nurtured by the notion that the 'Caucasian race [...] was proclaimed as superior to other races for its alleged aesthetic beauty and corporal harmony' and that in turn the exhibitions showcasing physical abnormalities or monstrosities as results of savagery allowed for the assertion that the civilised western society was superior.¹⁷ Native people from the colonies presenting physical curiosities were sent to the metropolis to be exhibited for such motives. This exposition to foreign cultures crystallised the idea of racial differences.¹⁸ Such practices contributed to the establishment of a social hierarchy or order between the metropolis and the colonies, the European white man and the foreigner, normality and abnormality which established society as a set of Manichean oppositions. As a result, and more generally, things that were not considered 'normal' were then automatically negatively categorised. Two solutions could be applied then: control – freak shows can be considered as a display of power to some extent – or elimination, which can be considered as an extreme form of control – as was the case with witches.

With this eclectic range of new interests, it is not surprising that writers of the time filled their works with these ideas. According to Popelard, the rise of science coincided with the emergence of theatre,¹⁹ and as such, William Shakespeare represents no exception. Moreover, Shakespeare was especially known and appreciated for his plays, a literary genre both concerned with the idea of order and analogous to freak shows: according to Mark Thornton-Burnett, plays and freak shows present similarities insofar as both aim at the display of a

¹⁶ Půtová, 'Freak Shows', p. 3.

¹⁷ *Idem.*

¹⁸ Harris, 'Shakespeare and Race', p. 203.

¹⁹ Popelard, 'Faustus, Prospero, Solomon', p. 7.

spectacle meant to entertain the people.²⁰ Furthermore, plays commonly share a pattern that can be simplified into three stages: the ‘exposition’ which introduces the setting and the characters, the ‘complication’ when ordered life is thrown into disarray, and the ‘resolution’ where the situation is resolved, or not.²¹ In other words, plays revolve around the idea that the disordered order of things has to be put back into place in order to reach a conclusion. It is no wonder then that Shakespeare, who was born in 1564 and died in 1616, managed to reach success as a playwright in the midst of the Early Modern period, during which the popular obsession for order and the interest in a possible representation of disorder were high, since his plays brought together all these aspects, and even more so through the medium of theatre which was appreciated by all classes. His plays and his company, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men – later renamed the King’s Men under James I – were acclaimed at the time and his works have become part of the literary canon.

One of his latest works, *The Tempest*, is concerned with all the subjects mentioned above. Written in 1610-1611 and probably inspired by the actual shipwreck of a British vessel in the Bermudas in 1609 whose story was known to the English public after having been published,²² *The Tempest* is a comic play, also called a ‘romance’ because of the fact that it contains elements of comedy but also of tragedy. The plot of this play is intricate, and several subplots can be identified, but at the centre of all of these stands the character of Prospero. Prospero, a usurped Duke, exiled on an island with his daughter Miranda, wants to regain the title his brother stole from him. At the beginning of the play, a boat on which said brother happens to be sailing passes by the shores of the island. Prospero, who controls an aerial spirit named Ariel, asks his magical servant to create a storm so that the sailors will end up stranded on the island with them. From this moment on, different parallel and mirroring stories develop

²⁰ Thornton-Burnett, ‘Constructing Monsters in Shakespearian Drama’, p. 78.

²¹ Coyle and Peck, *How to Study a Shakespeare Play*, p. 2.

²² Marienstras, *Shakespeare et le désordre du monde*, p. 389.

as the sailors find themselves on different sides of the island. However, it is not these plots that are of interest for this paper, but rather the untold story of another character named Sycorax. When Prospero first arrived on the island, other people had already been living there: Sycorax, her son Caliban and the aerial spirit, Ariel. However, since the character Sycorax is absent in the play, having died years before, she has to be studied through her relation to the other characters, especially Prospero, Caliban, Ariel and Miranda, since the other newcomers do not know of her. It is through the study of Sycorax's representation that the themes of the occult and witches, religion, patriarchal control, misogyny, colonialism, and medicine through the medium of the idea of maternity can be analysed in this play.

As suggested by Bergeron in a discussion of the study of Shakespeare's plays, this paper will make use of historical criticism²³ and analyse how *The Tempest* reflects its immediate historical period, that is the Early Modern period, with a focus on England and Scotland. Taking a postcolonial approach like Suniti Namjoshi did in her retelling of *The Tempest*, entitled *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems*, which suggests a reading from Sycorax's point of view, this paper will try to shed some light on the erased or ignored parts of the story and history. This paper aims at the study of the character Sycorax as a witch, a mother and a person of colour, and the different dynamics put in place between her and Prospero through the other characters as well, in order to show how this relation reflects and represents the historical context of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras; that is colonialism, imperialism, misogyny, patriarchy as well as social and religious unrest. This paper will demonstrate that all these concerns intersect in the history of witch hunts and medicine, especially that of midwives, an argument that has seldom been studied in relation to Shakespeare.

²³ Bergeron and De Sousa, *Shakespeare: A Study and Research Guide*, p. 6.

In order to complete this study, several interconnected aspects need to be developed. Firstly, the question of language will be examined. Language is indeed an important matter in *The Tempest*, which is a literary work made to be performed live in front of an audience. In the play, the use of language is closely linked to power and control as it is in real life. Prospero gives a subjective account of Sycorax as she is absent and cannot speak for herself. This way, Sycorax is marginalised, even to the point of oppression, by the way in which she is presented in the play. In a similar manner, the narrative surrounding witch hunts at the time was closely manipulated, especially through the way trials were conducted, a process that was often based on and / or supported by both religious and royal discourses. Secondly, the question of misogyny arises through the dynamics of the powers of both Sycorax and Prospero, who can be read as two mirroring images made to be opposed. In addition, both the over representation of women in witch trials and the antifeminist religious and royal discourses reinforce this misogynistic tendency. Sycorax and Prospero share many similarities, especially when it comes to magical abilities, however, instead of connecting them, these similarities are presented in a way that completely draws them apart. The othering of Sycorax by Prospero, which is primarily based on gender and race, is a tool to portray her as a foil that allows the author to make a morally good character out of Prospero. This is representative of the way witches were persecuted when a figure like John Dee, a Renaissance Magus studying the occult arts, thrived in the Elizabethan court. These differences in treatment bring about the notions of patriarchy and colonialism, both on Prospero's island and in Shakespeare's society, because as mentioned above, the exposition to other cultures brought about the notion of white supremacy and the Manichean opposition between those who belong and those who do not.²⁴ Finally, this paper

²⁴ On the subject of white supremacy here, I have based my reflection on Andrea Smith's paper entitled 'Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy'. Even if her paper is anchored in a more modern and American context, I feel that her deconstruction of white supremacy into three 'pillars' also applies to the early British imperial agenda of colonisation and is thus relevant when studying the colonial context of Shakespeare's time and how it appears in his work. These three pillars will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

will dwell upon the question of reproduction as a natural continuation of colonialism and patriarchy. As a matter of fact, women's prime function at the time was to bear and raise children in order to populate the Empire. However, this had to be done according to certain rules, and only white, able-bodied women were encouraged to do so within the bonds of marriage with men of the same race – this can be considered as the premises of eugenics. In this respect, Sycorax's son Caliban is an embodiment of the fears of miscegenation and hybridity present in society at the time. Moreover, the erasure of mothers in the play, be it through the destruction of their body, their voice or their roles, embodies the patriarchal control over women's sexuality and the fear of illegitimacy. This naturally leads to the history – or herstory to be more exact – of midwives and how the religious and governmental attempts at controlling their traditional practices with the use of witch hunts and official regulations was an attempt to control women's bodies and sexuality and relegate that control to men, more particularly with and because of the masculinisation of obstetrics that happened at the same time.

1 The Importance of Language

1.1 An absent character: Prospero's subjective account

As stated in the introduction, this paper is concerned with the character of Sycorax in relation to Prospero and the system of oppositions that is put into place between them. Since Sycorax is an absent character inasmuch as she never appears on stage, she can only be studied through the other characters' memory and presentation of her. She exists purely through second-hand accounts.²⁵ The fact that Shakespeare chose not to make her appear on stage could be explained by the absence of female actors at the time. Indeed, Early Modern women were forbidden from appearing on stage in England as acting was tantamount to prostitution under the belief that making a spectacle of themselves would not be socially acceptable 'for a woman to display herself on stage was to violate all the canons of female modesty and chastity' according to Orgel.²⁶ This restriction put on women also coincides with the theory and ideology of the separate spheres dictating that women's place was in the domestic sphere while men's place was in the public sphere. The stage being a public place was thus reserved for men. Consequently, male actors had to take on the roles of women when needed. On the other hand, the character of Miranda is very present throughout the play, and other female characters regularly appear in other Shakespearian plays as well, meaning that it was not a problem for men to play female characters. Some specialists argue that 'Shakespeare's plays include many more daughters, fathers and sons than mothers'²⁷ because playing a mother – a mature woman – would be more difficult than playing a young girl for young male actors.²⁸ However, the way Sycorax's name is regularly voiced and the way she is given a background – unlike Miranda's

²⁵ Blystone, 'Extremes of Gender and Power', p. 76.

²⁶ Orgel, 'Shakespeare, sexuality and gender', p. 226.

²⁷ Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, p. 75.

²⁸ Hocmard, *Shakespeare, Thèmes et Etudes*, p. 64.

mother – means that the reasons for her absence on stage must go beyond the sole technicalities of stage plays at the time. She is given too big a role for her absence to be due entirely to the difficulty of playing a mother, especially since another Shakespearian play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, has two mothers who appear on stage as main characters.

Of course, the absence of Sycorax mostly results from the fact that she is no longer alive, no longer there, no longer able to speak for herself. In the play, it is never explicitly said when Sycorax died exactly, but it is explicitly mentioned that she died before Prospero even arrived on the island.²⁹ Her absence is particularly practical for Prospero because Sycorax does not have the possibility of defending herself against him. Furthermore, her absence also gives Prospero the power to manipulate her image, thus creating an account of her that suits his narrative. Her voice is never heard once, yet her presence permeates the play because Prospero keeps coming back to her. In other words, her presence is never seen yet it is very much felt. She is first mentioned in the second scene of the first act and from this moment on, her presence hovers over the whole play. Through the words he uses, Prospero controls the perception the reader or spectator has of her character, particularly because she has no interiority, and only factual accounts of her life are given, so there is no way to form a judgement about the veracity of Prospero's claims. Because Prospero seems to be the one who knows Sycorax the best, he is able to control the memory that others retain of her. He leaves no space for alternative stories. Her memory is especially discussed when the characters of Caliban and Ariel appear on stage, and more particularly when they speak with Prospero. It is during these instances that Prospero can be seen to control what others remember of her. To quote but one example, Prospero has to remind Ariel of how he saved the spirit from the evil Sycorax, constantly seeking validation from him for his act and the way it happened – while at the same time comparing himself

²⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.279.

positively to the absent Sycorax – in order to keep Ariel in his service a little longer.³⁰ It seems that Prospero is trying to convince Ariel of what happened with Sycorax rather than simply recounting the past. As Lindley interestingly put it in his introduction to *The Tempest*: ‘the play seems at times to remember more than the characters can know’,³¹ which goes back to the idea that the account given of Sycorax can be questioned or challenged, as Prospero could easily be subverting the story.

Prospero needs to keep this version of the narrative going in order to justify his position as the good character in the play. When he says: ‘[...] I must / Once a month recount what thou hast been,’³² it points to the fact that he is indeed actively nurturing this memory and that it is a repetitive process that needs to be (re)asserted, otherwise the other characters could possibly remember a variant version of the story that would not work in Prospero’s favour. From a narrative framework, Sycorax has to be absent so that Prospero can present himself as the victim of the story. Were she still present, he would go from being the usurped Duke to the usurper, which would become problematic as Shakespeare presents him as a righteous character. The fact that she is missing allows him to portray her negatively and to use her alleged failures and flaws to highlight his own success, superiority and moral greatness.³³ As a result of all of this, a very subjective portrait of Sycorax is given in the play: her absence allows for permeability and the reader or spectator cannot form their own opinion of her character. She becomes an important character, but at the same time she exists outside of the play, or as Abenia Busia puts it: ‘it is true that Sycorax is invoked quite insistently throughout the play, but [...] she is invoked only to be spoken of as absent, recalled as a reminder of her dispossession, and not permitted her version of her story’.³⁴ As access to language equates access to power, Prospero is the one

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I.2.250-294.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³² *Ibid.*, I.2.262-263.

³³ This aspect of the play, studying how Prospero constructs Sycorax as his Manichean opposite to use her as a foil is further detailed in the second part of this paper.

³⁴ Busia, ‘Silencing Sycorax’, p. 86.

in control here.³⁵ As a matter of fact, Prospero monopolises the narrative in the play thanks to his control of the plot – as he uses his powers so that the other characters act the way he wants – but also thanks to his speaking time. Indeed, Prospero’s lines account for around 30% of the overall play, placing him in first place, when the second place – Caliban – accounts for only 9% of the play.³⁶

It is interesting to suggest at this point that Prospero’s words could be completely challenged. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, he arrived on the island after Sycorax’s death, which means that he would not have been able to witness her actions or even get to know her character. The only plausible way he could have learnt about her is through Ariel and Caliban, the only characters who knew Sycorax first hand. Yet, he is the one reminding Ariel of the story, not the other way round. Moreover, when Prospero asks Ariel about Sycorax’s origins, which appears at first simply as a way to make sure Ariel keeps his attention on the conversation, Prospero is surprised by the answer: ‘O, was she so?’.³⁷ This seems to indicate that Prospero genuinely did not know this information or thought otherwise. Then how can the reader or the audience trust the rest of his account? In addition to this, the fact that Prospero would have had to have heard the story from another character first before reminding Ariel and informing the reader or spectators makes it a third-hand account and not second-hand, which leaves even more room for subjectivity. Nevertheless, Sycorax’s absence and the dubious story told of her puts her in the margins of society in the play. In *The Tempest*, Prospero controls a dual narrative: the told and the untold, as well as the past and the future, by dominating and controlling the action to reach the resolution he wants.

On a related idea, it is worth mentioning Suniti Namjoshi’s rewriting of *The Tempest* in order to demonstrate how a narrative can be modelled and subverted. Her work is entitled

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁶ Popelard, ‘Faustus, Prospero, Salomon’, p. 352.

³⁷ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.262.

Sycorax: New Fables and Poems, and in this retelling, Namjoshi gives Sycorax her voice back. The story is set on the island after Prospero and the others have left to return to Milan and Naples. Strictly speaking, it is not a retelling of the play, but Sycorax shares her thoughts and reflections on the situation while wandering around the island just before her death. Interestingly, Namjoshi's Sycorax was also absent on the island when Prospero was constructing his narrative, she only returned after he left, which means that the portrait painted by Prospero in *The Tempest* stands as the basis of her reflections, that is, as explained above, a very subjective and negative depiction. First, Sycorax admits that she is a witch but there are no negative connotations given to this designation, since she calls herself 'The good witch Sycorax'³⁸ and she explains that one of her powers lies in dreaming,³⁹ which is something that anyone can do. Then, she explicitly says that 'Prospero [...] lied'⁴⁰ and asserts that she does not consider herself guilty⁴¹ of anything Prospero reproaches her for. This reveals that there may be another version of the story Prospero tells in *The Tempest* and that his version might not be the truth.

1.2 The manipulation of the narrative in witch hunts

The manipulation of the narrative controlled by Prospero in *The Tempest* is tantamount to the treatment that women accused of witchcraft received in this period during the witch hunts and more precisely the witch trials of the time. As stated in the introduction, Early Modern England concerned itself with the idea of order and feared social disorder the most. This

³⁸ Namjoshi, *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems*, p. 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

obsession might account for the popularity of Shakespeare's plays – *The Tempest* being one of them – and of theatre overall since their plots focused on the resolution of social disorder. However, as Alex Davis has suggested: 'Renaissance England was a society hungry for a clarity of social distinctions; but the reality of early modern life was inevitably messier'.⁴² It is because the reality was indeed much more complex that people were preoccupied with the idea of conformity and belonging. Therefore, in order to thrive in society, one had to conform to the norms in place, or risk alienation and persecution. In other words, society tried to put forward one main narrative that every member had to follow in order to maintain harmony in the world. Failure to do so could lead to repression and punishment. This is particularly true for women, who possessed little freedom and liberties in a very gendered patriarchal society and had little room to evolve outside of the expectations imposed on them. Using Belsey's words: 'Women [...] were defined in relation to men and in terms of their relations with men'⁴³ and women who could be defined differently, that is independently, met with scrutiny. This is why old women – especially widows – were more frequently the target of accusations: they represented a danger to the order of the patriarchal society.⁴⁴ Overall, women were the first victims of witch hunts, but independent women such as old women, widows, healers and especially midwives, who could make a living on their own, were particularly targeted.⁴⁵ There was a need to get rid of deviant women so as to correct the narrative of the world and restore order in society.

Moreover, as stated earlier, *The Tempest* very much reflects the actual historical context of the time, and especially as concerns the subject of women and witchcraft. Views inherited from the Middle Ages, that associated magic with the devil, were still prevalent, and women were perceived as more easily corruptible than men,⁴⁶ which is also a reason explaining why

⁴² Davis, 'Shakespeare's Clowns', p. 80.

⁴³ Belsey as quoted in Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 167.

⁴⁴ Du Chéné, *Les Sorcières : une histoire de femmes*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ The persecution of witches in relation to medicine will be developed later in this paper.

⁴⁶ Horsley, 'On the Trail of the "Witches"', p. 16.

they were more frequently accused of witchcraft and often executed. In Europe, between 1580 and 1640, it has been estimated that at least 75% of convicts standing trial for witchcraft were women.⁴⁷ Because of their place at the margins of society, and the little power women possessed on their own, authorities could easily control the narrative to accuse or have others accuse women of witchcraft, convict them, and execute them. Piot gives a definition of witch hunts that differs from the one given in the introduction: ‘the search for a culprit through the use of questionable means, with the intent of charging them before looking to prove them guilty in the name of often totalitarian ideologies.’⁴⁸ This definition is interesting as it shows how the witch hunts were a process meant to designate a culprit – or a scapegoat in a public enemy – and that the accused were deemed guilty from the beginning because they did not fit into the prominent narrative – seen as a set of ideas shaping societal norms and serving to unite society.

The manipulation of the narrative in the witch hunts is manifested in the way trials were conducted. To start off, popular gossip or accusations were enough to lead to a trial.⁴⁹ As a result, people who held grudges against others could easily rid themselves of their neighbours by accusing them of witchcraft. This means that as a consequence, reputations were important. In other words, to keep out of trouble, people had to conform to the role society expected of them so as to avoid public criticism which could lead to unprovoked accusations. In her book dedicated to the study of witches, Du Chéné describes witch trials as a succession of steps: first comes the accusation which leads to a prosecution, a medical examination to find marks of witchcraft on the body is then performed, with in addition to this a questioning meant to bring on the confession, and finally comes the execution.⁵⁰ Each step leaves room for the manipulation of the narrative. As explained earlier, accusations could come from individuals or

⁴⁷ Porret, ‘L’Europe des milles bûchers’, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Piot, *La Diabolisation de la Femme*, p. 32. The original quotation was translated by me: ‘recherche de coupables, par des moyens le plus souvent douteux, avec la volonté d’accuser avant de chercher à démontrer la culpabilité, au nom d’idéologies généralement totalitaires.’

⁴⁹ Ostorero, ‘La sorcière’, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Du Chéné, *Les Sorcières : une histoire de femmes*, p. 21.

from popular rumour, and as baseless as they might be, this sufficed to start the trial process.

The possible manipulation of facts is already present at this stage as:

Some accused witches may have found themselves on trial for reasons other than genuine suspicions within their community. Some accusations of witchcraft may have been actions of malice [...] motivated by mistrust, personal feuds, politics – any one of a number of reasons why one or more people might wish harm to one or more others, or, quite simply, want them disposed of permanently.⁵¹

This means that accusations leading to trials were not necessarily based on the truth. The ensuing medical examination was supposed to uncover areas of reduced sensibility on the body of the witch; however, every individual presents such areas on their body.⁵² Seafeld explains that these marks were called ‘witch marks’ and that they were considered proof of the pact made between a witch and the Devil, thus their placement was often hidden, meaning that the witch had to be examined naked and completely shaved.⁵³ This part of the trial also exemplifies the objectification of the witch,⁵⁴ but most importantly the trauma and shame that would have encouraged them to confess more rapidly.

Indeed, the next step and the most important one was that of confession. Several treatises dwelled on the description of the witch and her powers, and they constituted a format to which the confession had to correspond. Horsley says that: ‘The alleged witches were questioned and tortured to obtain confessions conforming to this theory on witches’;⁵⁵ thus, as long as the confession obtained suited the representation of the witch at the time, it was accepted as sufficient proof of guilt.⁵⁶ The problematic aspect of the trials in regard to the manipulation of the narrative resides in the fact that torture was almost systematically used to obtain said confession. On the subject of torture, Seafeld writes that ‘the extremes of pain and distress that the victims of torture were made to endure were so great that it is small wonder that they gave

⁵¹ Seafeld, *Scottish Witches*, p. 27.

⁵² Du Chéné, *Les Sorcières : une histoire de femmes*, p. 48.

⁵³ Seafeld, *Scottish Witches*, p. 49.

⁵⁴ Du Chéné, *Les Sorcières : une histoire de femmes*, p. 111.

⁵⁵ Horsley, ‘On the Trail of the “Witches”’, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Seafeld, *Scottish Witches*, p. 24.

up confession'.⁵⁷ The sexualisation of the figure of the witch can be witnessed in the torture devices used to obtain a confession. During the search for the witch mark, women's private parts were also examined. Moreover, instruments such as the 'vaginal pears' – a device meant to be inserted into the vagina, the anus or the mouth and gradually and painfully expanded to damage the body, often with irreversible consequences – were used. This clearly manifests the sexual aspect of torture during witch trials.⁵⁸ Added to this was the psychological stress brought on by the trial process, but also of the knowledge that the death sentence was almost inevitable once the process started.⁵⁹ It is no surprise that many witches 'publicly recanted their confessions as they were about to be put to death'.⁶⁰ This shows how unreliable their confessions were, mostly because the accused had most certainly been manipulated to reach an outcome that had already been decided from the very beginning to suit the standard narrative. Moreover, convicted witches were asked to give the names of other witches during their confession so that a maximum number of witches could be punished.⁶¹ This contributed to the role of witch trials as a means of control as well as a punitive measure.

Furthermore, the final step, that is the execution, also played a role in the manipulation of the narrative. Witch hunts were actually not very numerous in England when compared to Scotland⁶² or to the craze on the European continent. Yet, even if witch hunts were slightly different in Great Britain compared to the rest of Europe, probably because of the difference in religious practices, persecutions and executions still happened. Interestingly, while Continental Europeans preferred burning witches at the stake, hanging was a more commonly used means of execution in England, at least until James I ascended on the throne.⁶³ In both cases, these

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵⁸ Merchant, 'The Scientific Revolution', p. 10.

⁵⁹ Seafeld, *Scottish Witches*, p. 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶¹ Ostorero, 'La sorcière', p. 43.

⁶² Popelard, 'Faustus, Prospero, Salomon', p. 102.

⁶³ Piot, *La Diabolisation de la Femme*, p. 84.

executions were used as a display of power, a spectacle that participated in the repression of witches by scaring the rest of the community.⁶⁴ Witch trials served as a warning and a way to keep society in check, especially women,⁶⁵ because they were targeted most frequently. Piot mentions how the numbers of the executed were even exaggerated so as to scare people even more.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, after trials and executions, records were often burned in order to erase all traces,⁶⁷ and names were erased from registers.⁶⁸ These last acts participated in the manipulation of the narrative as well: after having controlled the trial process from beginning to end, this last action of destroying and erasing the history represents the ultimate control of the authorities over the official version of the narrative.

1.3 The religious and royal discourses

Both in Shakespeare and in real life, the importance of the notions of authority and control as two interrelated elements is made obvious. Two types of authority are closely linked to the witch hunts: that of the Church and the Crown. Indeed, both religious and royal discourses have influenced – and have been influenced by – the phenomenon of the witch hunts and each other. It is no surprise that these two fields held such important positions at the time, as they stood as the pillars of social order. Moreover, it is the respect for a certain social hierarchy – with a monarch or another similar figure at the top – and the belief in a set of shared religious ideologies that many members of Early Modern society believed would allow for the maintenance of harmony on earth. At the time, absolute monarchy and the idea of the divine

⁶⁴ Baldo, 'Discours de l'Inquisiteur', p. 44.

⁶⁵ Horsley, 'On the Trail of the "Witches"', p. 15.

⁶⁶ Piot, *La Diabolisation de la Femme*, p. 19.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶⁸ Du Chéné, *Les Sorcières : une histoire de femmes*, p. 17.

rights of kings – also called the divine-right theory of kingship – prevailed, so it is no wonder that both discourses intersected. Indeed, according to this theory, monarchs inherited their right to rule from God which was a way to legitimise their political power. This was especially true in England after Henry VIII declared himself the Head of the Church of England following the Reformation, but also with James I, who was a fervent believer in this theory.⁶⁹ *The Tempest* is filled with the lexical field of religion: words such as ‘prayers’,⁷⁰ ‘blasphemous’,⁷¹ ‘kind keepers’⁷² or even the expression ‘men of sin’⁷³ all carry religious connotations that as a result frame the play. In his introduction, Lindley observes that the play demonstrates an ‘engagement with religious paradigms of repentance and forgiveness’⁷⁴ which are embodied in Prospero’s decision to give up his magical powers at the end. Leading up to and during the time that the witch hunts reached their peak, many texts that focused on demons and how their evil powers influenced life on earth, especially through the medium of witches, were published. This ‘Demonology in all its manifestations was not merely saturated with religious values; it was inconceivable without them’,⁷⁵ meaning that the study of witchcraft and the role this study played in the witch hunts could always be linked to religious discourse. It is worth discussing two important texts used as references in the witch hunts: the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the later *Daemonologie* that King James I – or James VI of Scotland at the time he first published it – wrote on the model of the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* was written by two Dominicans called Kramer and Sprenger.⁷⁶ First published in 1486, just after Pope Innocent VIII’s apostolic decree creating a

⁶⁹ James VI wrote the *Basilikon Doron* in 1599, a treatise on government that reasserts the divine rights of kings and explains how to be a good monarch.

⁷⁰ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.1.46.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I.1.35.

⁷² *Ibid.*, III.3.20.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, III.3.53.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁷⁵ Clark as quoted in Lindley’s Introduction to *The Tempest*, p. 50.

⁷⁶ Kramer wrote the *Malleus Maleficarum* under his latinised name Institoris, while Sprenger’s name was added years after the first publication and his contribution is still questioned.

religious and legal framework for witch hunts,⁷⁷ their work was meant to be used as a manual – similar to a criminal code – in the fight against witches.⁷⁸ The book treated witches, how they came to be witches, how they used their powers, how to protect oneself from them, and how to judge them for their crimes. It became the second most frequently sold book after the Bible,⁷⁹ and the text was even published in a small format so that inquisitors could carry it easily and refer to it during the trial process.⁸⁰ Both authors were German, members of a religious institution, and they used their position of authority in order to justify their arguments. Because of the immediate context of its publication, the book circulated around Europe during the witch craze. The *Malleus Maleficarum* presents ‘*maleficium* as a predominantly, albeit never exclusively, female crime’⁸¹ which is consistent with the percentage of women accused of witchcraft. The book codified the crime of witchcraft and the way it should be dealt with. The Papal Bull published in 1484 states that:

It has indeed lately come to Our ears, not without afflicting Us with bitter sorrow, that in some parts of [...] Germany [...] many persons of both sexes, unmindful of their own salvation and straying from the Catholic Faith, have abandoned themselves to devils, incubi and succubi, and by their incantations, spells, conjurations, and other accursed charms and crafts, enormities and horrid offences, have slain infants yet in the mother’s womb, as also the offspring of cattle, have blasted the produce of the earth [...] ; these wretches furthermore afflict and torment men and women [...] with terrible and piteous pains and sore diseases, both internal and external ; they hinder men from performing the sexual act and women from conceiving [...] over and above this, they blasphemously renounce that Faith which is theirs by the Sacrament of Baptism, and at the instigation of the Enemy of Mankind they do not shrink from committing and perpetrating the foulest abominations and filthiest excesses to the deadly peril of their own souls, whereby they outrage the Divine Majesty and are a cause of scandal and danger to very many.⁸²

This rather long quotation summarises the dynamics that were present in society at the time, dynamics that were presented in the introduction of this paper: the miseries found in society, such as famine, were attributed to the influence of demons on earth through the sin of people

⁷⁷ Du Chéné, *Les Sorcières : une histoire de femmes*, p. 27.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷⁹ *Idem.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸¹ Bailey, ‘*Malleus Maleficarum*’, p. 2.

⁸² Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, pp. 18-19.

abandoning their religious faith. More interestingly, although the Bull did not designate women as the sole persons at fault, there was an insistence on the fears surrounding reproduction, a very gendered question.⁸³

On the other hand, The *Malleus Maleficarum* clearly states that women are weaker than men by nature and more prone to insatiable carnal lust and the text presents this as a reason for the fact that witchcraft is predominantly the sin of women:

[...] it is sufficiently clear that it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft. And in consequence of this, it is better called the heresy of witches than wizards, since the name is taken from the more powerful party. And blessed be the Highest Who has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime [...].⁸⁴

The *Malleus Maleficarum* is also cogently concerned with the notions of sexuality and procreation, which goes back to the fears surrounding reproduction present in the Papal Bull. It is not surprising that such concerns held an important place in texts treating the subject of witches; indeed, they often discussed the castrative power of witches and their ability to dispense abortion.⁸⁵ On this subject, the *Malleus Maleficarum* states:

[witches] can cast an obtrusive spell on the procreant forces, and even on the venereal act, so that a woman cannot conceive, or a man cannot perform the act. [...] [They] take away the virile member as though it were altogether torn away from the body. [...] witch midwives in various ways kill that which has been conceived in the mother's womb; and when they do not do this, offer the children to the devils.⁸⁶

The concerns surrounding witches' powers in regard to sexuality and reproduction are made obvious throughout the book and they are representative of the anxieties surrounding women's sexuality at the time.⁸⁷ This link appears even clearer in the long-held accusation that witches copulated with devils as a means to obtain their powers.⁸⁸ This belief can account for the fact

⁸³ The question of reproduction in regard to witch hunts is developed in a later part of this paper.

⁸⁴ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, p. 29.

⁸⁵ Baldo, 'Discours de l'Inquisiteur', p. 102.

⁸⁶ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, p. 82.

⁸⁷ The link between women's sexuality and witchcraft is developed later in this paper.

⁸⁸ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, p. 55.

that midwives were often the target of accusations of witchcraft.⁸⁹ Ultimately, whatever the reasons women were brought before court for, their guilt had already been proven in their gender through this authoritative text.

Moreover, when it comes to the religious discourse, it is worth mentioning that the Reformation had an impact, especially in England. The Encyclopaedia Britannica indicates that 'The *Malleus* went through 28 editions between 1486 and 1600 and was accepted by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike as an authoritative source of information concerning Satanism and as a guide to Christian defence'.⁹⁰ Although Christianity as a whole held similar views towards witches, a slight difference of treatment can be observed in England and Scotland with the Anglican Church compared to the rest of Europe. There are also some differences in the treatment of witch hunts in England compared to Scotland – notably in the numbers of those convicted and the means of execution, that is hanging or burning at the stake – but these differences tend to be minimised after the ascension of James I to the throne. In her article, Horsley argues that the impact of witch hunts was lesser in England compared to Continental Europe because the religious views explained above were less strongly promoted.⁹¹ Nonetheless, even if the number of witches executed was lower, the same dynamics – that is, the same stereotypes and treatment of witches, as well as the same overrepresentation of women – can be observed. In his work, Piot mentions that Luther believed in witches and was in favour of their persecution, and that to some extent his Protestant Reformation foreshadowed the establishment of the Church of England,⁹² meaning that the different Christian denominations 'shared many of the same beliefs and exhibited a similar desire to extirpate witchcraft'.⁹³ Either way, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was used as a fundamental text in witch trials and thus

⁸⁹ The case of midwives is studied in detail later in this paper.

⁹⁰ Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Malleus Maleficarum'.

⁹¹ Horsley, 'On the Trail of the "Witches"', p. 16.

⁹² Piot, *La Diabolisation de la Femme*, p. 172.

⁹³ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, p. 111.

participated in the manipulation of the narrative as the whole process – from the accusations to the questioning and confession as well as execution – was modelled on its contents, especially as it recommended the use of torture to obtain the confession of witches.⁹⁴ The religious instability originating from the different reformations that took place in a short period of time meant that each religious movement wanted to obtain religious hegemony and restore social order. It appears that focusing attention on the witch problem was one of the tools that was used to achieve this goal, especially because the persecution of religious deviancy could be used as a way to revive and purify faith and ‘realise the ideal of a moral, devout, Christian community’.⁹⁵ Generally speaking, it is ‘reasonable to claim, therefore, that the Reformation and Counter-Reformation served to intensify the process of witch-hunting and perhaps helped the hunt to spread from place to place’.⁹⁶

The *Daemonologie* published in 1597 in Scotland and 1603 in England by King James I is divided into three parts like the *Malleus Maleficarum*. His *Daemonologie* treats similar questions and uses similar arguments to describe what witchcraft is, how one becomes a witch, why more women than men practice witchcraft, what their powers are and how to deal with them. His alleged aim was to instruct his subjects, especially those still ignorant about the subject of witchcraft.⁹⁷ His work takes the form of a dialogue between two characters: Philomathes and Epistemon, the latter representing the King’s own views. In the text, James I denounces witches and magicians in the hope of eradicating practices he deemed harmful,⁹⁸ and his treatment of men somewhat distinguishes itself from the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Indeed, James I admits that there are men practicing witchcraft although in fewer number because

⁹⁴ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, p. 217.

⁹⁵ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, p. 120.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁹⁷ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, p. 20.

⁹⁸ Popelard, ‘Faustus, Prospero, Solomon’, p. 171.

women are the ‘frailer’ sex.⁹⁹ Moreover, he differentiates between sorcery and science,¹⁰⁰ between the practice and the study of witchcraft, and the latter is not considered a crime – after all, his very own text is a study of witchcraft. It is worth noting that James I was a firm believer in witchcraft and that he believed himself to have been targeted by it.¹⁰¹ In his *Daemonologie*, James I asserts that ‘[...] witchcraft, and Witches haue bene, and are, the former part is clearelie proved by the Scriptures, and the last by dailie experience and confessions’.¹⁰² When he ascended the English throne in 1603, he instituted harsher punishments for witches, more particularly with the Witchcraft Act of 1604 that sentenced to death people conjuring evil spirits.¹⁰³

In her book *Scottish Witches*, Seafeld explains in detail the episode that could have triggered the writing of the King’s own treatise on witchcraft.¹⁰⁴ To summarise the story, in 1589 King James VI of Scotland was to marry Anne of Denmark; however, because of recurring storms, her boat could not sail to Scotland. The Danish authorities blamed the storms on witchcraft and James VI decided to go and fetch her himself. Unfortunately, on the way back to Scotland, one of the boats transporting Anne’s dowry sank. The *Malleus Maleficarum* explicitly explains the influence witches had on the weather, especially when it came to raising tempests.¹⁰⁵ A popular rumour started, accusing several people in North Berwick, a public suspicion which led to the North Berwick witch trials, the first mass witch trial to take place in Scotland, and King James VI actively participated in the investigation. James VI was known to encourage torture and the burning of witches¹⁰⁶ and this was especially the case in this trial: he

⁹⁹ King James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁰¹ Merchant, ‘The Scientific Revolution’, p. 10.

¹⁰² King James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. 5.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Seafeld, *Scottish Witches*, pp. 93-101. The following lines on the North Berwick witch trial are based on pages 93 to 98 more specifically.

¹⁰⁵ Kramer and Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, pp. 139-143.

¹⁰⁶ Merchant, ‘The Scientific Revolution’, p. 17.

asked for Agnes Sampson, the primary suspect, to be examined and tortured in order to obtain a confession. After having finally admitted to her guilt and cooperated in giving other names and describing witch activities in detail, she was strangled and burnt. This episode, which might be the reason why James VI wrote his own treatise on witchcraft, as he seems not to have had any prior interest in the question,¹⁰⁷ also appears at the end of his *Daemonologie*.¹⁰⁸ Through the publication of his treatise, James VI and I had an influence on the scale of the witch hunts: his text also participated in the manipulation of the narrative surrounding witches by reinforcing stereotypes and encouraging torture during trials – in his words: ‘thretten and torture them as ye please’.¹⁰⁹ However, it is worth mentioning that with time, his views on witchcraft became milder,¹¹⁰ especially after some time on the English throne, as English society was less concerned with the witch craze.

¹⁰⁷ Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁸ King James VI, *Daemonologie*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹¹⁰ Piot, *La Diabolisation de la Femme*, p. 42.

2 Misogynistic Dynamics

2.1 **Sycorax as a foil for Prospero in *The Tempest***

It seems that both in Shakespeare's play and in the society of his time, there was a manipulation of the narrative surrounding the story of witches, a manipulation enabled by the gendered religious and societal views that identified witches as primarily female. This inherent misogyny, enhanced by the marginalised position women held in society – a position that gave them little room to resist that imposed narrative – participated in the othering of female figures. As stated earlier, this paper aims to study of the system of oppositions put into place between Prospero and Sycorax in *The Tempest*. At first sight, the two characters present many similarities: they both use magic, they both subject the same aerial spirit and threaten him with similar punishments, they both rule over the same island and they both raise their child as a single parent. However, these seeming similarities are undermined by the way the characters are presented in the play, and as a result, Prospero and Sycorax appear as opposites rather than reflections of one another. As discussed earlier, this very opposition is mostly drawn by Prospero himself. Indeed, Sycorax's absence in the play means that she never actually appears on stage but is only presented by the other characters, so all the information given to the audience about her is to be found in other people's words. Prospero is the one who recalls Sycorax most frequently, followed by Caliban, Sycorax's son, and Ariel, her former servant. As a result, Sycorax is only portrayed through the subjective eyes of others, and Prospero seems to be the one primarily controlling that very image.

It appears that Prospero purposely draws a negative portrait of Sycorax so as to legitimize his power on the island, as she was the previous ruler of the place. In order to do so, he constantly insults Sycorax when referring to her and a particular slur is often used: 'witch'.

In Early Modern England, ‘witch’ was a common insult directed at women,¹¹¹ especially during the time of witch hunts. Originally, the term referred to women who possessed magical powers granted by the devil; it was thus a way to demonise them. Yet more importantly, and according to two specialists of Early Modern England, the term ‘witch’ also meant ‘the mirror reversal of all that the patriarchy deemed good in a woman’.¹¹² The two authors point to the fact that ‘witch’ was used as a gendered insult targeting women who challenged the patriarchy.¹¹³ Thus, the possibility that women could be in a position of power was rationalised by suggesting an association with evil since the established order of society would not allow such a reversal of power in a patriarchal system. On the other hand, Prospero’s powers are not associated with evil, which along with gender constitutes another point of opposition.

The fact that Sycorax’s powers are linked to the devil is insisted upon, through the insults directed towards her and her son Caliban whose monstrosity can be interpreted as a result of his mother’s wrongdoings.¹¹⁴ The words associated with Sycorax are often ‘foul’,¹¹⁵ or ‘damned’¹¹⁶ which automatically depict her as a bad character. As a result, if Sycorax uses black magic, then by opposition Prospero uses white magic. Furthermore, Prospero’s magic is linked to books, thus it is associated to acceptable origins,¹¹⁷ in opposition to Sycorax’s magic whose origins are unknown and so associated with evil.¹¹⁸ According to Popelard, Prospero’s white magic counterbalances Sycorax’s black magic,¹¹⁹ arguably to the point of overpowering it as he presents himself as more powerful than her, which allows for the restoration of order at

¹¹¹ Blystone, ‘Extremes of Gender and Power’, p. 77.

¹¹² Crawford and Mendelson as quoted in Blystone, ‘Extremes of Gender and Power’, p. 77.

¹¹³ The importance of patriarchal power is discussed later in this paper.

¹¹⁴ Caliban’s representation will be examined later in this paper.

¹¹⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.257.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I.2.263.

¹¹⁷ Lemonier-Texier, *Représentations et identités sexuelles*, p. 134.

¹¹⁸ The difference in nature between Sycorax’s and Prospero’s magics is developed later in this paper.

¹¹⁹ Popelard, ‘Faustus, Prospero, Salomon’, p. 175.

the end of the play. Likewise, even if they both enslave the same spirit Ariel, Prospero uses him to restore the order of the world, unlike Sycorax.¹²⁰

It is through this succession of oppositions that Prospero conducts his process of othering and draws Sycorax as his foil. Indeed, Prospero (re)constructs Sycorax's story and paints her as his opposite on purpose in order to 'legitimise his takeover'¹²¹ on the island. Despite their numerous similarities, Prospero's insistence on their completely different natures draws them apart, and as a result the two characters appear as 'extreme ends of the spectrum of gender and power'.¹²² In this imposed hierarchy, Prospero and Sycorax cannot be perceived as equals, and it appears that Prospero considers himself more powerful than Sycorax. To quote but one example, Prospero manages to free Ariel from Sycorax's spell that bound him to a tree,¹²³ which implies that Prospero outperformed Sycorax in the use of magic. In other words, the demonisation of Sycorax and her depreciation serve to better glorify Prospero. As a consequence, Prospero and Sycorax can be described through a succession of Manichean oppositions: the good against the bad, the powerful against the weak, the man against the woman, the righteous against the evil and so on and so forth. Because of this, Prospero's power becomes synonymous with goodness and justice while at the same time as his foil Sycorax's power is presented as weak and evil.

In addition to this, Prospero is in himself a character full of duality. In truth, he is both usurped and usurper¹²⁴ – he lost his dukedom but takes over the island – as well as sinned against and a sinner – his dukedom was stolen but he rules over the island whose inhabitants he enslaved. Addressing this argument, Suner claims that Prospero is a man 'more sinned against

¹²⁰ Dubu, 'Ariel, des métamorphoses de l'Esprit à l'esprit des métamorphoses', p. 57.

¹²¹ Blystone, 'Extremes of Gender and Power', p. 76.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹²³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.274-293.

¹²⁴ Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 202.

than sinning' and that as such he can be considered good.¹²⁵ There are several reasons behind Prospero's dissociation from Sycorax, but the most important one is his redemption at the end of the play. As a matter of fact, Sycorax is never said to have repented for her sins, while Prospero does, and it is this central element that helps differentiate them. It is thanks to his repentance and forgiveness of the other characters' sins that Prospero can be considered as a good and just character, as opposed to Sycorax, who is 'damned'¹²⁶ and by definition cannot be forgiven. In addition to this, Tillyard mentions that the two concepts of 'sin' and 'redemption' were opposed at the time,¹²⁷ and as such Prospero cannot be considered a sinner if he repents. Moreover, Prospero made use of his powers to restore order in society, meaning that he was acting for the greater good – so how can he be considered evil?

It is worth adding, however, that Prospero's white magic is never far from tipping towards Sycorax's black magic.¹²⁸ Indeed, the fact that Prospero enslaves and regularly threatens both Ariel and Caliban, as well as causing a shipwreck that frightened even his daughter Miranda should not be forgotten. As mentioned earlier, witches were often believed to have the power to raise storms, and according to Lindley in his introduction to *The Tempest*, Miranda's reaction to the possibility that her father used his powers to create that storm and cause the shipwreck – saying 'If by your art [...]'¹²⁹ – denotes a reaction to the horror of both the storm itself and the possibility that it was generated by her father.¹³⁰ This leads to the question of how magic powers should be used in order for them to be considered white magic and not black magic, a question that continues to permeate the play through the oppositions drawn between Sycorax and Prospero. In the end, it appears that even though Prospero and Sycorax make use of similar powers, their intent is completely different – Prospero works for

¹²⁵ Suner, 'Be not Afeared', p. 1.

¹²⁶ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.263.

¹²⁷ Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 18.

¹²⁸ Popelard, 'Faustus, Prospero, Salomon', p. 129.

¹²⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.1.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

the greater good to restore order, while Sycorax uses her powers for her own gain and thus causes disruptions – stands at the base of the reasons why their magic is considered differently. It is only because his foil, Sycorax, constructed as a Manichean opposite, is absently present in the play to remind the audience of what black magic typically is, that Prospero is never seen to fall to the dark side of magic.

2.2 John Dee as a prime example of double standards

A real-life example of this dynamic would be the historical figure of John Dee. Because of striking similarities, Shakespeare is frequently seen in the character of Prospero. However, it appears that the figure of John Dee – also called Doctor Dee – is often thought to be the inspiration behind Prospero, and this allusion allows for an interesting comparison of the difference in treatment between Prospero and Sycorax as a mirror of those between John Dee and the witches who were persecuted during the witch hunts. In an article written on the subject of John Dee, Roger Jones summarises the life of this peculiar individual as follows:

Dee was born in London in 1527, and studied mathematics at Cambridge, where he was a founding fellow of Trinity College. He entered the Royal Court fairly promptly, initially under Queen Mary I. Even at that early stage his inclination towards the occult was apparent, and Mary, who had about 300 people suspected of sorcery put to death, arrested Dee for witchcraft in 1555, and he was lucky to survive and stay at Court. When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 Dee's prodigious learning was put to practical use — his mathematics were employed in helping the English fleet to navigate the high seas, and his less conventional abilities were called on by Dudley, Earl of Leicester, to identify the most auspicious date for Elizabeth's coronation.¹³¹

Although John Dee met with some difficulties in his life because of his association with the occult, especially at the beginning of his career and towards the end of his life, he still managed to avoid death. More importantly, he managed to thrive at the Elizabethan court, not only thanks

¹³¹ Jones, 'Scholar, Courtier, Magician', p. 317.

to his scientific abilities but also thanks to his knowledge of the occult arts, while women accused of witchcraft did not get this chance.

John Dee and Prospero share many similar traits. For instance, Prospero finds his magical abilities in his books, and before being exiled, he was said to spend his time in his library. To continue with this idea, the 'book' often referred to in the play is tantamount to the grimoire used to conjure up spirits that many aristocrats often had in their libraries, according to Popelard.¹³² Moreover, when Caliban plans to overthrow Prospero with the help of Stephano and Trinculo, he insists on the necessity of separating him from his books as they are the source of his powers: 'First to possess his books; for without them / He's but a sot [...]'.¹³³ He even suggests burning them,¹³⁴ which is interesting considering that witches often ended by being burnt at the stake for the crime of witchcraft, and that these books were a means of acquiring magical powers. Similarly, John Dee was famously known to own an impressive collection of books – one of the largest in Europe – and he genuinely believed he could communicate with spirits, so he thought he possessed some kind of magical abilities and probably owned books on the subject of magic. He even conducted experiments in his home. Popelard argues that as the growth of science coincided with the rise of plays as a popular genre, it is not surprising that science and scholars started to appear in literary work at the time,¹³⁵ which makes John Dee as the inspiration behind Prospero even more plausible. John Dee held an official position in the Elizabethan court: he was the Queen's astronomer, astrologer, mathematician, occultist and alchemist. He was also Elizabeth I's advisor. However, he was turned away when James I arrived on the throne of England which marked the beginning of his downfall. The figure of Doctor Dee is the embodiment of what is called a 'Renaissance Magus', or in other words a

¹³² Popelard, 'Faustus, Prospero, Salomon', p. 174.

¹³³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, III.2.84-85.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, III.2.87.

¹³⁵ Popelard, 'Faustus, Prospero, Salomon', p. 17.

scientist who knew how to control spirits and occult forces, because ‘in those dark times, astrologer, mathematician and conjurer were accounted for the same thing’.¹³⁶ John Dee himself never made the distinction between his scientific and magic activities.¹³⁷ At the time, a scientist was a mix of humanist learning – including books and classical culture – magic and technical skills.¹³⁸ That is why magic held an ambiguous position in society.

To pursue the idea that magical abilities were ambiguously considered in the Elizabethan era, it is important to note that magic at the time was not actually completely frowned upon. Differences were drawn between different types of magic: magic performed in villages following oral tradition was opposed to book-learned magic performed by people like John Dee – that is, people who had access to a formal education supported by books. There was also a distinction made between illegal and legal magic, the former being the result of a pact with the devil and thus threatening the Church. To summarise these ideas, Popelard drew an interesting table entitled ‘Table of magic types at the beginning of the scientific revolution in England’:¹³⁹

Type of magic	Popular	Scholar
Illegal	Witchcraft (Witches)	Necromancy
Legal	Divination	Astrology Natural, mathematical, celestial and demonic magic (Dee and Prospero)

¹³⁶ Aubrey as quoted in Popelard, ‘Faustus, Prospero, Salomon’, p. 106.

¹³⁷ Popelard, ‘Faustus, Prospero, Salomon’, p. 106.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129. The table was translated from French and simplified by me.

According to this chart, Dr Dee and Prospero practise magic acquired through a legal and scholarly background, which dissociates them from the witches who were hunted at the same time. This differentiation might account for Dr Dee's surprisingly high position in society when witches were actively persecuted and hunted. The same dynamic can be observed between Prospero and Sycorax in the play.

On the distinction between the different kinds of magic that were believed to exist in the Early Modern period, Thomas Blount defined 'magic' as follows:

Magick Art (magia) in general, is wisdom or contemplation of heavenly Science, and is two fold; Natural, which is lawful, as is the ground of all true Physick, and the occult wisdom of nature, without which all mans Reason and Knowledge is Ignorance; The other is Diabolical, superstitious and unlawful, and is called Necromancy: whereby men attain to the knowledge of things by the assistance of evil spirits.¹⁴⁰

When applied to Prospero and Sycorax in *The Tempest*, this definition conveniently goes back to the Manichean reading that was suggested before, that is that 'Prospero's good version is simply set against Sycorax's bad.'¹⁴¹ Lindley argues that the first type of magic, the natural one, practiced by Prospero, is 'the first stage of an aspiration to wisdom that ascended via celestial or astrological magic to ceremonial or religious magic.'¹⁴² This ascent ultimately led to the possibility of conversing with angelic spirits, which is to be opposed to Sycorax's links with the devil. This way, Prospero's magic is stripped of any connections to black magic. By association, this also applies to John Dee, whose ultimate goal was to be able to converse with angels. On this subject, Egil Asprem writes:

In the early 1580s, the Elizabethan natural philosopher John Dee (1527–1608 or 1609) commenced on a program, simultaneously religious, philosophical, and scientific, to contact angels through a "showstone"—a practice better known as crystal gazing. With the aid of various scryers, most significantly Edward Kelly (1555–1597), Dee conversed with the archangels Michael and Gabriel and with a number of idiosyncratic angelic beings by such names as Ave, Madimi, and Nalvage. Dee kept studious records of these "actions" or "colloquiums," filling hundreds of folio pages [...].¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Blount as quoted in Lindley's Introduction to *The Tempest*, p. 45.

¹⁴¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, p. 45.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁴³ Asprem, 'LOAGAETH, Q CONSIBRA A CAOSG', p. 91.

Indeed, John Dee spent much of his free time allegedly conversing with angels, which put him on the side of legal / white magic and allowed him to avoid the persecutions witches faced at the same time.

However, as mentioned before, even if he was highly regarded by Elizabeth I, John Dee's position and use of magic was not supported unanimously. Mary I tried to have him condemned for witchcraft, and he fell from grace as soon as the Union of Crowns in 1603 was implemented because he was accused of conjuring evil spirits. Men were also judged at the time, but this was much rarer and often resulted from a connection they held with a previously convicted female witch. In 1604, Doctor Dee even sent a letter to the King, asking to be punished like a witch if his alleged association with demons could be proven.¹⁴⁴ He tried to defend himself against such accusations all his life because even if he had a high standing in society, he still met with suspicion and hostility from members of the population. His library was sacked once in 1583 while he was traveling and after his downfall, he died in poverty. Nevertheless, he is said to have greatly contributed to the 'British Empire' – an expression apparently first coined by him – and the expansion of the Empire through his work on navigation and cartography.¹⁴⁵

2.3 Patriarchy and Colonialism

As explained above, the very insult 'witch' is linked to patriarchal values and becomes a 'sexist slur'.¹⁴⁶ In the play, a system mirroring that of the real world is put in place, and the

¹⁴⁴ Popelard, 'Faustus, Prospero, Salomon', p. 224.

¹⁴⁵ Jones, 'Scholar, Courtier, Magician', p. 317.

¹⁴⁶ Blystone, 'Extremes of Gender and Power', p. 77.

patriarchy is further strengthened by colonial power, and vice versa. Indeed, another link to be made between *The Tempest* and its historical context is that of the New World, the expansion of the British Empire and colonialism. The discovery of the Americas and the beginning of its colonisation accentuated the concern for order as new questions arose. In a very codified society, where should the new peoples be placed? Should they be considered equal or inferior? Should they be regarded as human or animal?¹⁴⁷ How should they be treated? Through his characters and their interactions, Shakespeare depicted the questions of the time on this subject. When *The Tempest* was written, Great Britain had just entered the race for colonisation and expansion, competing against the other European Empires, and a sort of colonial frenzy permeated the country. The play is imbued with colonial dynamics, especially within the dynamics between the characters, such as the enslavement and animalisation of Caliban,¹⁴⁸ but also with the conquest of the land, and even the idea of white supremacy, all of these mirroring the state of the world of the time. As a matter of fact, white colonisers used paternalism as a justification for taking control of the lands and peoples they discovered, a theory that combines patriarchal and colonialist values to justify the assertion of dominance. Andrea Smith's three pillars of white supremacy were mentioned in the introduction of this paper and are especially interesting when applied to *The Tempest*. These pillars are 'the logic of slavery', 'the logic of genocide' and the 'logic of orientalism'.¹⁴⁹ Andrea Smith argues that the first pillar, slavery, places people of colour at the bottom of the social hierarchy, enabling the commodification of their labour and more generally making property of them. The second pillar, genocide, conveys the idea that in order to rightfully claim indigenous land, said indigenous populations must disappear. Finally, the third and last pillar is tantamount to Edward Said's definition of 'orientalism' inasmuch as she uses the term to define the process through which the West

¹⁴⁷ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, p. 32.

¹⁴⁸ A focus on the case of Caliban will appear in a later section.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, 'Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy', p. 2.

defines itself 'as a superior civilisation by constructing itself in opposition to an "exotic" but inferior "Orient"'. In other words, white supremacy imposes itself through the separation of what is white and what is non-white – or as said earlier: those who belong and those who do not – and the underlying ideology that what is white is superior serves as a justification to the theft of land and the enslavement of natives.

Keeping these three pillars in mind, it appears that the 'logic of slavery' can be studied with Caliban, the 'logic of genocide' with Sycorax and the 'logic of orientalism' with both, given the colonial context of Shakespeare's time. These three logical foundations depict the justifications used and the actions made by British – or European more generally – colonisers when conquering and appropriating new territories. The logic of genocide enabled colonisers to rightfully claim the land through the disappearance of indigenous peoples. In the play, that is the case with Sycorax, who is an absent character. The logic of slavery enabled the commodification of native labour by placing slaves at the bottom of the social ladder. Colonisers advanced the theory that natives needed supervision because they were too primitive to take care of themselves and their land, which is why the new peoples encountered were often depicted as barbaric, savage and uncivilised at the time. In the play, this is the case of Caliban. The third logic, the 'logic of orientalism', provided the means of implementing the first two. It is by this logic that white colonisers like Prospero thought themselves to be superior to other peoples and gave themselves the right to subordinate them. Even if at the time some scholars like Rousseau or Montaigne preached cultural relativism when dealing with new peoples, this attitude was not often observed in practice. Indeed, In Montaigne's work, 'Des Cannibales', published and translated into English just before *The Tempest* was first performed in 1611, the image of a 'noble savage', who was uncorrupted by civilisation, is presented in the place of a 'barbaric' savage. This utopic ideal can be found in Gonzalo's soliloquy in the first scene of the second act. In addition, Montaigne advocated for cultural relativism on the basis that 'everyone

calls things which he does not practise himself barbaric',¹⁵⁰ meaning that a different culture does not mean a lesser one, but the attitudes observed in the play and in the world outside it were the complete opposite. Gonzalo's soliloquy is immediately undermined by the comments of the other characters, showing how this utopia is inherently impossible.

In the case of Sycorax, gender and race combine as opposing forces: her othering results from the association of patriarchal and colonial values.¹⁵¹ Often, women who were independent – such as single mothers or widows – and provided for themselves, as well as women who had medical knowledge – like healers and midwives – were the main targets of the accusation of witchcraft because they fell outside the limited roles allotted to women by the patriarchy. These women did not depend on a man or were working in a field that was slowly becoming academic, and as a consequence reserved for men only, whereas Early Modern patriarchal views relegated the identity of a woman to the control of a male family member. Duarte explains the place women held in early modern England as follows:

Women have always struggled to find a place in society – or in their own families – where their roles were not restricted to being somebody's wife, daughter and mother, and their role during the Renaissance era was still very limited. Generally, women were thought to be unable to look after themselves, so they either depended on their husbands, fathers or any other male relatives – a shocking concept considering that an unmarried woman was on the throne in England at the time. [...] they were not allowed to pursue the same professions as men and they could not go to school or university either, even though some educated women were tutored at home.¹⁵²

Sycorax is both a woman who wields magical powers and also a woman who challenges the patriarchy through her roles as the previous ruler of the island and as a single mother. While patriarchal ideas praised traditional values in women, values such as submissiveness, purity and virginity before marriage, Sycorax is endowed with all the opposite attributes. She is depicted as the 'mirror reversal'¹⁵³ of the ideal of a perfect woman endorsed by a patriarchal society, an

¹⁵⁰ University lecture given by Dr Coquil, Université de Picardie Jules Verne, 09/04/2021.

¹⁵¹ Blystone, 'Extremes of Gender and Power', p. 75.

¹⁵² Duarte, 'Demonizing and Silencing Powerful Women', p. 6.

¹⁵³ Crawford and Mendelson as quoted in Blystone, 'Extremes of Gender and Power', p. 77.

ideal embodied by Miranda, but in a sense, Sycorax is also the mirror image of Prospero. If Sycorax and Miranda are mirror reversals in terms of gender roles, Sycorax and Prospero are mirror reversals in terms of gender identity. In other words, Miranda and Sycorax share the same gender but are depicted with completely opposed behaviours, while Sycorax and Prospero share similarities in terms of behaviour but are two different genders. In order to distinguish himself from her and to legitimize his claim on the island, Prospero demonises her, showing that as a male ruler his power is natural while hers is not and that her power can only be the result of an alliance with the devil. He represents the patriarchy, as a man, and she embodies the threat to that order because she represents a different power structure.¹⁵⁴ By painting her to be the exact opposite of the idealised woman in a patriarchal society, Prospero legitimises his own power and his claim to the island while at the same time allowing her to threaten both him personally as a legitimate ruler and the patriarchal hierarchy that he introduced on the island. Even though she is absent in the play, the constant summoning of her memory by other characters gives her a kind of threatening power. This way, her repression seems even more necessary. According to Blystone, it is because Prospero projects his fears and anxieties about women and power onto Sycorax that the slur ‘witch’ becomes synonymous with her name in the play and hence an insult to gender.¹⁵⁵ In order to resist this possible corruption, women were encouraged to adopt behaviour considered proper, a ‘feminine ideal conforming to principles of respectability, a *decorum*, that demands gentleness, discretion and submissiveness’.¹⁵⁶ In the play, Miranda embodies that ideal and along with the absence of any other female character, reinforces Prospero’s patriarchal power by her passivity, which results from her internalisation of her father’s patriarchal values.¹⁵⁷ Miranda embodies everything a woman should be, while

¹⁵⁴ Blystone, ‘Extremes of Gender and Power’, p. 79.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁵⁶ Lemonnier-Textier, *Représentations et identités sexuelles*, p. 21. The original quotation was translated by me: ‘un idéal féminin conforme au principe de convenance, le *decorum*, qui exige douceur, discrétion, soumission’.

¹⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, pp. 71-72.

Sycorax stands at the other end of the spectrum and embodies everything a man should fear in a woman, and who thus must be condemned. The contrasts depicted between Sycorax and Prospero as well as between Sycorax and Miranda serve the purpose of supporting the patriarchal values conveyed in the play. It appears that at the time, women were either persecuted and hunted or scared into hiding or conformity.

It is obvious that the physical absence of Sycorax in the play and her gender both contribute to the process of othering, but a third element also has to be taken into account: her race. Nothing is definite about her origins or her skin colour, but both Prospero and Ariel mention that she comes from 'Algiers'.¹⁵⁸ Thus, it appears that Sycorax is of North African descent, that is to say a woman of colour. Her race is a source of tension in the play, clashing with Prospero, who embodies the white male patriarch. In this respect, gender and race come together as opposing forces and both patriarchal and colonial power are at play in *The Tempest*.

In her research, Duarte uses the words of Gabriella Tóth to support this idea:

In colonial literature, Sycorax is the representation of female subjectivity that is the most problematic of all, and this stems from the fact that post-colonial women are subjected to a 'double bind', that is, they experience two forms of alienation and/or 'othering': gender and racial.¹⁵⁹

Sycorax is the victim of a kind of 'double othering' insomuch as she is alienated because of her gender and because of her race. This double discrimination is something women of colour experience, and the term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in order to give this phenomenon a name.¹⁶⁰ In her TED Talk, Crenshaw explains how gender discrimination and racial discrimination overlap for women of colour, making them face a sort of double challenge, and how this problem needs to be acknowledged to be resolved. Sycorax's situation in *The Tempest* fits the definition of intersectionality perfectly. Moreover, her loss is double

¹⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.261.

¹⁵⁹ Tóth as quoted in Duarte, 'Demonizing and Silencing Powerful Women', p. 13.

¹⁶⁰ Crenshaw, 'The urgency of intersectionality'.

insofar as she was exiled from her own country and then had her story usurped by Prospero who speaks in her place and to his advantage.

Even though Sycorax is the only character in the play who can fall victim to intersectionality as defined by Crenshaw, meaning both gender and racial discrimination, her son Caliban is also the victim of racial discrimination. This racial discrimination is part of the colonial aspect present in the play and comes to light through the relationship between Prospero and Caliban. It can be argued that Caliban is a victim of another type of intersectionality, that is the combination of racial discrimination and class discrimination, as his social status in the play is that of a slave. Prospero's colonial agenda appears in his interactions with Caliban. He animalises Caliban, constantly insulting him by comparing him to animals, for example to a 'tortoise'¹⁶¹. Other characters join in this animalisation, which depicts him as a beast or a monster. They also often compare him to a 'fish'¹⁶² which implies that he is a creature of water that has not evolved, and this marginalises him further – he is not even considered human. This lack of evolution makes him a 'savage',¹⁶³ a name he is also called multiple times in the play, and which serves to justify Prospero's colonialist behaviour. It is this lack of so-called civilisation in Caliban that justifies Prospero's paternalistic approach. Paternalistic views preached the notion that 'savages' needed to be enslaved because they could not take care of themselves. In his discussion, Mickaël Popelard quotes Matthew DeCoursey who explains the dynamics behind the civilising mission colonisers used as an excuse to conquer new land and enslave indigenous people: 'the notion of baseness is connected to slavery in that it justifies the enslavement of people asserted to be inferior, to lack the characteristics to be fully human'.¹⁶⁴ This means that Prospero's treatment of Caliban is justified by Caliban's inferior status.

¹⁶¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.317.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, II.2.23.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, I.2.355.

¹⁶⁴ DeCoursey as quoted in Popelard, 'Faustus, Prospero et Salomon', p. 362.

Caliban's nature as a creature who is half-human, half-animal allows and even gives Prospero the right to take a hold of the island in order to civilise it. In colonial discourse, the dehumanisation of natives supports the right to steal their land and to enslave them. Here, even if Sycorax and Caliban are not technically natives, the same line of reasoning is used. Both mother and son are alienated and presented as others in the story, respectively by being demonised or dehumanised, so as to legitimise Prospero's position as the good protagonist and rightful ruler of this island. Strictly speaking, can Prospero's takeover of the island really be considered a usurpation if the people living there prior are not really natives or not really considered human beings?

Moreover, colonialism is based on another concept, that of linguistic hegemony. Language was used as a powerful means to alienate colonised people. The language of the coloniser was used as a civilising means, but by teaching indigenous people their language, colonisers forced them to adhere to their own representation of the world. Language is indeed a powerful means of imposing one's ideology: 'Caribbean writer George Lamming was one of the first critics to suggest that language imposition functions as an essential element of colonialism'.¹⁶⁵ Through language, the coloniser can control native peoples' mode of expression and perception. In the play, Miranda says she taught Caliban how to speak because he did not know before:

Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known. [...]¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Bergeron and De Sousa, *Shakespeare: A Study and Research Guide*, p. 220.

¹⁶⁶ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.353-358.

Just like contemporary colonisers, Miranda insinuates that whatever language Caliban spoke before, it was a primitive one and thus not adequate. To add to this idea: ‘control of language is a means of ensuring that the subjected can articulate their subjection only in a language that already defines their subordinate relationship to the powerful’.¹⁶⁷ In other words, linguistic hegemony takes part in the subordination of native peoples by taking away their freedom of speech and to some extent, their liberty to think for and by themselves, ensuring a long-term subordination. Prospero first tried to educate Caliban – as part of his civilising mission, as ‘educational practice throughout the Renaissance was based on a belief in the centrality of artful language to a civilised society’¹⁶⁸ – but when Caliban betrayed him by attempting to rape Miranda, Prospero’s behaviour changes and shifts to repression and punishment. This goes back to the narrative of native ‘treachery’ that was used to make ‘the conduct of the natives responsible for their own repression’.¹⁶⁹ In the end, Prospero monopolises authority as a ruler, master, father and colonist.

¹⁶⁷ Brathwaite as quoted in the introduction to *The Tempest*, p. 41.

¹⁶⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, p. 74.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

3 The Reproductive Question

3.1 Caliban and the fear of hybridity

At the time of European colonial expansion, the conquest of the land was often compared to a sexual conquest with the imagery of ‘the virgin land’ waiting to be conquered and owned.¹⁷⁰ This is why the question of women’s sexuality is another important theme that runs through the play. More than just belonging outside of the play and existing only through second-hand accounts, Sycorax is also depicted as an outsider socially speaking. In a patriarchal world that is established, embodied and enforced by Prospero, she stands at the margins by being unmarried, a single mother whose child was born out of wedlock, and an independent woman who ruled over the island before Prospero arrived and restored what he presents as the natural order of things. According to Novy, there was a cultural opposition between marital and extra-marital love at the time.¹⁷¹ As a result, if women’s sexuality was accepted inside the confinement of marriage, premarital sex or any form of extramarital sex was frowned upon. Nothing certain is said about Caliban’s father in the play, but Prospero explains that Sycorax arrived alone and pregnant on the island when she was exiled from Algiers.¹⁷² Moreover, Prospero implies several times that Caliban is the son of a demon, a ‘born devil’,¹⁷³ a character somewhat standing in between the human and the non-human, meaning that her offspring stands at the margins of the human world as well. This can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, Sycorax’s son’s hybridity can be accounted for by the fact that as a witch, she had sexual intercourse with the devil which resulted in a beastly son. On the other hand, since witchcraft was not her only sin, her son’s deformity could result from the fact that she had him

¹⁷⁰ Busia, ‘Silencing Sycorax’, p. 86.

¹⁷¹ Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, p. 32.

¹⁷² Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.260-269.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, IV.1.188.

as an unmarried single mother. Her son stands as a reminder of her sins and a warning to other women not to follow in her footsteps. In addition, Sycorax's former position at the top of the social order on the island becomes problematic once Prospero's patriarchal society is implemented. At a time when women's identity was always defined in relation to men, her position is unconventional. In other words, women always came second to a man they were related to: first their father, then their husband and finally their son if they became widows. Their place in society without that connection to a man was precarious and looked down on most of the time. However, because of her alleged sexual freedom, this is not the case for Sycorax, who lived outside of these limitations.

Sycorax's power and sexuality clash with Prospero's patriarchal values, values that he projects onto his daughter through her education. As a consequence, the alienation of Sycorax in this patriarchal order is highlighted by the character of Miranda, who embodies the perfect woman in a patriarchal society. Miranda is endowed with all the qualities that were praised in women at the time: chastity, as she is still a virgin, obedience to her father and her soon-to-be husband, which can be seen every time she speaks to either of them and agrees to what they say without questioning. Docility and submissiveness are her two main character traits in the play. All these characteristics contrast with the representation that is made of Sycorax: she is demonised while Miranda is glorified. That opposition is explained by Novy in her studies of other authors:

Mary Beth Rose and Valerie Wayne have analysed the mixture of different attitudes towards women, love and marriage in England at this time (Rose 1998; Wayne 1991). Women were traditionally associated with the body and sex, and thought to be more lustful than men – unless they were the idealised Virgin.¹⁷⁴

It appears that Miranda further contributes to the othering of Sycorax in that each is associated one of two possible female types when it comes to sexuality: respectively the chaste source of

¹⁷⁴ Novy, *Shakespeare and Feminist Theory*, p. 34.

salvation, Mary, and the sinner, Eve. To some extent, Sycorax could also be associated with Lilith,¹⁷⁵ Adam's first wife, who was cast out of the Garden of Eden for not obeying her husband. Even if Lilith was barren, she is sometimes called 'the mother of demons', or 'the primordial she-demon' and as such Sycorax, the single mother of a half-demon son who was banished from her homeland, stands as a representation of Lilith. Miranda becomes a sort of antidote for Sycorax's deviant behaviour, a corrected version. Sycorax is a threat to Prospero because she is the symbol of a different power structure,¹⁷⁶ so that threat has to be eliminated. To put it differently, Sycorax the 'bad' woman, has to be counterbalanced by Miranda, the 'good' woman, or 'angel', and even overpowered insomuch as Sycorax is absent while Miranda is very much present. As a result, both Prospero and Miranda contribute to the othering of Sycorax, making use of her absence and her unconventional stance in a very gender-ruled society. It is worth noting that in their othering of Sycorax, Prospero and Miranda follow gendered lines too. While Prospero's contribution is very active – he controls and structures the presentation of Sycorax – Miranda's contribution is strictly passive: she does so by simply being present. The man being active while the woman is passive is a very traditional ideal or norm in patriarchal societies.

As explained earlier, Prospero projects his fears about women onto Sycorax¹⁷⁷ and as a result, despite her absence, her 'shadow [...] is strongly present throughout the narrative in the form of a fundamental fear that shapes the thematic contents of the play, a fear that [can be designated] as the fear of illegitimate birth and noncontractual sexuality'.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, noncontractual sexuality, meaning sexual relations outside of marriage, could lead to the birth of bastards. This concern for the legitimacy of heirs was a common question in Shakespeare's

¹⁷⁵ Suner, 'Be not Afeared', p. 6.

¹⁷⁶ Blystone, 'Extremes of Gender and Power', p. 79.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁷⁸ Suner, 'Be not Afeared', p. 1.

time, especially in regard to the principle of primogeniture. Primogeniture stated that the first – usually male – heir of a family would inherit, but only wives could know whether their children were legitimate or born of an unfaithful relationship. According to Laetitia Sansonetti, that kind of power was a source of fear for men: ‘The fear of adultery that struck patriarchal societies [...] the legitimate son and the fake son can only be differentiated by the mother, which gives her a power over inheritance’.¹⁷⁹ Illegitimate births could threaten the orderly, well-regulated human society by unleashing an evil nature,¹⁸⁰ and this is why women’s sexuality had to be controlled in order to avoid such disruptions.

The occurrence of such disorder is embodied by Caliban in *The Tempest*. Indeed, he was born out of wedlock and as such is an illegitimate son. According to Bergeron, Caliban symbolises the opposite of order in the play.¹⁸¹ His condition is reflected in his appearance that, as explained before, is described as a creature-like individual, or as Suner puts it: ‘Sycorax lays seeds of improper form neither fully animal nor fully human’.¹⁸² His name in itself also reflects his ambiguous position in society: Caliban is an anagram of the word ‘cannibal’.¹⁸³ This shows how Caliban’s evil nature will not heed or admit any form of human control¹⁸⁴ as a result of his illegitimate birth. It appears that Sycorax’s sins continue to be carried by her son¹⁸⁵ who becomes a living proof of her misconduct. His monstrous appearance is made even more obvious in theatre performances and movie adaptations of *The Tempest* where actors are dressed the part and where Caliban’s distorted body becomes the embodiment of disharmony. Pilard mentions that often, Sycorax and Caliban are represented as monsters on screen.¹⁸⁶ It is

¹⁷⁹ Sansonetti as quoted in Lemonnier-Texier, *Représentations et identités sexuelles*, p. 59. The original quotation was translated by me: ‘La peur de l’adultère qui frappe les sociétés patriarcales [...] le fils légitime et le “faux” fils ne sont différenciables que par la mère, ce qui lui donne un pouvoir sur la transmission du patrimoine’.

¹⁸⁰ Suner, ‘Be not Afeared’, p. 2.

¹⁸¹ Bergeron and De Sousa, *Shakespeare: A Study and Research Guide*, p. 75.

¹⁸² Suner, ‘Be not Afeared’, p. 3.

¹⁸³ Hallet, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

¹⁸⁴ Suner, ‘Be not Afeared’, p. 1.

¹⁸⁵ Crunelle-Vanrigh, “‘Unmixed with “baser mater”’: le monster et la matrice”, p. 101.

¹⁸⁶ Pilard, *Shakespeare au cinéma*, p. 116.

interesting to compare and analyse the differences in representation among the different versions but also notice that they convey the same message overall. In the BBC version of *The Tempest*, Caliban appears as follows:¹⁸⁷



(23'18'')



(49'22'')

¹⁸⁷ Directed by John Gorrie, 2005.

Caliban is depicted as a base creature, appearing in a human form but as uncivilised: he is either almost naked or wearing rags, barefoot and extremely hairy, which is reminiscent of animals. Moreover, when he appears next to other characters, he is often crouching down, denoting his inferior status. In The Globe version, he appears slightly differently:¹⁸⁸



(1:21'58'')



(25'38'')

¹⁸⁸ Directed by Jeremy Herrin, 2014.



(55'22'')

He is still mostly naked or dressed in rags, but this time instead of being hairy, he is covered in dirt and what seems to be dried blood, both connoting some sort of savagery and violence. In addition to this, his otherness is accentuated by his limp – he cannot walk like an able-bodied human being, maybe as the result of a birth defect – and by his heterochromia, which embodies his liminality as a creature half-human and half-demon or half-beast. Moreover, his face is overly expressive and frequently grimacing which further separates him from the other characters. Finally, in the 2012 film directed by Julie Taymor, Caliban is reduced to even more baseness:



(17'42'')



(1:02'28'')

His clothing is even more minimal, and he is covered in mud. But the most interesting part is his face, where his hybridity resides, a hybridity that is double: his heterochromia and his two-toned face. In this case, his otherness is also conveyed by his colour, as a clearly appears as a person of colour, a foreigner for the period the play is set in. This also is a reference to the fear of miscegenation that plagued society at the time. Overall, all these versions depict Caliban as a creature, not exactly human, not exactly animal, but clearly othered and differentiated from the other characters. In all these versions, the baseness in his appearance can be linked to his inferior status as a slave and his origins.

In his introduction to *The Tempest*, Lindley argues that Caliban's appearance can:

be situated within the period's fascination with monstrous births and prodigies as David Cressy and Mark Thornton-Burnett have suggested. He also draws upon a much older tradition of the 'wild man', who had figured in romance literature throughout the Middle Ages, [...] half man, half beast in his predatory sexuality.¹⁸⁹

Indeed, Caliban's monstrous appearance can be linked to that of a freak who would have been displayed in freak shows during Shakespeare's time.¹⁹⁰ As suggested in the introduction, at the time Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*, freak shows and cabinets of curiosities started to gain in popularity in the metropolis. People were fascinated by wonders such as human deformity or

¹⁸⁹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, p. 43.

¹⁹⁰ Thornton-Burnett, 'Constructing Monsters in Shakespearian Drama', p. 77.

exotic animals and they would pay money to be able to see them. In the play, Stephano and Trinculo see Caliban as a potential exhibit from which they can earn money:

What have we here - a man, or a fish? [...] A strange fish. Were I in England now – as once I was – and had but this fish painted, not a holiday-fool there but they would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian.¹⁹¹

This passage points to the possibility of exhibiting Caliban, as ‘monsters and curious prodigies were prominent attractions at holiday fairs’.¹⁹² The reference to Indians goes back to the display of natives from the colonies that was also common at the time.¹⁹³ Caliban’s hybridity is obvious to everyone who meets him, and because of beliefs about the fact that ‘a woman’s corrupted flesh can only hatch another corrupted flesh’,¹⁹⁴ his situation is attributed to his ascendance, that is, to his mother who gave birth to him outside of wedlock and against the rules imposed on women about marriage and maternity at the time.

3.2 The erasure of the female body and motherhood

The links between women’s sexual life and its control is further exemplified in the question of reproduction and maternity. Prospero’s patriarchal control over the island and over women’s sexuality peaks in the erasure of maternal figures. Mothers are completely absent from the play, the only female character appearing on stage is Miranda who has no children. The maternal figures that are somewhat present in the play are only talked about, they are physically absent on the island and on stage. Caliban’s mother Sycorax is the maternal figure who is

¹⁹¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, II.2.23-30.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁹³ *Idem.*

¹⁹⁴ Crunelle-Vanrigh, “‘Unmixed with “baser mater”’: le monster et la matrice”, p. 98. The original quote was translated from French by me: ‘la chair corrompue d’une femme ne peut engendrer autre chose qu’une chair corrompue’.

referred to the most in the play, but her motherhood is depicted as a failure. Indeed, she birthed a monstrous and savage son. Miranda's mother's name is not even mentioned, yet even if she only occupies four lines, her representation is far more positive than Sycorax's: 'Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter, and thy father / Was Duke of Milan; and his only heir, / And princess, no worse issued'.¹⁹⁵ Even though Miranda's mother is only briefly mentioned, she is, like her daughter, opposed to Sycorax – the only other maternal figure – in her virtue. Yet, it is worth noting that even if the adjective associated with her is 'virtue' while Sycorax is associated with 'foul', this passage is still problematic as it also raises the question of adultery and illegitimate heirs discussed previously, demonstrating once again how much of a concern it was at the time.

The notion of motherhood is even more fully silenced when Caliban and Ferdinand talk about the possibility of having offspring with Miranda: these children would be their offspring and not hers as, per patriarchal values, a child's identity is inherited from their father, hence the fact that they take their father's family name. Caliban says he would have populated 'this isle with Calibans',¹⁹⁶ meaning that his and Miranda's children would be an expansion of himself. Ferdinand and Prospero both commodify Miranda's virginity as a necessary condition to marriage and 'fair issue',¹⁹⁷ meaning a woman cannot have decent offspring without a husband. Prospero warns Ferdinand that he and Miranda must wait until their marriage to consummate their union, so as to give birth to legitimate heirs.¹⁹⁸ This idea leads to the question of maternal succession too, and the idea that only the paternal line can be considered, especially when Caliban tries to challenge Prospero's patriarchal stature by saying that he inherited the island from his mother.¹⁹⁹ It is interesting to note that Caliban uses maternal succession as a claim on

¹⁹⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.56-59.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, I.2.351.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, IV.1.24.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, I.2.332.

the island when he could simply state that he was there before Prospero arrived, in other words, the colonial argument of ‘first come, first served’ that Europeans were fond of. However, the possibility of maternal succession is completely ignored by Prospero: ‘Prospero never addresses maternal succession but instead changes the subject to Caliban’s behaviour’,²⁰⁰ which shows that maternal links are clearly rejected and are not even considered an argument potent enough to be acknowledged.

In addition to rejecting maternal figures, Prospero also appropriates some maternal abilities. It appears that by erasing maternal figures, his goal is to better replace them.²⁰¹ First, the description of his arrival on the island with Miranda is very similar to that of childbirth.²⁰² To be more precise, images reminiscent of childbirth are used by Prospero himself when he explains to Miranda how they reached the island: ‘Under my burden **groaned**; which **raised** in me / An undergoing **stomach, to bear** up’.²⁰³ In addition, Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh mentions that at the end of the play, there is a pun on the meaning of the word ‘deliver’ when Prospero asks the public to deliver him but the word can also be associated with the delivering of a child.²⁰⁴ Moreover, because he is the only parent Miranda has left, Prospero has to take on the role of both the father and the mother. As a result, he is endowed with roles traditionally associated with women: he educates her, nurtures her and plans for her future marriage. As a matter of fact, the little agency women possessed in Early Modern England consisted in ‘actively negotiating the marriage of their children as well as planning for their education’.²⁰⁵ As a result, Sycorax appears as a mother who did not fulfil her maternal duties while Prospero appears as a father who successfully managed to appropriate maternal abilities. Furthermore, as Sycorax raised a child on her own, it can be argued that she had to take on the role of a father

²⁰⁰ Blystone, ‘Extremes of Gender and Power’, p. 79.

²⁰¹ Crunelle-Vanrigh, “‘Unmixed with “baser mater”’: le monstre et la matrice’, p. 102.

²⁰² Laroque, “‘Or night kept chained below’: *La Tempête* ou le désir enchaîné’, p. 82.

²⁰³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.2.156-157 (emphasis is my addition).

²⁰⁴ Crunelle-Vanrigh, “‘Unmixed with “baser mater”’: le monstre et la matrice’, p. 104.

²⁰⁵ Rose as quoted in Blystone, ‘Extremes of Gender and Power’, p. 74.

as well, however if Prospero succeeded in raising a virtuous daughter by appropriating motherhood, Sycorax's appropriation of fatherhood is failed and only produces a monster.

In order to study the erasure of motherhood in more detail, it is interesting to compare Caliban and Miranda as continuity of their parents. If Miranda can be opposed to Sycorax in terms of their place and the representation as women, she can also be compared to Caliban when determining which parent raised a better child. The answer seems obvious: Sycorax's education is depicted as a failure. This can be seen in the way her son is presented as a savage and hybrid creature. This is also one of the reasons why Caliban cannot claim maternal succession to the island:

As early as the XIIIth century, Henry de Bracton – who was still a recognized authority during the Elizabethan period – wrote that if a woman gave birth to a monster or a prodigy that did not possess a human-like figure, that being could not be counted as a subject enjoying liberties and being able to inherit.²⁰⁶

Hybridity was seen as problematic, and in the play, Caliban becomes a 'figure of ambiguity'²⁰⁷ and his animalisation associates him with nature. On the contrary, the education Prospero provided Miranda with places her on the side of the arts and learning. It is thanks to his education and his books that Prospero was able to give his daughter a good education. Miranda's faithfulness to Prospero's values represents the power of his patriarchal position, and Caliban acts as a foil to Miranda, who embodies the virtues of education.²⁰⁸ The opposition of Sycorax and Caliban versus Prospero and Miranda embodies the fight of nature against the arts.²⁰⁹ In order to control nature as well, Prospero tries to educate Caliban through language, but he fails since Caliban starts using Prospero's own language against him, so Prospero turns him into a slave. Access to language is equated with power, and Prospero holds thirty percent

²⁰⁶ Marienstras, *Shakespeare et le désordre du monde*, p. 102. The original quotation was translated by me: 'Dès le XIII^e siècle, Henry de Bracton, qui faisait encore autorité à l'époque élisabéthaine, écrivait que si une femme accouchait d'un monstre ou d'un prodige qui n'avait pas figure humaine, celui-ci ne pouvait pas être compté parmi les sujets jouissant de leur liberté et susceptibles d'hériter.'

²⁰⁷ Drakakis, *Alternative Shakespeares*, p. 28.

²⁰⁸ Popelard, 'Faustus, Prospero, Salomon', p. 341.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

of all speech in the play,²¹⁰ hence the powerless position of the voiceless Sycorax. And if Sycorax loses to Prospero, then Caliban loses to Miranda, which means that motherhood loses to fatherhood.

The opposition between the two children and as a consequence between the two parents climaxes in the scene of the attempted rape. Moreover, rape can be compared with conquest: conquest of the body and conquest of the virgin land. According to Busia: ‘questions of power and authority, questions of manhood and patriarchal legitimacy, revolve around principles of sexuality which have become a fundamental part of the colonial literary legacy’.²¹¹ As discussed earlier, when the attempted rape is mentioned in the play, Caliban sees it as a way to populate the island. In other words, he sees it as a way to reconquer the island, but as a result, Caliban appears as a savage who cannot control his urges, which goes back to the imagery of the ‘wild man’ evoked by Caliban’s character. The same idea is found when he tries to ally himself with Trinculo and Stephano and they get drunk together: Caliban, who usually speaks in verse, switches to prose, which can be associated with low social status and madness,²¹² especially when he suggests that his new master can use Miranda to produce heirs, a proposition which recalls his own attempted rape. Caliban’s use of both verse and prose also points to the fact that he holds an ambiguous position in the play²¹³ – not exactly a human, not exactly a beast – but also to the fact that Prospero’s education has failed. Meanwhile, Miranda always uses verse and preserves her virginity, a commodity that ensures her future. She also always respects her father’s words and authority, which points to the fact that her education has been a success. In the end, Caliban appears as a failed child who has turned bad while Miranda embodies the

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

²¹¹ Busia, ‘Silencing Sycorax’, p. 91.

²¹² Hussey, *The Literary Language of Shakespeare*, p. 66.

²¹³ Bergeron and De Sousa, *Shakespeare: A Study and Research Guide*, p. 222.

perfect daughter, and the erasure of mothers further allows Prospero to orchestrate Miranda's romance.

3.3 Midwives vs 'medical men'

Men's attempts at control over reproduction and maternity are exemplified in the very relationship between women and the medical body, especially in regard to midwifery. The persecution of women was especially frequent in matters related to procreation, because, as stated earlier, only women had the capacity to give birth, to bring a new life into the world. Because of this hegemony over reproduction, men felt threatened and disempowered. As a consequence, and because of the fear of adultery, men tried to control women's sexuality to make sure of their faithfulness and ensure legitimate heirs. This is one of the reasons the virginity of women was commodified during this era, becoming a necessary condition for future brides in order to make certain there would be no illegitimate children born. Even so, men did not limit their control to their wives, but extended it to the people taking care of their wives' health. That is why healers and midwives were particularly persecuted and accused of witchcraft, under the claim that they were responsible for the death of babies, and the fact that infant mortality rates were especially high at the time supported those allegations.²¹⁴ Because folk medicine was considered as the starting point of magic,²¹⁵ accusations of witchcraft against healers and midwives were easily made, even more so since in case of failure in medical

²¹⁴ Du Chéné, *Les sorcières : une histoire de femme*, p. 45.

²¹⁵ Pliny as quoted in Amaru, *Plantes et Herbes de Sorcières*, p. 7.

treatment, people easily turned against the practitioners who had tried to help, and in this way the healer was turned into a wicked witch.²¹⁶

It is interesting to study how women have been considered in the medical field throughout history. As a matter of fact, women have always held an ambiguous position in medicine: 'Ancient cultures believed that medicine was the prerogative of women [...]. Yet the history of medicine begins with the "father" of medicine, the Greek physician Hippocrates'.²¹⁷ Later in time, the role of women in healing was considered as an extension of their domestic role.²¹⁸ Yet there was no official recognition for this role as it was not remunerated. Using the words of Chamberlain:

The role of these women as unofficial healers [...] has been largely ignored by medical histories. We are now accustomed to think of doctors and healers as men. [...] The history of medicine is on the whole seen to be the history of great men and discoveries in science. It is also the history of medical institutions and professions.²¹⁹

Indeed, more often than not, scientific and medical discoveries have been attributed to men and this is also the case for midwifery, after all, James Marion Sims is nicknamed the 'father of gynaecology' when he tested his techniques and theories on enslaved black women without anaesthesia, something he is still controversially known for today. In the same line of thought, Paracelsus is said to have burned his medical texts in 1527, confessing that he had 'learned from the sorceress all he knew',²²⁰ as if all he had learned that way was unworthy, whereas he is now considered to be a pioneer in the field medicine. With time, 'men's medicine began to stand for knowledge and discovery and women's medicine for superstition'.²²¹ This overrepresentation of men in the medical field overshadowed all the unofficial work women had done for centuries. This is especially true in the case of midwifery, where little material on

²¹⁶ Amaru, *Plantes et Herbes de Sorcières*, p. 8.

²¹⁷ Chamberlain, *Old Wives' Tales*, p. 8.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

the subject is available today as midwives were working-class and little effort has been made to catalogue their lives.²²²

Because midwives had the power to give birth, help give birth, but as a result also the power to possibly ‘give death’, they were often accused of witchcraft and society felt the need to control them, because this power they had challenged the patriarchy,²²³ be it through governmental or religious measures. As explained earlier, people in the Early Modern period were greatly concerned with the fact that midwives could easily harm babies, a fear that is reflected in the religious writings of the time, such as the Papal Bull and the *Malleus Maleficarum*, mentioned in the first part of this paper, and in witch trials. As a result, many measures were taken to curb their practices. First, the clergy tried to control them, then medical men tried as well with the help of the government. For example, in 1421, Parliament petitioned King Henry V to ban the practice of untrained or ‘on-the-job trained [...] wise women’; the petition was approved in 1423, but not effectively enforced.²²⁴ In 1511, the Physician and Surgeons Act ruled against the quack practitioners described as ‘a great multitude of ignorant persons such as smiths, weavers and women’.²²⁵ In 1533, the Peter’s Pence Act required an ecclesiastic license to practice medicine.²²⁶ However, women continued to practice without the authority of science or religion,²²⁷ often facing punishments such as excommunication.²²⁸

Medicine progressively became an academic institution, and it is important to bear in mind that at the time, access to formal education was a right allowed only to men. In other words, accusations of witchcraft against midwives were a way for doctors to get rid of the competition while taking control over reproductive health. On this subject, Alain Piot wrote that

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²²³ Chamberlain, *Old Wives’ Tales*, p. 28.

²²⁴ Allison, *Midwifery from the Tudors to the 21st Century History*, p. 2.

²²⁵ Thomson as quoted in Allison, *Midwifery From the Tudors to the 21st Century History*, p. 2.

²²⁶ Allison, *Midwifery from the Tudors to the 21st Century History*, p. 7.

²²⁷ Chamberlain, *Old Wives’ Tales*, p. 18.

²²⁸ Allison, *Midwifery from the Tudors to the 21st Century History*, p. 7.

there was a masculinisation of the medical profession, explaining how male practitioners appropriated the knowledge of giving birth little by little:

Matronly women and midwives kept a traditional feminine complicity: they handed down recipes, empirical or magic, of contraception, abortion, remedies and discreet poisons. Their supervision allowed the dismantlement of important parts of an autonomous feminine culture. The reproductive function became men's business.²²⁹

As a matter of fact, midwifery was a field where knowledge was freely given as little money was at stake,²³⁰ and where no formal qualification was required, just a form of apprenticeship.²³¹ Moreover, the Church declared in the fourteenth century that: 'If a woman knows how to heal without having studied, then she is a witch and dies',²³² which is quite paradoxical since they could not study, meaning that all knowledgeable women in this field were thus sentenced to death. In addition, easing the pain of childbirth was perceived as anti-religious because Eve's punishment for her sin was to bring forth children in pain,²³³ and thus some midwives' practices were not viewed favourably.

Because midwifery was practiced by women for women, it held a low status in society.²³⁴ The role of midwives was to help women give birth naturally, while men had a more invasive, and with time surgical, approach. To quote but one example, obstetrical forceps were invented by a family of – male – surgeons who then proceeded to gatekeep their technique. Midwives denounced the misuse of such practice that could endanger both mother and child.²³⁵

²²⁹ Piot, *La diabolisation de la femme*, p. 13. The original quotation was translated by me: 'Matrones et sage-femmes restaient attachées à une complicité féminine traditionnelle : elles transmettaient des recettes empiriques ou magiques de contraception, d'avortement, de remèdes et des poisons discrets. Leur mise sous tutelle a permis de démanteler des pans entiers d'une culture féminine autonome. La fonction de reproduction est devenue l'affaire des hommes'.

²³⁰ Chamberlain, *Old Wives' Tales*, p. 3.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

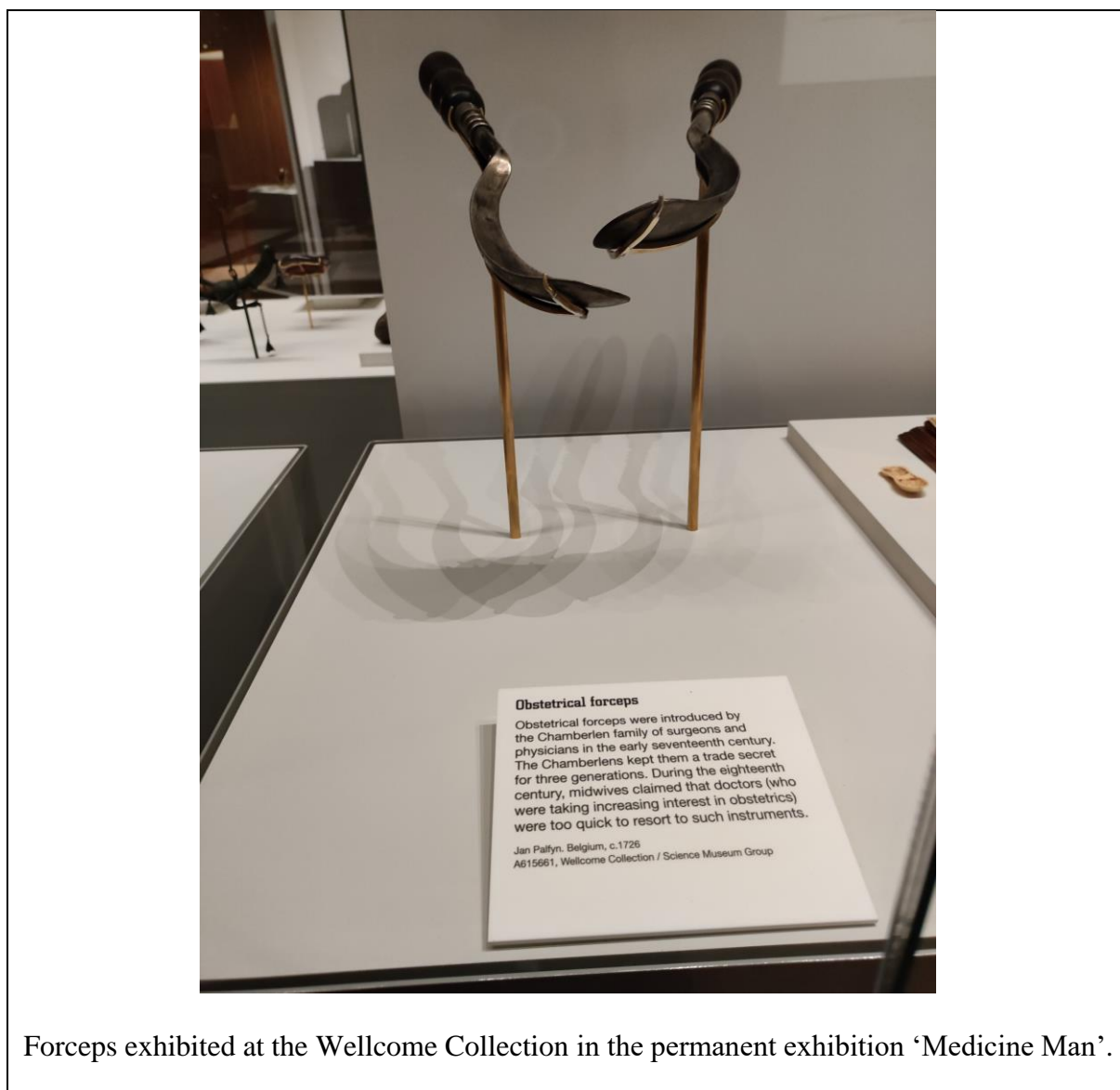
²³² Baldo, *Discours de l'inquisiteur*, p. 65. The original quotation was translated by me: 'Si la femme sait guérir sans avoir étudié, elle est sorcière et meurt'.

²³³ *Idem.*

²³⁴ Chamberlain, *Old Wives' Tales*, p. 25.

²³⁵ Allison, *Midwifery from the Tudors to the 21st Century History*, p. 74.

The Wellcome Collection in London hosts an impressive collection of forceps, including the following ones, which support this claim:



Yet, as much as they tried to make it seem like they had better results, nothing proves that medical men managed to decrease the mortality rate in childbirth. On the contrary, the passage of childbirth from women's business to the governmentally-approved medical men in the promise of reducing maternal and infant mortality²³⁶ proceeded to raise mortality rates that were

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

not that high to begin with.²³⁷ Tudor midwives actually achieved a success rate that was not repeated until the 20th century.²³⁸ Allison even claims that ‘the death rate soared with the medicalisation of midwifery’.²³⁹ In the end, the idea that midwives were incompetent in their practice was propaganda spread by medical men in an attempt to discredit their female counterparts and replace them:

By the seventeenth century, the ranks of the physicians (and in particular, the surgeons and apothecaries) were growing. Anxious to increase the scope of their practices, they began to regard midwifery, especially among the middle-class, as a potentially lucrative area of work. Attempts to incorporate it into male medical practice were made, accompanied by a great deal of propaganda against the alleged ignorance, clumsiness and incompetence of midwives.²⁴⁰

Even with all these regulations and the propaganda used against them, some midwives were still allowed to practice, but only under the control of men. They even had to take an oath.

An example of such oath would be that taken by Eleanor Pead in 1567:

The midwife swore / to help both poor and rich / not to allow any woman to give birth in secret / to ensure that two or three lights were ready / to ascertain the true father of a base child / not to allow substitution of an infant at birth / not to use ungodly means to shorten the labour / not to use sorcery or incantation / not to destroy or dismember an infant / to baptise any new-born, in the time of necessity, using the accustomed words and plain, pure water and inform the curate of the parish / to faithfully and diligently exercise the office according to such cunning and knowledge / as God has given me.²⁴¹

This oath shows the concerns surrounding the practices of midwives at the time, that is: the fear of illegitimate birth, the association with witchcraft and the use of herbs – or spells – to help with labour pain, the fear surrounding the use midwives-witches made of babies, and the importance of the Church in this control. Indeed, midwives were still needed, as their fares were

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁴⁰ Chamberlain, *Old Wives' Tales*, p. 56.

²⁴¹ Allison, *Midwifery from the Tudors to the 21st Century History*, p. 10.

minimal in comparison to medical men, and as a result there was this idea that that midwives were for the poor and that male accoucheurs were for those who could afford them.²⁴²

Still, their practice was increasingly negatively viewed. Aveling wrote in his book about midwives that:

It is certain however that she [the early English midwife] was a woman of inferior education. Her opportunities of obtaining written or oral instruction in midwifery were very few, consequently nearly the whole of her information must have been gained by experience, often it is feared, at the expense of the poor women.²⁴³

This idea that midwives were not competent arose with the arrival of male accoucheurs in the 17th century who undermined their reputation to try to replace them.²⁴⁴ This added to the fact that ‘physicians began to perceive themselves as members of a profession and to demand protection to ensure that a monopoly be guaranteed and preserved’,²⁴⁵ which participated in the monopolisation of midwifery by the medical profession and in their intellectual hegemony over scientific ideas.²⁴⁶ Claiming the incompetence of women in medicine and midwifery, Chamberlain argues that ‘the exclusion of women from the universities, and therefore from access to learning, was justified on the grounds that their intellects were deficient, largely because they were governed by the senses rather than reason’.²⁴⁷ So, if they were practicing medicine without formal education, they were sinning against Christ but also against their own sex, for their ‘natural’ incompetence as healers necessarily meant that they did themselves a disservice.²⁴⁸ It is because the practice of midwifery was viewed negatively that it was associated with witchcraft and vice versa. Of course, accusations of witchcraft did not originate primarily with women healers, but it is interesting to note that witch hunts and the demand for

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁴³ Aveling as quoted in Allison, *Midwifery from the Tudors to the 21st Century History*, p. 4.

²⁴⁴ *Idem.*

²⁴⁵ Chamberlain, *Old Wives' Tales*, p. 32.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁴⁸ *Idem.*

legislation around medicine evolved at the same time.²⁴⁹ As a consequence, a distinction was made between men and women in medicine:

The distinction between ‘female’ superstition and ‘male’ medicine was made final by the very roles of the doctor and witch at the trial. The trial in one stroke established the male physician on a moral and intellectual plane vastly above the female healer he was called to judge. It placed him on the side of God and Law, a professional on par with lawyers, theologians while it placed her on the side of darkness, evil and magic.²⁵⁰

Because of this, the tradition of midwifery as a passage of knowledge among women, especially within the family circle, was gradually lost²⁵¹ and their loss of visibility because of unfair competition and their association with witches also caused the extinction of traditional midwifery²⁵² at least until its resurgence in a more modern period. This progressive overshadowing and erasure of women as healers and midwives appears in *The Tempest* through the character of Sycorax and the erasure of women and maternity with Prospero’s usurpation of maternal abilities when it comes to Miranda’s education and marriage.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁵⁰ Ehrenreich and English as quoted in Chamberlain, *Old Wives’ Tales*, p. 62.

²⁵¹ Chamberlain, *Old Wives’ Tales*, p. 81.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Conclusion

As Lindley states in his introduction to *The Tempest*: '[the play] alludes to a wide range of cultural, political and social issues and languages, and it is necessary to recognise their interplay'.²⁵³ In conclusion, it appears that the play as a whole is concerned with oppositions: between Prospero and Sycorax, Prospero and Caliban, Sycorax and Miranda, Miranda and Caliban, but also between concepts like the arts and nature, good and evil or even civilisation and wilderness. These Manichean oppositions reflect the historical context of Shakespeare's time and its concern for witchcraft and witch hunts, colonialism and the reassertion of patriarchal power when King James I inherited the throne of England after two powerful women monarchs.

What is fascinating in the play is the fact that the witch Sycorax possesses no voice. There is nothing finite about her character, the audience cannot be sure of anything since everything about her comes from second-hand accounts. Her narrative is controlled by Prospero, reflecting the same manipulation of the story found in the case of witches, since the ideas conveyed in official religious and royal discourses 'demanded that the right kind of story be told'.²⁵⁴ This manipulation was especially present in witch trials where:

[Their] content and meaning is seen as contingent upon the circumstances of its production and use. [...] Testimony was built around certain kinds of story-types and featured particular themes and arguments, it was because these were formally required for judicial procedures actually to work; these procedures had to begin, continue, and reach a conclusion and carry conviction with those involved at every stage.²⁵⁵

Because the outcome of the trials was basically already determined prior to judgement, 'judicial decisions resulted from public performances of narrative accounts, which by being accepted,

²⁵³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, p. 82.

²⁵⁴ Clark, *Languages of Witchcraft*, p. 11.

²⁵⁵ *Idem*.

became authoritative versions of reality. In this sense, “truth” was constructed’.²⁵⁶ In this process, women were massively targeted, as witchcraft was considered to be their sin, more particularly for healers and midwives who were negatively associated with witchcraft. In the words of Seafield:

The persecution of witches, wherever it took place, was possible because people at all levels of society believed in witchcraft. And as long as that belief was held to be true [...] there was a focus for blame for many of the ills of society and an opportunity for figures of authority to present themselves as God’s generals in the war against evil.²⁵⁷

In *The Tempest*, Sycorax is portrayed by Prospero as his Manichean opposite, as the black to his white and as a result she becomes a foil meant to highlight his good nature. Her depiction as such is necessary to allow Prospero the role of the good protagonist; otherwise, his duality would tip towards a resemblance of Sycorax’s cunning because of their numerous similarities. In order to strengthen the opposition drawn between Prospero and Sycorax, a sort of double othering is put into place, an othering where Sycorax’s gender and race render her inferior to Prospero’s white patriarchal power. This difference in representation between them is interesting when seen in regard to Shakespeare’s time period in which a figure like John Dee – who Prospero resembles – managed to reach success in society while practicing magic, when at the same time witches were persecuted for the same thing. The dynamics between Prospero and Sycorax also reflect the rules and principles shaping Shakespeare’s patriarchal and colonialist society, where a hierarchy between gender and race determined who stood at the top – white men – and who stood at the bottom – women of colour.

The opposition between Prospero and Sycorax is also portrayed through their children, Miranda and Caliban, who represent a continuity of the beliefs and values conveyed by their parents. Caliban is the personification of the fear of illegitimate births, hybridity, miscegenation

²⁵⁶ Rushton, ‘Witchcraft Accusations and the Demonstration of Truth’, p. 24.

²⁵⁷ Seafield, *Scottish Witches*, p. 19.

and disorder that plagued society in the Early Modern period with his monstrous depiction as the bastard son of a witch and possibly a demon, but also because of his links with freak shows. He is the embodiment of the fears surrounding women's sexuality – also called 'gynophobia' by Piot after W. Lederer²⁵⁸ – because of their unique power to give birth. On the other hand, Miranda represents the perfect woman in a patriarchal society, presenting all the attributes valued in women at the time, especially that of chastity. Because of the fears surrounding the power of maternity, the female body and motherhood are erased in the play: Sycorax is portrayed as a failed mother while Prospero appropriates maternal abilities and succeeds in raising a virtuous daughter. This erasure and appropriation of the female body and maternity in the play is representative of the way medical men gradually tried to gain control over the reproductive field in the Early Modern period; by replacing midwives through a process of alienation, with the help of the Church and the government, and through a programme of propaganda that aimed to discredit their competence as women. This progressive change was made easier by the persecution of healers and midwives as witches, a persecution that restricted them and scared away any possible future recipients of such traditional medical knowledge, and that as a result successfully managed to shift the practice of women midwives to male obstetricians.

²⁵⁸ Piot, *La Diabolisation de la Femme*, p. 188.

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