Extricating Sycorax from *The Tempest*’s “Baseless Fabric”

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Abstract

Sycorax, although dead in *The Tempest*, continues to be disinterred like a centuries-old cold case. The intrigue that one dead witch generates has transcended time and scrutiny. This thesis examines the mental power struggle of the living, exiled Prospero, magician and usurped Duke of Milan with the dead African “witch,” Sycorax. It is with her threatening memory that Prospero shares the enchanted island. He damns that memory in sporadic outbursts in *The Tempest*, which actually gives her not only life, but also a forceful incorporeal presence. A study of the absent yet incorporeally powerful Sycorax is a study of historical, religious, and psychosocial norms of Shakespeare’s time; it is the study of patriarchy and racial attitudes that help create a culture ripe for the creation of a Sycorax character.

This thesis presents a non-Eurocentric view of Prospero, the critically esteemed wise, compassionate, and powerful wizard versus the North African woman who from a Eurocentric perspective is deemed wicked and ugly, yet powerful enough to control the moon. Understanding the vilification and restoration of Sycorax requires a study of general attitudes toward women and witches before and during Shakespeare’s day, and how those attitudes have transcended time. We will find that throughout history she is vilified by many men and is restored by some women. In this regard, the ambivalent nature of two poems by Ted Hughes and the restorative literature of two post-colonial fiction writers, Gloria Naylor and Marina Warner are examined. For women writers, the venture to put flesh on the bones of Sycorax seems personal. It seems that by restoring Sycorax, they restore a part of themselves that needs healing.
Author Biography

Laurie Scott-Reyes is a retired Army combat journalist, and is currently an independent writer and artist. More than a decade after earning a Masters of Fine Arts Degree in writing from Vermont College of Norwich University and subsequent retirement from the Army, she decided to further her education in English at Harvard Extension School.

Her goal is to apply her forty-plus years of experience in writing and visual art to the healing arts in association with the Arts in Medicine Program at the University of Florida. The program uses art to enhance the lives of hospital patients, employees, and families.
Dedication

For Israel Reyes-Rodriguez, U.S. Army Sergeant Major (retired)

whom God used as a light on my path and a rock upon which to stand.
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A heartfelt thank you to Dr. Theoharis C. Theoharis for making me realize that tragedy is life and that is okay. He made difficult texts not only palatable, but also interesting and life changing.

I am mostly grateful for my ancestors who endured unspeakable hardships in this country. Through me, a country girl from Alabama, Harvard provided a catalyst for them to express their great potential. I am a symbol of what they might have accomplished had they been given the opportunity.
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Chapter I
Introduction

“You are spoiling my comfortable darkness forcing me to see again. Go away we must not meet.” – Ted Hughes

For centuries, literary artists like Ted Hughes, scholars, students, philosophers, and feminists have resurrected and examined *The Tempest’s* dead yet enigmatic witch, Sycorax. In those resurrections she is vilified, politicized, and exalted. For a woman who never uttered a single word in the play, there is much conjecture about her. This study again reopens that her case to further examine possible inspirations for the creation of Sycorax, her influence within *The Tempest*, her influence upon other writers, and how she has become a metaphor for feminine power. This exploration will reveal that although Sycorax is a fictional character, she is also a product of Shakespeare’s era and his imagination. Shakespeare had many sources from which to draw in creating his stage witches. I will show that Sycorax is likely a product of historical attitudes, beliefs and events.

In her absence from *The Tempest*, Sycorax transcends her obvious role as foil for Prospero and exposes an unspoken power play between them. The dark magic of Sycorax, daughter of Africa, at first seems to serve only to illuminate European Prospero’s white, therefore, benevolent sorcery. However, for reasons explored here, Prospero is never quite secure in his power, which leads to a quest for patriarchal power over both the living and the dead on the island. Likewise, this thesis is an exploration of how Sycorax, although voiceless and
ostensibly absent, becomes a defining force in *The Tempest* although her existence is incorporeal. She still evokes fear from Ariel and both anger and fear from Prospero, for whom she is a virtual thorn in the side.

Prospero’s damnation of Sycorax is a dominant theme in *The Tempest*. This is in part because she is preceded by a long history of the vilification of women who were deemed witches within a patriarchal society. Shakespeare undoubtedly drew upon contemporary issues to inform his writing. This study of Sycorax is presented primarily in a historiographical context, although, in the book *Shakespeare’s Politics*, authors Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa criticize the limitations of interpreting Shakespeare within historical terms. Nonetheless, they concede that his writing produced an accurate thematic picture of the current social concerns: “The poet is an imitator of nature; he reproduces what he sees in the world, and it is only his preoccupation with that world which renders him a poet” (qtd. in Dall). In producing a historical replica of Sycorax’s world, Shakespeare reconstructs social and political issues and addresses universal themes of that time. Other scholars also contend that the historical depiction cannot be overlooked in significance. Leonard Tennenhouse, author of *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare’s Genres*, professes that Shakespeare was distinctly a Renaissance individual and playwright, and his writing cannot be divorced from this perspective:

Where the literary figure is presumed to have written truths that obtain over time and across cultures, the man Shakespeare is situated in a Renaissance context. His writing is largely topical and allegorical as he comments on the figures and policies of his time in relation to which, then, one can fix his political identity. . . . Shakespeare becomes a means of turning the canonized Shakespeare into a window onto
Renaissance social relations, a mirror of his times, a text that presupposes a context ‘outside’ of itself (qtd. in Dall).

Examination of Sycorax lends itself to a historiographical study because she is an absent character and even other characters’ memories of her are fragmented. This study strives to create a three-dimensional view of Sycorax from the limited information presented in The Tempest. For, Sycorax is undoubtedly an amalgamation of historical, religious, political and social influences before and during Shakespeare’s time.

I will argue that religious and royal precedents aided in setting the stage where Sycoraxes, real and imagined, could be born. The Bible, King James, and Queen Elizabeth I, all had significant roles in how the general public viewed and treated women, especially those who were marked witches.

Prospero’s attitude toward Sycorax is based on the general attitudes toward women and witches during Shakespeare’s time and social norms dictated patriarchal dominance, which is apparent in The Tempest. It is evidenced in the play that Sycorax had to die because if she were pitted against Prospero in the flesh, she would be a formidable foe, thus dramatically changing the plot of the play. Power through magic is an essential element in The Tempest. The true efficacy of Prospero’s and Sycorax’s magic, however, is not addressed in the play. Close examination of Prospero’s magical feats expose possible skullduggery and artifice, for it is Ariel who carries out magical feats at the command of Prospero. Beliefs in magic were strong in Shakespeare’s day, but some skeptics and disbelievers spoke against it despite possible repercussions.

Some critics say that the origin of witches is unknown. However, this study examines how the Bible sets the stage for Christian subjugation of women with the sinning Eve, who is
punished for eating forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. In the book of Genesis, Eve not only tastes and savors knowledge, but she also seduces her mate Adam to do the same. Eve is punished for “knowing” (learning), as were her “witchy” successors. Biblically, Eve is precedent for the too wise, rebellious, cunning, seductively powerful, sexually immoral female, not unlike the witches who succeed her.

This thesis will show how Shakespeare and the British populace were already primed for the creation of a Sycorax character long before Shakespeare penned *The Tempest*. She was preceded by an indelible influence of animal familiars, fairies, sorcerers, and wise women.

Some of the most powerful leaders before and during Shakespeare’s time influenced people’s perception of witches in England. Official publications and declarations by King James VI of Scotland (King James I of England), Queen Elizabeth I and Pope John XXII contributed to the fear and the persecution of witches. They not only detailed how to identify them, but also how to punish them. Among these powerful leaders witches, and therefore Sycorax, were viewed as unfinished animals, deviant, and morally ill. The church used Christian morality as a tool to control the masses. Witches were deemed immoral heretics and were therefore enemies of the church. During a time in which the church feared losing power, witches became convenient scapegoats to increase the power of Christendom. The devil was believed to be deliverer of all things bad, and witches were his consorts and were blamed for negative occurrences, from famines to some deaths.

The persistent question of Sycorax’s race calls for close surveillance of how it figures into her denigration by Prospero and by some readers. There is an assumption among some critics that she is black because she is African. As an Algerian, she is indeed part of a culture politically demonized by Europeans in Shakespeare’s time, but because of the historical diversity
of the peoples of North Africa, there are several possibilities for her race and ethnicity. Those possibilities are examined in this thesis as is the fact that Shakespeare never refers to her race in *The Tempest*.

Because Sycorax is absent from the play, we do not hear her version of events. Instead, we are left to puzzle through Prospero’s apparently jaundiced view of her. Herein lies the need for some writers to fill the missing gaps and give voice to the unvoiced. Often when Sycorax is interpreted from a post-colonial Eurocentric point of view, she fares no better than she does in *The Tempest*. However, to her more fervent resurrectors, mainly women and particularly those of color, Sycorax is apparently more than a damned “foul witch” or “member of a vile race” (Bate 1.2.311-417). Among the many literary iterations of Sycorax, Gloria Naylor in her novel *Mama Day*, portrays Sycorax as a Black matriarch with natural powers. In Marina Warner’s *Indigo*, she is a native Caribbean island spiritualist, and in several works by Poet Ted Hughes, she is at once goddess and demoness. She has come to symbolize different things to different people based on the narrowness or broadness of their peripheral visions. Some women writers find that by freeing Sycorax, they free themselves from the negative labels of womanhood and/or race. Theirs, like mine, is yet another attempt at putting flesh on the bones of Sycorax. I will also mine how modern writers retrieve Sycorax and give her the voice that Shakespeare denied her. Writers like Warner, Naylor and Hughes keep Sycorax incorporeally alive.

My interest in examining the mysterious Sycorax, parallels that of Irene Lara. She explains what she means by calling for a literacy of the character:

> When I call for a literacy of Sycorax, for us to listen, speak write, and read through Sycorax, I am evoking her as a metaphor of the actual racialized, sexualized women of color witch/healers largely made absent in discourse. Such literacy includes researching
the voices and experiences of women who are similar to the fictional Sycorax. Absolute accuracy of representation may not be possible, nor is it necessarily the goal. My humble aim is to encourage us, at the very least, to imagine the possibilities of her missing or distorted subjectivity in the modern-colonial imaginary and the ways that making her present may help us to better understand the unjust legacies of similar underrepresented and misrepresented subjects (81).
Chapter II
This Damned Witch Sycorax: A Fragmented History

In *The Tempest*, a five-act play, Sycorax is mentioned only eight times. Throughout the play, Sycorax’s unreliable biographers Prospero and Ariel present her history through fragmented and biased recollections of her. Those recollections are unreliable because Prospero repeatedly invokes memories of her in anger and consequently uses them to manipulate Ariel. Prospero, in unexplained hostility damns Sycorax throughout the play and Ariel damns her under fear of punishment from Prospero. Sycorax’s son Caliban who knows her best, uses her memory to execrate Prospero, whose wrath he fears. In his invocations of Sycorax, Prospero never provides a cohesive narrative about her. What he does tell of her is not only damning, but cryptic.

Sycorax is first mentioned when Prospero reneges on his promise to free the loyal Ariel who has completed Prospero’s demands. Instead of freeing Ariel, Prospero invokes the memory of Sycorax to justify prolonging Ariel’s servitude and when he reminds Ariel that it was he who rescued him from the tree in which Sycorax had imprisoned him. Prospero asks, “Dost thou forget / From what a torment I did free thee?” (Bate 1.2.294-95). However, even when Ariel affirms that he remembers, Prospero manipulates his memory by calling him a “malignant liar” and by asking Ariel, “Has thou forgot the foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy / Was grown into a hoop? Hast thou forgot her?” (Bate 1.2.3-303-05). His reference to her as a hoop heightens the image of her deformity. Reginald Scot in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* says, “They [supposed witched] are women which commonly be old, lame, bleare-eied, pale fowle, and full
of wrinkles; they are leane and deformed, showing melancholie in their faces” (Scot Book I. chap. iii. 7). Samuel Harnsett in A Declaration of Popish Impostures in 1603 speaks of a witch as “an old weather-beaten crone, having her chin and knees meeting for age, walking like a bow, leaning on a staff, hollow-eyed, un-toothed, furrowed…” (qtd. in Dyer).

In addition to painting an historically accurate picture of a witch, Prospero reminds Ariel that “…for mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible to enter human hearing, from Algiers, thou knowest [Sycorax], was banished: for one thing she did they would not take her life” (1.2.310-15). Prospero mysteriously, never mentions what that one thing is. To further guilt Ariel by invoking Sycorax, Prospero adds, “Refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee…and in her most unmitigable rage / Into a cloven pine” (1.2.322-25). Ariel is the holder of some truths about Sycorax, at least after her arrival to the island. But he dares not contradict Prospero. It is possible that Prospero creates or at least embellishes what Ariel knows first-hand about Sycorax. Brittney Blystone observes that Prospero lacks firsthand observation or concrete evidence about Sycorax; thus, Prospero constructs Sycorax as simply his opposite and tool (76). Blystone adds that because Prospero never saw Sycorax, his detailed descriptions of her are partly his construction, which he manipulates for his benefit, specifically to legitimize his takeover (76). The more Prospero attempts to demonize Sycorax’s magical power, the more he evokes her permeating presence.

However, Prospero’s damning of Sycorax through a dubious history is more than a medium of control over his subjects. His name-calling: “foul witch” and “blue-eyed hag” (Bate 1.2.304-17), reveals not only a more personal issue that eats at Prospero, but also a character flaw. He, the rightful Duke of Milan, a man of intellect and royal breeding, is diminished in character by the memory of a dead witch. But by damning Sycorax, he creates a boomerang
effect in which the curses he hurls at her come back to him in the form of mental angst. Also, when he manipulates Ariel to despise the memory of Sycorax for imprisoning him in a pine, he threatens to imprison him also, but one-ups Sycorax by referring to the use of the stronger oak tree as a potential prison. He taunts, “If thou murmu’st, I will rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails till / Thou hast howled away twelve winters” (1.2 98-100). Through his invocations, Prospero appears to be in direct competition with the dead witch.
Chapter III
The Contrasting Powers of Sycorax and Prospero

For both Sycorax and Prospero, involvement in the magic arts leads to their banishment from Algeria and Italy, respectively. The observations of Blystone and Scilla Elworthy on masculine versus feminine power give credence to the theory that competing feminine and masculine powers are central to the theme of *The Tempest*. At the root of Prospero’s Sycorax anxiety is his fear that her power, even in death, eclipses his own. Paul Brown observes that Sycorax and Prospero have much in common: “both are rulers, both have been exiled because of their practices, both have nurtured children on the isle.” He also acknowledges that the major distinction between the two is the contrasting black magic or Sycorax and the white magic of Prospero. He says that the most apparent distinction between black and white magic regimes is that the latter is simply more flexible in its capacity to produce and use others (Brown 60).

The desire for power over both the living and the dead, courses throughout *The Tempest*. The play is an apologue for the attainment, the wielding, and the ultimate surrender of power by Prospero. Although Sycorax is dead, Prospero’s struggle to be the stronger power is an undercurrent throughout the play. There are some commonalities between their powers, like their command of the spirits that inhabit the island, but the major difference is the source and nature of their abilities.
Prospero’s Claim to Power

As duke of Milan, Prospero values the power of knowledge (books) over political and governmental power. Prospero says, “Me, poor man, my library was dukedom large enough” (Bates 1.2.109-110). Knowledge power is the ability to comprehend circumstances, to predict and plan, and to create effects, particularly by knowing how to use other forms of power (Atlee). When Prospero tells Miranda the details of how his brother Antonio usurped his dukedom, and how he and she were put to sea in a rickety boat in which they were intended to perish, he says, “Knowing I loved my books, he [Gonzolo] furnished me / From mine own library with volumes that / I prize above my dukedom” (1.2.167-69). Prospero acknowledges that because of his quest for knowledge power, he facilitates his own usurpation. He says, “…neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated/ To closeness and the bettering of my mind / With that which, but by being so retired, o'erprized all popular rate, in my false brother awakened an evil nature” (1.2.89-93).

A negative side of knowledge power is that it can facilitate cunning to achieve an end. Prospero has a neurotic need to control every creature on the island, especially Caliban. His condemnations of anyone who stands in his way are irrational and obsessive. By condemning Sycorax he condemns her son, thus justifying stealing the island from Caliban who is its rightful owner by succession. Much like the modus operandi for establishing a system of colonialism and slavery, the oppressor first appropriates the victims’ humanity and then his property. So, Prospero denigrates both son and mother by comparing Caliban’s birthing to a littering like that of dogs: “…a freckled whelp, hag born—not honoured with / A human shape” (1.2.330-32). Prospero reminds Caliban of his supposed parentage by the devil and his witch mother: “Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself upon the wicked dam.” The debasement of Caliban renders him incapable of self-governing and justifies enslavement.
Even Caliban knows that Prospero’s “magic” is somehow connected to his books, for when he plans to murder Prospero, he orders his co-conspirators Stephano and Trinculo to first seize his books, then brain him (Bate 2.2.96-104). He tells them, “First to possess his books; for without them / He’s but a sot, as I am, nor hath not / One spirit to command: they all do hate him / As rootedly as I. Burn but his books” (Bate 3.2.96-104).

Prospero’s quest for knowledge, then, is a quest for a power, and not for the personal satisfaction of knowing. He recognizes that books are the gateway to knowledge and that knowledge is the gateway to a type of power that is even greater than his status as duke. It is the power of creating illusion through magic: seizing and controlling the minds of man. German philosopher, Friedrich Wilhem Nietzsche affirms that knowledge works as an instrument of power (Nietzsche xv, p. II). Likewise, Frederick Copelston says that the aim of knowledge is not to know, in the sense of grasping absolute truth for its own sake, but to master (Copleston 407). Prospero’s quest for magic through intellectual power at first seems to no end, but after banishment, he uses them to master his environment. Copleston attests, “We desire to schematize, to impose order and form on the multiplicity of impressions and sensations to the extent required by our practical needs” (407). Prospero’s world and his needs within that world are rooted in his own reality: his interpretation of what is real. Copleston says,

Knowledge, of course, is a process of interpretations. But this process is grounded on vital needs and expresses the will to master the otherwise unintelligible flux of becoming. And it is a question of reading an interpretation into reality rather than of reading it, so to speak, off or in reality (409).
In line with Coplestonian and Nietzschean philosophy, Prospero unconsciously conjures up his own reality, both in his quest to attain knowledge-power, and in the need to control his environment. In this respect, his exertion of power is more innate than contrived. For, every living character in the play strives for control in some form. For instance, the ship’s crew tries to control the vessel during the storm. Ariel uses his power to satisfy Prospero and therefore gain freedom from him. Ferdinand seeks control of Miranda’s virginity, while Gonzalo fantasizes about becoming king of the island. All living creatures, according to Nietzsche, possess a natural will to power. He says, “…Every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension” (Nietzsche 636).

Prospero thrusts back at what he perceives as the lingering power of Sycorax. When Prospero takes the island and enslaves Caliban and Ariel, he is compelled to do so without any consideration for morality or the desires of the enslaved. In his Euro-sensibility, this is the natural order of things. Part of his cunning is an inclination to enslave. He clearly considers both Ariel and Caliban his slaves. When he reminds Ariel of his servitude to Sycorax, he says, “Thou my slave / As thou report’st thyself, wast then her servant” (Bate 1.2.273-74). When Prospero wants wood for his cave, he says to Miranda, “We’ll visit Caliban, my slave…” (Bate 1.2.314). During a dismissal of Caliban Prospero says, “So, slave, hence!” (Bate 1.1.381). Prospero, like Aristotle, apparently believed that some people are slaves by nature, therefore justifying slavery. They, according to Aristotle, suffer in part from arrested mental development. He believed, “…Slavish people benefit from membership in a despotic partnership and that the slave does not possess wholly the deliberative capacity” (Dobbs 79-80). Nietzsche explains, “[Anything which] is a living and not a dying body... will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to
grow, spread, seize, become predominant - not from any morality or immorality but because it is *living* and because life simply *is* will to power…exploitation” (259). Therefore, in line with Nietzsche’s philosophy, Prospero’s need for power is more than a perceived entitlement: it is organic.

Patriarchy and the Masculine Need for Domination

In his natural drive for power, Prospero is compelled to dominate his environment to further his own survival, and that of his daughter. He can rest comfortably in his patriarchal dominance; because of historical and social norms, he is entitled.

Furthering the idea of conflicting powers in *The Tempest*, Elworthy describes two opposing types of energy: masculine power as domination power, power over something or others, and feminine power as power *with* others. She observes that women are endowed with spiritual power, sexual power, persuasive power, and the power of procreation.

At the other end of the spectrum is masculine power, which Elworthy describes as being based on domination, exploitation and possessiveness. In *The Tempest* Prospero does appropriate the island from its rightful heir. In his final quest for specific outcomes, i.e. the marriage of his daughter, confrontation with his usurping brother, and exodus from the island, he dominates and controls everyone around him. It is not only his birthright to be in control, but to some, it is an innate need, or a will to power.

One symptom of man’s will to power is his ancient quest for dominion over women. Just as the church perpetuated belief in witchcraft in its attempt to regain dwindling power, men used the same tactic to dominate women in order to solidify their own power. Nietzsche writes that men “are barbarians in every sense of the terrible word,” adding that the noble caste was always
the barbarian caste; their superiority did not consist first of all in their physical, but in their psychical power (Nietzsche, Beyond IX). Blystone says, “The patriarchy that Prospero enforces is not an independent or coherent system; rather, it reacts to its opposite, which Sycorax symbolizes.” Sycorax has been dead since long before Prospero’s arrival, yet she still shapes the characters’ perceptions of power and gender (Blystone 73-74). Sycorax symbolizes all that may challenge patriarchy. “Sycorax exists only in male characters’ accounts; however, she influences the men’s perception of power because she is absent” (Blystone 73). For instance, Prospero in her absence tries to create the illusion that he is more powerful than she is and Caliban pretends in vain that he can invoke Sycorax’s power to intimidate Prospero.

Further solidifying the idea of patriarchal power in *The Tempest*, Diane Purkiss describes Prospero as a ruler-sorcerer who strenuously asserts the masculine to ensure the “providential absolutism” of his rule (184). He considers himself, according to Lemuel Jackson, to be “under a more auspicious star” and he says that in Prospero’s case, any and all overtopping attempts at violation by native or other dangerous even if low-comedy types (Caliban and his confederates) are to be well and truly trashed (22). But, the more Prospero tries to establish himself as pre-ordained lord and master, the less he is able to extricate himself from the hold of Sycorax; he sees her as a challenge to his power more than the island natives or any of the more learned, or socially prominent men who are shipwrecked there. Among them are men who want Prospero dead, yet he never resorts to name calling when he speaks of those who conspired against him. Prospero perceives them as being born under that same auspicious star as he, so he chooses the higher road of virtue rather than vengeance by dealing with them using “noble reason” rather than unleashing his fury (Bate 5.1.27-29). However, with total abandon he does unleash his fury on Sycorax, the dead African woman. Ania Loomba refers to Prospero’s anger as anxiety about
what he perceives as Sycorax’s remaining power (328). As a result, Sycorax not only becomes a symbol of the racial and cultural dissimilar, but also one of contrasting female power.

The fictive Prospero, like his real-life contemporaries, is a product of his time. Regardless of Shakespeare’s personal views on patriarchy, he was born into a world of male dominance condoned and perpetrated by the church. Patriarchy, like witchcraft, has roots in the Holy Bible. One of the Biblical tenets of patriarchy is the designation of God as masculine. We know this because according to the Bible, man was made in his image; as a masculine God watches over all creation, so does man watch over his earthly family. In multiple versions of the Holy Bible, including the Geneva Bible to which Shakespeare had access, the first version of the creation of humankind, men and women are equals: “In His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27). However, in a second version in Gen. 2:21-22, woman is created from the rib of man, which implies that she is subordinate to him. This is the version perpetrated and perpetuated by the church in Europe. Male dominance is further elaborated in an epistle from the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians. Paul writes: “…The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (Cor. 11:3). It is also stated that woman is the glory of man and that woman was created for man and not the other way around (Cor. 11:7-9). This Biblical genesis of masculine dominance is a guarantee of power for men who wish to claim it.
The Anti-Patriarchal Powers of Sycorax

It is within the world of patriarchal dominance that Shakespeare creates both the powerful Sycorax and the unassuming Miranda. The difference between the women is that Sycorax from the grave is the very antithesis of male dominance, while the child Miranda eagerly submits to it. Brittney Blystone says, “As a powerful woman, Sycorax exemplifies anti-patriarchal ideas in modern England, when patriarchy was the norm, or even ideal” (73).

The greatest testament to the strength of Sycorax’s power comes from none other than Prospero himself when he admits that she could “control the moon” (Bate 5.1.49). This is significant because various powers have been attributed to the moon by many cultures throughout history. Science affirms that the moon along with the rotational and gravity system, affect the tides. Some farmers still use almanacs to plant according to the phases of the moon. Ancient witches of Thessaly, Greece, were believed to control the moon, which in essence meant they controlled nature. Their ability to harness the moon’s powers was referred to as “Bringing down the moon” and it remains a contemporary Wiccan ritual (Gully 108). It has been widely believed that the moon causes lunacy. Aristotle and Roman historian Pliny the Elder suggested that the brain was the “moistest” organ in the body and thereby most susceptible to the pernicious influences of the moon” (Lillienfeld and Arkowitz). The moon and its powers are referenced in many of Shakespeare’s other works. Othello blames his slaying of Desdemona on madness caused by the moon. He says, “…It is the very error of the moon; / She comes nearer earth than she was wont / And makes men mad” (5.2.123-24). In Romeo and Juliet, Romeo says, “Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon / Who is already sick and pale with grief…” (2.2.4-5) and Juliet says, “O, swear not by the moon, th’ inconstant moon…” (2.2.109). The King James and other Bible versions allude to the power of the moon when it warns people against idolatry.
One verse warns that one should not be drawn by the moon (Deut. 4:19). The moon also represents nature itself, which implies that Sycorax could harness the powers of nature. If Sycorax has such incredible powers of bringing down the moon and controlling its powers at her behest, Prospero is justified in his fear of her even after her death.

Sycorax’s physical absence from the play and the shreds of information about her provided by her biographers leaves examiners to resort to historicism and deduction to further analyze her powers in *The Tempest*.

The Fallacy of Prospero and Sycorax’s Magic

Although the range of the powers of Prospero and Sycorax are described in *The Tempest*, the true nature of their magic is never fully addressed: whether Shakespeare intended it as art or artifice within the play.

Because witchcraft and sorcery beliefs were a real part of English society in Shakespeare’s day, he had access not only to information that purported magic as real, but also that expressed skepticism of it. Therefore, his characterizations were likely well informed. For instance, in 1583 Howard, Earl of Northampton, published *Defensative against the Poyson of Supposed Prophecies* and in 1584 Reginald Scot wrote *Discoverie of Witchcraft* in which, according to Rolfe, “with great learning and ability, he [Scot] exposed the pretensions of the magicians and their craft. He made many enemies by it; and, James I ordered all the copies of it that could be found to be burned by the public hangman” (Rolfe). Though he had access to information, it is not known if Shakespeare actually believed in magic. Whether he did or did not, his stage magic was just that and he never fully addressed its intricacies, especially the seedier side. For instance, when he wrote that Sycorax had lain with the devil and begat Caliban,
he avoided the detailed claims in publications like *The Malleus Maleficarum*, written in 1486 which states that the devil cannot produce sperm, so before he copulates with a woman, he must take human shape (Heinrich Part I, Question III). Because most historical detail is omitted, Sycorax and Shakespeare’s other stage witches and wizards are caricatures of what were deemed real.

It is implied in *The Tempest* that Prospero belongs to the higher order of magicians — those who *commanded* the services of superior intelligences — in distinction from those [like Sycorax] who, by a league [allegedly] made with Satan, submitted to be his instruments; Witches purportedly enjoyed supernatural powers in exchange for their souls (Rolfe). Reginald Scot says that Prospero’s class of magicians *professed* an art more honest and lawful than necromancy, “wherein they work by good angels.” Evageline M. O’Connor refers to Prospero not only as a powerful magician, but also as one who is noble and moral. She believes that the long-suffering Prospero after his fall, “displays his true, far-reaching, and terrible power, and becomes the *great irresistible magician* which Shakespeare himself had so long been.” My opposing view is that Prospero uses his power as a weapon of coercion and control, and although he has lost his worldly goods, he upholds a standard of aristocratic morality in which oppression of the proletariat is acceptable. Joseph says that Prospero uses his magic arsenal to oppress his slaves and ensure his own lordship. Khoury quotes Afri-French poet *Aimé Césaire* as saying:

To me Prospero is the complete totalitarian. I am always surprised when others consider him the wise man who forgives…. Prospero is the man of cold reason, the man of methodical conquest, in other words, a portrait of the enlightened European. Let’s not hide the fact that in Europe the world of reason has inevitably led to various kinds of totalitarianism…(qtd. in Khoury 24).
Even if Prospero is an intended symbol of totalitarianism, the power he claims throughout *The Tempest* is often dubious. For instance, he does not employ magic to prevent banishment from Milan or to set the boat on course to an agreeable location. On the island, Prospero depends on Caliban, whom he considers an inferior, for sustenance. Prospero’s inability to save or provide for himself raises questions about the true nature of his magical powers. For, it is Ariel who carries out magical feats in the play. Prospero asserts his power over the island’s spirits, including Ariel. Like the Olympian Apollo who favored psychics, diviners and mediums, Prospero absorbs and takes over the power of others. He is master and Caliban and Ariel are his slaves. It is believable that the secret knowledge Prospero attains from his books is how to manipulate his way to dominance, much like perpetrators of totalitarianism throughout the world, who take advantage of natives’ *naiveté* by conning them with lies, promises, trinkets, and smoke and mirror tricks. Upon arrival on the island, Prospero sets about creating an environment that is malleable for his supreme reign. To achieve this, he reconstitutes the island’s major inhabitants, living and dead; He guilts Ariel by constantly reminding him that he rescued him from a tree and that the dead Sycorax is a hag, an evil witch who committed sorceries too sordid for humans to hear (Bates 1.2.267-68). Prospero also harangues Ariel by telling him what to remember about Sycorax, and by calling him a liar, a “malignant thing” (Bate 1.2.259) and a dim-wit (Bates 1.2.288). Caliban as rightful heir to the island fares much worse with the name-calling. He is labeled bestial, a term used only after Prospero’s arrival. Caliban is also a “freckled whelp hag-born” without a human form (Bate 1.2.287-88), and he is dirt (Bate 1.2.317). ). Because he is subhuman he is therefore enslavable. Ariel and Caliban are now primed for manipulation; Prospero has bullied them into submission.
As Ariel and Caliban are instruments of Prospero’s power, so are his magical cloak and wand, which were common magician symbols in Shakespeare’s day. Prospero dons the cloak before performing magic much like a preacher dons his robe to stand before a congregation. The robes in both cases are mere cloth. The true power is in what they symbolize. On the preacher it symbolizes the power bestowed upon him by God to save souls. Prospero’s cloak symbolizes magical supremacy. The cloak can also be seen as a mask for Prospero’s deep sense of vulnerability, to which he admits at the end of the play. Prospero is wearing the cloak when the vessel carrying his enemies shipwrecks at the island. He says to Miranda, “Lend thy hand and pluck my magic garment from me” (Bate 1.2.22-23), as though the garment is responsible for the magical feat. But it is Ariel, not Prospero, who creates the sea tempest. All that Prospero does is put on a cloak to create the illusion of power, give orders to Ariel, and subsequently take credit for Ariel’s work. When the deed is done Prospero asks him, “Hast thou, spirit, performed to point the tempest that I bade thee?” Ariel responds, “To every article” (Bates 1.2.194-196). Ariel then informs him that he put the ship safely in the harbor, cast a magic spell over the sailors, and scattered the rest of the fleet (Bate 1.2.227-234). After his daughter helps him off with his cloak, Prospero again gives it credit when he says “Lie there my art [artifice?]” (Bate 1.2.22-23). It is admission to the limitations and fallibility of Prospero’s magic when he says, “…my zenith doth depend upon a most auspicious star, whose influence if now I court not but omit, my fortunes will ever after droop” (Bate 1.2.182-185). In other words, in addition to using Ariel to carry out his schemes, he will need luck. Prospero’s illusion of power is so great that even his daughter is convinced of it. She never questions its authenticity.

While Ariel is bound to Prospero through the coercive power of guilting for rescuing him from the tree, Caliban provides even poorer testament to Prospero’s powers or lack thereof. He
first implies that Sycorax’s powers are greater when he tries to invoke them to strike back at Prospero. “All the charms of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!” (Bate 1.2.346-247), he says. But he later says, “I must obey [Prospero]. His art is of such power it would control my dam’s god, Setebos, and make a vassal of him” (Bate 1.2.278-80). Caliban is therefore stating that Prospero’s power is greater than the high demon Setebos, but he never says that Prospero’s power is greater than that of his mother. Caliban knows that the books, the cloak, and the wand somehow empower Prospero, even if Caliban does not know the full nature of that power.

Ariel, a spirit who is of high intelligence whose nature is to serve, when in the presence of others willingly allows Prospero to take credit for his work. After Prospero sends him to warn Gonzalo who is about to be murdered by Antonio and Sebastian, Ariel says, “My master through his art forsees the dangers that you, his friend, are, and sends me forth…” (Bate 2.1.264-66). It is a type of “seeing” that could be derived from logic. Prospero takes credit when the pageantry begins and goddesses like Ceres, nymphs, and other spirits appear before Ferdinand and Miranda. He says, “Spirits which by mine art I have from their confines called to enact my present fancies” (Bate 4.1.111-13). However, Ariel says that it was he who created the pageant (Bate 4.1.158). Prospero’s powers disappear when Ariel is finally set free. Prospero confesses: “Now my charms are all o’erthrown, and what strength I have’s mine own, which is most faint” (Bate 5.1-3). Paul Brown says, “Hitherto he has insisted that his narrative be taken as real and powerful, now it is collapsed, along with everything else, into the stuff of dreams. The forging of colonialist narrative is revealed as a forgery” (67). Scot quotes John Calvin as saying that magicians, called counselors, use their juggling knacks only to abuse the people, or else for fame: but he might rather have said for gain (Epistle X).
As much as Prospero’s magic is contrived, the illusion of Sycorax’s magic, too, is fantasy according to Scot. He says, “The fables of witchcraft have taken so fast hold and deep root in the heart of man” and that wicked and arrogant people attribute to witches, powers that only God has (1:1). Sycorax’s “magic” then, is in reality natural feminine ability. Irene Lara believes that Prospero’s fear of Sycorax links her to a “female genealogy of learned healers, midwives, sorceresses, and priestesses; spiritually powerful and horticulturally knowledgeable ‘wise women’ who knew how to speak with and listen to the elements, who knew about women’s reproductive cycles, who bled but did not die…those knowledges were demonized (84). It is perhaps this feminine ability, called witchcraft, that real-life Prosperos feared. The fear of female natural ability transcended many cultures. In as early as 215 B.C., Cato the Censor gave an oration in Support of the Oppian Law, which greatly limited the rights of Roman women. The law was fully instituted during the height of the Punic wars between Carthage and Rome (264-146 B.C.). The law provided that women be constantly under the direction of a man: husband, father, or brother. It forbade women to ride in carriages, own gold, or wear the color purple, which drew attention to themselves. Cato said, “…But now our privileges, overpowered at home by female contumacy, are, even here in the Forum, spurned and trodden under foot; and because we are unable to withstand each separately we now dread their collective body.” He goes on to say that how a whole race of males was utterly “extirpated” by a conspiracy of the women. Cato the Censor expresses fear of female domination when he warns men: “Suffer them once to arrive at an equality with you, and they will from that moment become your superiors.” However, women protested and the law was repealed.

Sycorax is a witch only because Prospero labels her as such, for ultimately, witch was a name for women who threatened to upend patriarchy. Scot’s description of women falsely
accused of witchcraft closely matches that of Prospero’s description of Sycorax. Scot says, “As one sort of such as are said to be witches, are women which be commonly old, lame, bleary-eyed, pale fowl, and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious…” Prospero describes Sycorax as a blue-eyed foul witch bent with age and ill will (Bate 1.2.260-72). The similarities are proof of how profoundly ingrained the idea and image of witches were during Shakespeare’s era.

The vilification of Sycoraxes, women who posed a threat to men, did not end with their natural abilities; it extended even to their gynecology. A woman’s biology was degraded, including the basic anatomical function of her menstrual cycle. In the case of the Biblical Eve, the cycle was punishment from God. It has been regarded “a sign of corruption and a deadly poison” (Parramore). Also in the Bible, menstruating women were considered unclean and were banished to a separate tent, not to be seen by men. Parramore says, “Pliny the Elder claimed that a mere look from a menstruating woman will ‘dim the brightness of mirrors, blunt the edge of steel, and take away the polish from ivory.’” These types of assertions were often those of the human race’s most learned men. Plato theorized that the female uterus “wandered” throughout the body when it was discontented from lack of sex or pregnancy, causing a woman to exhibit signs of hysteria. Hippocrates, however, was one of the first to associate the wandering uterus with hysteria. He believed that where the restless womb ended up in the body, determined the severity of the illness. An unknown writer during Hippocrates’ time says:

The Hippocratics thought that the womb moved upward in the woman's body when ever it became hot and dry from overwork, or lack of irradiation from male seed, searching for cool and moist places in an effort to restore its equilibrium. As the womb tried to force its way toward the crowded places at the center of a woman's
trunk, it wreaked havoc with her physical and mental well being, causing her to faint or become speechless.

Aristotle believed that women are deformed men. He said that men became women due to the lack of heat needed to form a male body (Qtd. in Yang 72). This theory is justification of women’s inferiority to men. Aristotle argues:

“…woman is more mischievous, less simple, more impulsive, more compassionate, more easily moved to tears, more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike, more prone to despondency and less hopeful, more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, of more retentive memory… (Yang 72).

This is Aristotle’s opinion of women who were not deemed witches. Add natural ability and sexual deviance to the existing mythology and a Sycorax is born. Her sexuality is implied in *The Tempest* because she is pregnant and unwed when banished to the island. Therefore, according to Blystone, Sycorax she represents for Prospero an unfettered female sexuality that breaks the gender boundaries, threatening greater female autonomy. Sycorax’s sexuality is also implied when she makes “earthy (lewd) and abhorred” demands of Ariel (Bate 1.2.276). In order to ensure his patriarchy, Prospero must recreate Sycorax as an ugly, evil, and sexually deviant hag. As Prospero’s evil opposite, Sycorax symbolizes all of his negative assumptions about women; therefore, he constructs her sexuality in ways that oppose his patriarchal views on virginity (Blystone 8). Prospero unintentionally portrays Sycorax as an independent woman who remains powerful after losing her virginity, whatever the circumstances of the sexual encounter (Blystone 8). Attempting to condemn Sycorax as a witch and a
whore, Prospero instead creates the model of a powerful woman who breaks gender restrictions (Blystone 9). Because men could not control the mercurial nature of women (wandering wombs), their ties to nature, or their frightening seductive and sexual powers, they controlled their station in life socially, politically, and economically. Likewise, in *The Tempest*, Prospero is compelled to try to control the history of Sycorax even in her absence.
Chapter IV

Biblical Precedents for the Historical Witch

Shakespeare had many sources, historic and current events, with which to inform the characterization of his stage witches. For instance, at his behest he had the Bible in which the demonization of witchcraft has roots. Even if he did not personally consult the Bible, it had already set precedence for the demonization of witches.

In the Geneva Bible, which was available in Shakespeare’s day, Moses through divine law banishes all witches, soothsayers, sorcerers, and mediums from the land much like Sycorax was banished from Algiers (Deut. 18:10-11). Moses says, “For all that do such things are an abomination unto the Lord, and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth cast them out from before you” (Deut. 18:12). Later Saul the first king of Israel again banishes witches from Israel. But, when he is terrified of going into battle against the Philistines, he consorts with the witch of En Dor. He commands her to resurrect the prophet Samuel who had anointed him to be king, which she does (1 Sam. 28:3-7). In Exodus, Moses says, “You shall not permit a sorceress to live” (22:18). In Leviticus God tells Moses, “Give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits; do not seek after them, to be defiled by them” (19:31). Curiously, much like the Biblical witches, Sycorax is not only banished from Algiers, but Shakespeare also banishes her from *The Tempest*. And, like historical witches who existed on the fringes of society, Sycorax exists on the fringes of *The Tempest*. 

The church led the way in the persecution of witches in Europe. They became official enemies of the Church. Witchcraft became an antithesis to the church during the 14th to 17th centuries. Pope John XXII during his papacy from 1316 to 1334 fanned the fires of already growing witch paranoia. A fervent believer in the evils of witchcraft, the Pope in 1326 wrote “Decretal Super Illius” a papal bull in which he declares that witches are real. Witches became official enemies of the church when the Pope labeled them heretics. Some of his sources for the bull were the Bible, classical Latin literature, and teachings of St. Augustine, all of which he thought to be authorities on the subject of witchcraft (Bailey 597). In the widely distributed bull, the Pope claims,

“… some people, Christians in name only, have forsaken the first light of truth to ally themselves with death and traffic with hell. They sacrifice to and adore devils; they make or obtain figurines, rings, vials mirrors…by which they command demons…asking their aid…giving themselves to the most shameful subjection for the most shameful ends (qtd. in Ben-Yehuda 4).

The Pope authorized inquisitions into suspected witchcraft and prescribed excommunication of witches. His efforts resulted in a small-scale witch-hunt in the Pyrenees lasting more than a century and a half (Ben-Yehuda 4).

The church further perpetrated persecution of witches after publication of the Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer of Witches) written in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, both of whom were Inquisitors and members of the Catholic Church Dominican Order. Malleus served as a guidebook for Inquisitors, and was designed to aid them in the identification,
prosecution, and dispatching of witches. It was like an Inquisitor’s bible and was accepted widely as unquestionable truth. Wicasta Lovelace, who wrote the foreword to the reprinted *Malleus*, states, “Whether the belief that there are such beings as witches is so essential a part of the Catholic faith that obstinacy to maintain the opposite opinion manifestly savours of heresy” (Kramer 1). Lovelace says that while the Malleus itself cannot be blamed for the Inquisition or the horrors inflicted upon mankind by the Inquisitors, it did play an important role (Kramer 1). Lovelace refers to *The Malleus Maleficarum* as one of the most “blood-soaked” works in human history, in that “its very existence reinforced and validated Catholic beliefs which led to the prosecution, torture and murder of tens of thousands of innocent people” (Kramer 1).

Sycorax comes to Shakespeare’s stage with this history that his contemporaries likely knew. Therefore, in her absence and voicelessness, they know her.

**Sycorax as Scapegoat and Moral Contagion**

Within the church salvation, Godliness, and morality are synonymous. As foil to Prospero, Sycorax is the dark side of humanity, a sinister contrast that allows Prospero to be viewed as just and moral. She is both the cause of Prospero’s fear and angst and a scapegoat for it. Historically, witches became scapegoats in the church’s religious quest to preserve morality among the masses. The preservation of morality was at the core of preserving the power of the church and therefore, the power of the men who controlled the churches. Therefore, witches created from religious superstition were in reality a struggle for power. According to Nachman Ben-Yehuda, during the 15th century, a sharp decline in the church’s authority was noticeable and the church needed a scapegoat, an enemy, it could divinely hate (15). This was necessary, he says, so that a redefinition of moral boundaries could take place. He adds that the most rapidly
developing countries where the Catholic Church was weakest experienced a virulent witch craze.

“Although this was not the first time that the Catholic Church was threatened, the culmination in the Reformation was the first time that the Catholic Church had to cope with a large-scale threat to its very existence and legitimacy” (G.R. Elton qtd. in Ben-Yehuda 15). Instead of solidifying the church, the Reformation nearly destroyed it. The church, both Catholic and Protestant, pounced upon that common enemy, Satan, personified through witches. According to Ben-Yehuda, this made it possible to attribute all the undesirable phenomena associated with the anomie of the age to the conspiracy of Satan and the witches against Christianity. “By associating everything negative with witchcraft, the ideal components of true faith were positively highlighted.” Ben-Yehuda goes on to say, “The authors of the atrocious Malleus Maleficarum can be seen as ‘moral entrepreneurs,’ taking part in a moral crusade, striving to restore the integrity of the old religious-moral community” (15). Witches were the only deviants who could be construed as attacking the very core of the social system, through anti-religion. “This explains why a number of theologians and intellectuals found in the demonology of witches a cognitively satisfactory diagnosis of the moral ills of their time” (Ben-Yehuda 15), thus, creating the perfect scapegoat for all that morally ailed society.

A Biblical precedent strengthened the trend for scapegoating witches. In various Bible versions, when Aaron receives divine instruction to choose a goat. God orders him to “…confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away … into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited (Lev. 16:20). The heaping of sins upon the scapegoat allows the church to create the illusion of morality, which is at the core of its existence. As a result, though, the church’s push for morality and power created a
morality-based social hysteria regarding witches that affected European citizens at all levels of society. Sycorax, like the Biblical scapegoat, has the sins of others heaped upon her and she is driven out of her country much like she is banished to the periphery of the play.

**Royal Attitudes toward Witches**

Sycorax was created after the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Within a patriarchal society, Elizabeth was in league with the Protestant and Catholic Church’s dictates against witches. During her reign from 1558 to 1603, the time of the Renaissance, witches, most of whom were still women, did not fare well during this age of intellectual enlightenment. In 1562 the Queen passed the Elizabethan Witchcraft Act. It was “an act ‘agaynst Conjuracions Inchauntmentes and Witcheraftes’” (Gibson 3). The act, according to Gibson, stressed supposedly verifiable, material grounds for the conviction of witches (3).

Elizabeth was personally affected by witchcraft. In 1536 Henry VIII had her mother Anne Boleyn executed for witchcraft and other charges. During a time of transition to a new female ruler, Elizabethan dramatists, according to Purkiss, were preoccupied with figuring out relations between gender and rule. “It was difficult to separate the figure of the witch from the queen” (185). In addition to those conflicting ideas, the Queen was also the target of witchcraft. Purkiss quotes C. L’Estrange Ewen as saying, “The surviving records suggest that witchcraft prosecutions and executions peaked in the 1580s and 1590s” (185). The witch-alarm, according to Ewen, began “with the discovery of three female wax figures in August of 1578, found buried in a London dunghill, with bristles stuck through the heart” (Purkiss 185). It was clear that one of them represented the Queen “…as it had the name Elizabeth on the forehead; the others apparently represented her close advisors” (Witchcraft). It was assumed that whoever made the
images intended them to melt in the warmth of the dung heap, leading to great pain, distress and eventually the death of those the wax effigies or poppets represented (Witchcraft). “The Spanish ambassador reported the widespread dismay thus caused; it was assumed that the poppets were an attempt on the queen’s life by witchcraft” (Ewen qtd. in Purkiss). As a result, the queen excluded witchcraft and sorcery from a general pardon given the same year (Purkiss 185).

King James VI Persecution of Maleficent Women and Witches

King James, like Elizabeth, was not a friend to those accused of witchcraft. In fact, in 1597, more than a decade before Shakespeare wrote The Tempest, King James VI of Scotland (later King James I of England) wrote Daemonologie In Forme of a Dialogie. The King prefaces the book with, “The fearful abounding at this time in this country of these detestable slaves of the Devil, the witches or enchanters, have moved me to dispatch in post, this following treatise of mine…” He further tells the reader that his intent is to “resolve doubting hearts” and that Satan and his instruments (witches) are real. He instructs how to detect them and prescribes severe punishment (King James xi-xiv).

In Daemonologie King James explains that witches are predominantly female because they are “imperfect animals”: fragile, carnal, impressionable, loose tongued, revengeful, and deceitful. He blames women’s imperfection on the woman who committed the original sin, the Biblical Eve. He says, “It is true that in the Old Testament the Scriptures have much that is evil to say about women, and this because of the first temptress, Eve, and her imitators” (King James Part 1, Question VI pg.1). He even refers to a physical anomaly in Eve. “There was a defect in the formation of the first woman since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as if it were in a contrary direction to man. And since through this defect she is a
imperfect animal, she always deceives” (King James Part 1, Question VI pg.1). He further states that there are more superstitious and corruptible women than men, and that women are more credulous and since the chief aim of the devil is to corrupt faith, he attacks them (King James Part 1, Question VI pg.1). He blames the spread of witchcraft on women’s “slippery tongues.” “They are unable to conceal from fellow women those things which by evil arts they know; and, since they are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft” (King James Part 1, Question VI pg.1). He continues vilifying women when he says they are “more bitter than death,” and “subject to carnal lust” adding that he would rather dwell with a lion and a dragon than to keep house with a wicked woman (King James Part 1, Question VI pg.1). The King’s comments are in line with Prospero’s attitude toward Sycorax. Although the king’s book is damning, he does not persecute all women, and like The Tempest’s virtuous Miranda, good women are praised. He says that good women have “brought beatitude to men, have saved nations, lands, and cities as in the case of Judith, Debbora and Esther. In the New Testament women who have faith led nations and kingdoms away from the worship of idols to the Christian religion” (King James Part 1, Question VI pg.1).

Many witch trials were carried out during the reigns of Elizabeth and James. “For the playwrights and the public, witchcraft in general, and known cases thereof, must have been a topic of unceasing conversation,” says H.W. Herrington (469). He adds,

Everybody knew some old hag who was reputed to be a witch; there were prosecutions for witchcraft, particularly in Middlesex and the neighboring counties, almost every year; and that the facts of witchcraft might not become stale and dull, sensational cases periodically excited the imagination of the public: cases that were typically reported in
the greedily devoured tracts which in that day served instead of the lucubrations of the modern press (469).

People were aroused by the many cases of witchcraft and in the second year of James’s reign, public opinion helped to put through a new statute imposing death as the penalty for all maleficent witchcraft, whether it resulted in death or not, and otherwise slightly increasing the severity of the existing law (Herrington 470).

The King’s Malleus, Daemonologie was extremely influential in the persecution of witches and was widely spread due to the invention of the printing press. Therefore, Shakespeare would have had knowledge of it.
Chapter V
Race in England: An Atmosphere for Persecution

Sycorax’s race and ethnicity have been much debated. Some critics assume that because she is African she is therefore black in skin tone. But Shakespeare never refers to her as black. He does, however, identify her Africanism by assigning her birthplace as Algeria. That and the fact that England had hostile political associations with North Africa provides many clues to her race and ethnicity. It is more likely that she was likely a Muslim Moor, a people whose color has been described as white, tawny, or black.

There is also much debate among scholars about whether race even played a part in Sycorax’s marginalization in *The Tempest*. Historical evidence from Shakespeare’s era supports the theory that her marginalization probably had less to do with his personal ideologies about race, than those of the general English population. His characterization likely had more to do with creating a compelling, though absent witch. Because Shakespeare doesn’t mention Sycorax’s color, it is apparent that it was less an issue for him than for many of his readers.

Race during the Elizabethan era had different connotations from the racial categorizations and divisions of today, although racial prejudice was deeply entrenched. Complicating matters, black did not necessarily refer to dark skin like that of sub-Saharan Africans. It could refer to any person of color. However, being a person of color color became designation of race and was considered an outward manifestation of an inferior being. Ania Loomba states that the term race also connoted, “family, class, or lineage” (598). Therefore, in this study blackness is synonymous with the dissimilar: the non-European of color.
Although Shakespeare does not mention Sycorax’s color in *The Tempest*, it is a racially, ethnically, and politically loaded question when Prospero asks Ariel where Sycorax was born and Ariel responds, “Sir in Argier” (Bate 1.2.264). It is significant that Prospero emphasizes the country of Algeria and not Sycorax’s race directly. This is not a question of geography, but signifies a place of origin of a people deemed inferior to Europeans. According to Loomba, the North African geography evokes fear of Sycorax’s African femininity. “This ‘hag’ from Algiers must be eliminated and detached from her child who can then be adopted as the white man’s burden, as ‘a thing of darkness who is both alien and mine” (Loomba 166-67). This implies that one of the reasons for racial designation is for the disenfranchisement of “lessers.” Loomba says that there are three broad streams of ideas that go into the making of beliefs and debates about otherness or race in early modern Europe and the vocabularies available to Shakespeare. The first, she says, is comprised of medieval as well as classical notions about skin color, religion, and community. The second idea is that the New World and its inhabitants generated a very different set of ideas about others as either innocent or wild savages in a world of uncivilized plenty, ripe for European plucking. Loomba adds,

In this period, descriptions of outsiders helped to shape actual interactions with them, to institute patterns of diplomacy, trade, colonization, and enslavement. Over time they helped Christian Europe to achieve its historical dominance over other peoples. Images of blackness did more than produce ideologies of whiteness—they also helped legitimize actual exploitation of black peoples and nations. While these images obviously reshaped and even distorted reality, they were not complete fabrications but were created in response to a certain historical dynamic (10).
Finally, Loomba says that [in addition to color separation] in every society there also exist notions of difference between men and women, rich and poor, nobility and ordinary folk (Loomba 6). These divisions oftentimes were politically motivated.

Throughout history, some people have embraced the delusion that they can elevate themselves by diminishing others in the way that Prospero denigrates Sycorax. Loomba says that this is an attempt at self-fashioning. She says, “Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange or hostile” and she adds, “The development of Englishness depended on the negation of others” (Loomba 10).

An Historic but False Notion of Race

Notions of race have become deeply entrenched in many societies because like witchcraft, it has origins in the Bible and was therefore perpetrated by the church. For millennia a single misinterpreted/misrepresented story played a major role in the enslavement and persecution of Blacks. Genesis 9:20-27 tells the story of Ham who was cursed by his father, Noah. One day when Noah was drunk, Ham saw him naked. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, it is debated that either Ham or his son Canaan took sexual advantage of Noah. When Noah learned of this from his other sons Shem and Japheth, Noah cursed Canaan, and all his descendants. Noah said, “Cursed be Canaan a servant of servants he shall be to his brothers.” Although race was never mentioned in the Biblical story, throughout history, black became synonymous with servitude and the curse has been used to justify enslavement of Africans. Historian David M. Goldenberg says that there is evidence that a misreading of Hebrew and other Semitic languages led to the mistaken belief that the word “Ham” meant
“dark, black or heat” (qtd. in N.Y. Times). So, Sycorax was indirectly a product of that error, which reverberates until this day.

Because of its Biblical origins, blackness, like the curse of the original sin committed by Eve, has connotations of religious immorality. Sycorax is African and therefore thrice cursed: she is a sexually deviant Eve because she is pregnant when banished to the island; she is black in deeds because of the Curse of Canaan; and she is a heretical daughter of non-Christian North Africa. How colors come to be invested with moral connotations is precisely the history of racism, according to Loomba. Part of this tradition, she says, is derived from a Bible-centered conception of the world in which humanity was graded according to its geographical distance from the Holy Land—thus black people were devilish because they were outside both the physical and the conceptual realm of Christianity (42). “Blacks became identified with the descendants of Ham, and their colour a direct consequence of sexual excess. According to Scot the devil and his associates were inextricably linked with blackness: ‘a damed soul may and dith take the shake of a blackamoore’” (qtd. in Loomba 42). Voyager Richard Hakluyt adds, “And of this blacke and cursed Chus (the son of Ham) came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa” (qtd. in Globe).

Queen Elizabeth was also instrumental in solidifying the ideology of race and for mainstreaming racism against Moors (Muslim North Africans), and blacks from all regions of Africa. In England, she created labels and language of racism. The racial designations were “whitish” Muslims who could blend with English society, black (dark-skinned) Muslim moors, and black sub-Saharan Africans. The two latter groups were mostly servants and prisoners of war from Spain and Portugal. She designated them all as “infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel…” (Bartel 316). In 1596 when Shakespeare was thirty-two, the Queen issued an
open letter to the Lord Mayor of London, announcing that “there are of late divers blackamoores brought into this realme, of which kind of people there are allready here to manie” (Bartels 305). England had immigrants from other parts of Europe who could achieve citizenship under certain restrictions. But, Africans were treated differently. Bartels says, “Elizabeth’s orders to deport certain “blackamoores” are, in fact, unique, for they articulate and attempt to put into a place a race-based cultural barrier of a sort England had not seen since the expulsion of the Jews at the end of the thirteenth century” (Bartels 305-06). She designates the “Negars and Blackamoors” as “those kinde” defined by skin color. Thus, their skin color became a designation of race. As a result, race trumped religion as the main determinant of non-inclusiveness. The Queen’s call for deportation, however, was never widespread. Bartels says that Elizabeth’s documents “have become pivotal to critical assessment of the material and ideological place of “blacks” within England as well as of early constructions of racism and race within English literature of the period” (307). Racial assignations inevitable carried over onto the stage, which in part was a social teaching ground.

Shakespeare’s theatre built in 1599 and fittingly called The Globe, was instrumental in shaping English public opinion about the world. The English did not travel much and learned from the plays what was happening abroad. By 1600 eighteen to twenty thousand visits were made each week to London playhouses. Thus, the theatre deeply shaped English imagining of outsiders (Loomba 6-7). Imtiaz Habib says that the physical staging of the black life garnered from travel, writings, the morphology of popular Elizabethan cultural constructions allowed novel experiential encounters with the small but growing numbers of captured African populations in London (20). He adds, “Different sexual or ethnic lives are the staple of the
industry of the stage” (20). However, Unlike the Moor, Othello, Sycorax was not allowed to appear onstage.

**Argument against a Black Sycorax**

Sycorax’s race is nebulous because of the different designations of North Africans by the English and because Shakespeare omits details about her, choosing to have her already dead for twelve years at the beginning of the play. Writers like Gordon Rohler, Kamau Brathwaite and others have referred to Sycorax as black. Marlene N. Philip asks, “Was Sycorax a black woman…? (35)”. She goes on to say that Sycorax had lain with the devil and produced “Caliban the black man,” although Caliban’s blackness is not mentioned in the play. A possible explanation for the belief that Caliban was black lies in the belief that among other things, black was associated with the devil and with wickedness (Globe). Reginald Scot said that “a damned soul may and doth take the shape of a black moor [black Muslim],” and in Samuel Harsnett’s *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, known to have been read by Shakespeare…a woman is tempted by a demon in the shape of a black man standing at the door andbeckoning her to come away” (qtd. in Globe 3).

Furthering the idea that blackness came to have as much to do with skin color as with Biblical implications of sin, Loomba says, “In so many of the places where we look for early modern histories of blackness, we find skin color intricately connected with the question of faith” (613). Loomba says, “Biblical passages, fables, and emblem books, which speak about the impossibility of whitening an Ethiopian, a Man of ‘‘Inde,’ or a blackamoor, do so by comparing blackness to the inflexible nature of those who are accustomed to do evil” (613). She adds that in fact, “The subject here is often not blackness but the wicked or unbelieving heart” (Loomba
George Best suggests that “Blackness is not a result of the scorching of the skin by the sun, as was often supposed at the time, but a ‘curse and infection of blood’ that is passed down through lineal descent” (qtd. in Loomba 613). Loomba says that Best reverts to the biblical story of Noah’s curse upon Ham (613).

Regardless of Sycorax’s color, she is representative of a North African culture of Muslim Arabs and Moors that Christians in Shakespeare’s day deemed heretics, and vice-versa. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Moor as originally meaning a native or inhabitant of ancient Mauretania, a region of North Africa, corresponding to parts of present-day Morocco and Algeria. Moor evolved to mean a member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent inhabiting North-Western Africa.

Leo Africanus (also called John Leo), an Arab born in Spain and raised in Morocco, is attributed with influencing Shakespeare’s and other Europeans’ ideas about North Africans in his writings (Globe 2). Based on his findings, there was a great disparity between how the English viewed North Africans and how they saw themselves. Leo Africanus traveled throughout the region recording his findings about geography and culture. He writes, “Those Arabians that inhabit in Barbarie or upon the coast of the Mediterranean sea, are addicted unto the studie of good artes and sciences: and those things which concerns their law and religion are esteemed by them in the first place,” and that the people are studious in mathematics, philosophy, and astrology” (qtd. in Globe 2). It becomes obvious that racial division in North Africa are a European political construct when Leo Africanus observes: “Those which we before named white, or tawny Moores are steadfast in friendship…they leade a pleasant and jocunt life” (qtd. in Globe 2). However, in an opposing account about the virtues of Moors Leo Africanus says:

Inhabitants of the cities of Barbarie are somewhat needue and covetous, being also very
proud and high-minded, and wonderfully addicted unto wrath…They observe no certain
order of living nor of laws. Abounding exceedingly with choler, they speake always with
angrie and lowd voice…By nature they are vile and base people, being no better
accounted of by their governours then if they were dogs…(qtd. in Globe2)"

Sycorax, therefore, came to The Tempest full of contradictions like the country assigned to her;
from a European perspective, she is on the one hand cultured and powerful and on the other hand
wrathful, filthy, and base.

Shakespeare himself does not seem as conflicted as his fellow countrymen about race as
evidenced in his sonnet about a “dark woman.” William Wordsworth said that sonnets were the
key that unlocked Shakespeare’s heart” (Wordsworth 2-3). If this is true, then Shakespeare’s
lovesick confessions about the dark woman can be viewed as heartfelt. In Sonnet 127
Shakespeare staunchly defends the dark woman who is purported to be his mistress. He implies
that it is society, not he, that is bigoted against Blacks. He says that long ago dark complexions
were not deemed attractive, and if they were, no one dared admit it. Here he reveals society’s
need to not only demonize peoples of color, but also to further degrade them by demeaning their
appearance. He continues in Sonnet 130 with physical descriptions of the dark woman: “If snow
be white, why then her breasts are dun [grayish brown]; If hairs be wires, black wires grow on
her head.” He says that black is beautiful in his eyes: “…Thy black is fairest in my judgment’s
place” (Bate Sonnet 131). In the same sonnet, he defends her to those who consider her
unattractive. He says, “…then will I swear beauty herself is black, and all they foul that thy
complexion lack” (Bate Sonnet 132). Shakespeare doesn’t discriminate against the dark woman’s
color, but he does detest her rude and despicable actions, which include her involvement with his
young friend. He states, “In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds.” Here he confirms the common association of the word black with evil. He vacillates between being lovelorn and bitter because of the dark woman’s power over him and because she at some point both pities and disdains him (Bate Sonnet 132). Prospero’s treatment of Sycorax is much like Shakespeare’s treatment of his dark lover; he caresses her with one hand (admitting to her power), while slapping her with the other (cursing her control over him).

Much Ado About Blue Eye’d Hags

There is much debate among critics about Sycorax’s blue eyes as a contradiction to her North Africa origins. Prospero references them when he calls her, “This blue-eyed hag…” (Bate 1.2.317). Richard M. Waugaman calls for a reassessment of the term. He says,

Editors of *The Tempest* have long struggled over the meaning and implications of Prospero’s recollection of Sycorax as “This blew eye’d hag.” Modern editors typically read blue for the First Folio’s blew; of those editors choosing to remark upon Shakespeare’s choice of descriptive term, the majority appear to agree with David Horne’s assertion that ‘Blue veins in the eyelids were thought to be a symptom of pregnancy. Earlier editions, such as those of Morton Luce and the New Cambridge edition of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and Dover Wilson, hint at alternative readings—Luce’s modernization of blew to blue is understood too imply “lurid circles round the eyes: hence livid or haggard-looking.

Waugaman mentions how editor, Leah Marcus, has sought to “deconstruct editorial practice, addressing questions of race and editorial imperative in readings of Sycorax as ‘blue’-eyed (604). Waugaman says, “Marcus takes umbrage with attempts to read against the blue eyes
of Shakespeare’s apparently Algerian witch, hinting at potential imperialist undertones to propositions of a compositor’s error” (604). Waugaman adds, “…for Marcus, suggestion that Shakespeare may probably have written ‘blere ey’d’ or ‘blear ed’d’, and ‘blew’ is perhaps a misprint of the first folio, rests on the assumption that Sycorax could not possibly be blue eyed” (604).

P.A. Daniel finds the bleary-eyed theory questionable. He says, “Shakespeare’s hags, although doubtless blear-eyed, were as likely to be blue-eyed as not.” He continues, “The special object of referring to Sycorax was to remind Ariel of her cruelty towards himself” (Daniel 107). Casting her eyes as blue also adds a more sinister hue to Sycorax because of the superstition that people of color with “light eyes” are instruments of the Devil.

In actuality, it is not uncommon for Algerian Berbers (Chaoui or Shawia) to have blue eyes. M.W. Hilton-Simpson during his travels from from 1913 to 1917 in the land of Berbers in Algeria, observed “A very large proportion of fair (sometimes golden) hair, blue eyes, and complexions, especially in the case of young children who lack the tan produced by years of exposure of the fierce heat of the summer sun, often paler than our own, were the physical characteristics which at once arrested our attention…” (40). Hilton-Simpson described neighboring Saharan Arabs as “Negroid” and found them intermingled with the Berbers (40).

However, in the unlikelihood that the people Sycorax represents were actually Black, there are a number of possible reasons for blue eyes. It could be due to a recessive gene, which can cause a medical condition called Ocular Albinism that manifests as blue irises in Dark-skinned Africans (Percha). Or it could be a simple case of corneal arcus, a blue ring around a dark iris, common among mature people including blacks. There are numerous assertions among critics that blue veins in the eyelids were thought to be a symptom of pregnancy. If Sycorax had
been a person of color, blue veins would not be visible. Another assertion is that Ralph Crane, scribe of the compositor’s manuscript of the First Folio in the 1623 collection of Shakespeare’s plays, made a mistake when he transcribed *The Tempest*.

Another theory about blue eyes relates to the evil eye. Belief in the evil eye is found in Islamic doctrine, based upon the statement of Prophet Muhammad who says, "The influence of an evil eye is a fact; if anything would precede the destiny it would be the influence of an evil eye, and when you are asked to take a bath (as a cure) from the influence of an evil eye, you should take bath” (Sahih 026:5427). According to Frederick T. Elworthy, it was firmly believed by ancients, that some malignant influence darted from the eyes of envious or angry persons, and so infected the air as to penetrate and corrupt the bodies of both living creatures and inanimate objects. The evil eye is also mentioned in the Bible in Proverbs 23:6: “Eat thou not the bread of him that hath an evil eye, neither desire thou his dainty meats.”

Witchery in North Africa

“Sycoraxes” remain deeply entrenched in Islamic culture, which still tolerates benevolent witches. In Algeria they still turn to the “arts” to address problems and situations that religion cannot resolve. According to Kenyan Christian philosopher, John S. Mbiti, the Koran mentions many spiritual beings, including angels, jinns, and devils. But because orthodox Islam gives little consideration to spirits connected with natural phenomena and objects, African Muslims tend to have a negative attitude towards them (Mbiti, 251). Mbiti says, “The ideal Muslim attitude disapproves of them, but African Muslims, especially women, revert to these cults to seek relief from afflictions that are not remedied by Islam” (251). Ironically, Islamic practice encourages divination and the use of good magic. It also recognizes the efficacy of
sorcery and witchcraft but condemns them (Mbiti 251). Therefore, Islam might in some cases approve and sanction magical procedures that are directed towards such “legitimate” ends as the cure of disease and the assurance of prosperity and success, even if in the background the people retain hope in God (Mbiti 251). If Shakespeare derived Sycorax from the north African Islamic culture with which England was at odds, and based on anthropological evidence on the peoples of Algeria, it is believable that Sycorax was a blue-eyed witch.
Chapter VI

Stage Witches: From Bugs and Beasts Before the Law, to Familiars, Fairies, and Sorcerers

Shakespeare’s ambiguous treatment of Sycorax in *The Tempest* likely has less to do with a deliberate marginalization of her than with politics of the era and the emergence of prototypical stage witches who were often loose theatrical versions of historical witches. The evolution of the stage witch is long and varied. Sycorax and other witches were actually preceded by possessed beasts, familiars, fairies, male magicians, and kindly witches.

The history of witchcraft in Europe would be incomplete without mention of animals that were accused of heresy. During Medieval times, primitive legislation existed against offending animals and insects as well as humans. There are recorded cases regarding the prosecution of child-eating pigs, crop-eating locusts, obnoxious caterpillars, dogs and even gnats. They were tried and convicted through “acts of personification” (Evans 10). No heretical creature escaped the law; for, it was believed that some animals were animated by the devil and that demons were the real cause of human disease and blights. Also, animals, like humans, were thought to have moral responsibility. Therefore, they could be excommunicated or hanged by order of the church. Barthalomew Chassenee, a prominent French lawyer and an authority on the subject of prosecuting animals, made his reputation as counsel for some rats that had been put on trial before the ecclesiastical court on the charge for “feloniously and wantonly destroying barley crops” (Evans 18). He believed that if a crime consisted in the commission of deeds hurtful to
other sentient beings, knowing that such actions to be wrong, then the lower animals are certainly guilty of criminal offences. He said, “The devil used irrational animals to our detriment” (Evans 55).

E.P. Evans states:

Animals were put on a par with old crones in bearing their full share of persecution during the witchcraft delusion. Pigs suffered most in this respect, since they were assumed to be peculiarly attractive to devils. But Beezlebub did not disdain to become incarnate in all sorts of creatures, such as cats, dogs of high and low degree, wolves, night-birds, and indeed in any beast, especially if it chanced to be black. (165)

In one famous case in 1474, the magistrates of Bale, Switzerland sentenced a cock to be burned at the stake “for the heinous and unnatural crime of laying eggs” (Evans 162). People from all walks of life flocked to see the burning. Rooster-laid eggs were believed to contain an ingredient used in witch ointments and could possibly hatch a basilisk, a legendary European reptile allegedly the king of serpents. It was believed that basilisk could cause death with a glance (Evans 163).

The persecution and condemnation of witchy animals speaks to the depth and breadth of the witch-lunacy in Europe. In the people’s imaginations, all living creatures were naturally imbued with the power to do demonic harm. But even after their persecution abated, animals’ role in witchcraft did not end. They reappear in folklore in the form of familiars: animals that are demonically possessed helpmates to witches. The animals were protectors and magical aids. The relationship was a depraved one in that in payment for their services, the animals requested permission to suck the witch’s blood or teat (Wilby 295). Fairies and familiars were often
mutually inclusive. “It could be assumed that, no matter how many similarities can be identified between the fairy and the familiar, they emerged in the period as two distinct phenomena for one prominent reason—the fairy was believed capable of helping humans, while the familiar was believed to be only concerned with harming them (Wilby 297).

In both elite and popular culture of the period, individuals believed that they cultivated either non-visual or visual relationships with fairies. Even the most common ordinary type of non-visual human relationship with a fairy would have been implicitly contractual in nature. John Aubrey claimed, for example, that in England “Countrey-people…were wont to please the Fairies, that they might doe them no shrewd turns” (qtd. in Wilby 290).

Fairy mythology in England, according to H.W. Herrington, is ancient, far antedating the accession of Elizabeth, and in its development no sudden or unusual incidents can be discovered. He says, “John Lyly, the first English dramatist to employ the fairies, demonstrably uses them as a theatric device although they often were not pertinent to the plot” (Herrington, 448-449)). Herrington also says that in Robert Greene’s well-known romantic comedy, James IV (c. 1594), occur fairy ballets in great profusion that stand apart in an enveloping action, which is quite distinct from the plot of the play (449). “The pseudo-fairy scene in the last act of The Merry Wives of Windsor first published in 1602…is clearly introduced by Shakespeare to round off the play with a lyric scene” (Herrington 449). Herrington says, by the 1550s the fairy as a stage figure was well known; “We need not search, therefore, for any special stimulus which urged Shakespeare more fully to display the fairy lore in A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” Shakespeare took up the established dramatic vogue of the fairy, and directed it into new channels, gathering in figures, traditions, beliefs—new to the drama, but old in popular story, which were doubtless familiar to him from infancy” (Herrington 450).
Fairy stories, according to Purkiss, were a sign of an outmoded structure of belief, always already on the point of disappearing, and hence associated, like the folktales, with elderly, uneducated women (160). She adds that consequently, courts and other interlocutors were more than likely to reinterpret a fairy story as a story about some more up-to-date bugbear: a demon, a witch (Purkiss 160).

As belief in fairies diminished, so did their random insertion into stage dramas. Herrington says that at the turn of the fifteenth century the fairies were vanishing from the general drama to find a safe harborage in the court masque (452). “The Elizabethan had lost what faith he formerly held in the fairy-folk” (Herrington 452). He observes that a “decided shift in dramatic values took place just before 1600, and which after that date would have rendered the fanciful fairy material unacceptable to the general [public]” (Herrington 452).

However, fairies set the stage for the magician, which was “an actual figure in contemporary life, pointed at, resorted to” (Herrington 467). Herrington says,

Especially well known were various less pretentious dealers in magic: conjurers, exorcisers, and the like. The typical practicing magician is far closer to actual reality than any figure hitherto considered. The popular conception of him in the time of Elizabeth is a development from actual figures, broadly represented all over Europe from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. Sometimes these persons were primarily profound scholars, enlightened investigators, like the great Roger Bacon; but if their researches were devoted to the obscurer branches of knowledge—among which, in those times, all scientific pursuits were included—they were sure to be reported, in common fame, as workers in the forbidden arts. Many of them in their own belief actually practiced magic” (459).
Eventually, “All of the more vulgar traffickers in the supernatural were included in this grouping; prominent in their number are the conjurer, the wise woman, the witch…Elizabethan life was crowded with these figures” (Herrington 467). Herrington says that it should be observed in particular that public interest and discussions of witchcraft and all related themes must have been active for several decades before 1600 (470). “The whole group of conjurers, wise, women, and witches was thoroughly familiar. Hence portraits of such persons in literature were sure to be readily recognized and understood (470). He adds that the most interesting period of witchcraft falls in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He says,

> These are pre-eminently the centuries of the great documentary war over the dogma; of eager discussion in pulpit, in council, and on the street; of fevered outbreaks of prosecution; of the great trials. Naturally, a subject of such universal interest is abundantly represented in literature, and nowhere is it revealed more fully than in that most typical of literary forms in this period, the Elizabethan drama (Herrington 447).

In England, literary witches slowly evolved from rascally, benevolent wise and cunning women to Sycorax-like grotesqueness. But prior to 1597, stage witches did not “photograph” real witches although the public was very much aware of them (Herrington 477). Herrington says, “The gross sensationalism of the witch accounts over which the public gloated—the revolting details, for instance of intercourse with familiars, of the petty animosities of wrinkled old hags…are prior to 1597 strangely absent” (477).

Purkiss is in concurrence with Herrington when she states that the witch of the Elizabethan stage gradually emerges from a mass of supernatural figures: sorcerers and sorceresses, classical witches, wise women, prophetesses and fairies (183). She says, “While
‘real’ witches were being hanged in unprecedented numbers, the stage was not especially interested in their fate, seeing the witch as one among many supernatural figures who could be offered as functions of comic and tragic plots of unexpected revelation which the dramatists enjoyed” (Purkiss 183). She also addresses how the politics of church and state during Shakespeare’s time, undoubtedly affected how witches were portrayed on stage:

The pressure exerted by Elizabeth on a masculine identity so fragile that it was unable to tolerate the equation of power with femininity in any sphere made witch more of a problem, and perhaps more of a threat. Taken together with the politicization of the figure in relation to the queen, it isn’t surprising that few were game enough to portray witches and sorceresses (Purkiss 187).

The fact that “It was hard to maintain the distinction between the queen and the witch, partly to Elizabeth being linked to the moon, and dramatists’ interest in classical witch-lore” (Purkiss 187) undoubtedly created an awkward situation for dramatists. And after all, her mother, Anne Boleyn, was beheaded for being witch among other things and witchcraft is carried through maternal lines. And in 1587 Elizabeth did have Mary Queen of Scots beheaded for treason.

According to Herrington, "Cases of witchcraft aroused widespread interest, and were abundantly represented in pamphlet publications and in literature. The agitation, in fact, seems endemic throughout practically the whole sweep of the Elizabethan drama” (Herrington 470). “In particular, a debt to the Italian is shown in a number of interesting plays which include, Gasciogne’s well-known Supposes (1566) translated from Ariosto’s I Suppositi, in which the parasite Pasiphilo exhibits a pretended knowledge of palmistry, and La Spirirtata (1561) in which a man is hoaxed into the belief that his house is haunted by spirits” (Herrington 471).
The aforementioned trends lent themselves toward a more realistic literary and stage witch, which began in England, according to Herrington. He says, “We may regard the Englishman as making an approach in his own way, and according to the standards of his time, toward a realistic portrait” (471). Herrington refers to some of the early English workmanship of Trappola, which professes both magic and medical arts as “…a feeble drawing of the same Italian stock character” (472).

Realism in female witches likely began trending with The Fat Woman of Brainford or Brentford, often referred to The Merry Wives, as a cunning woman (Herrington 481). “In Heywood’s Wise Woman of Hogdsdon (c. 1604) we have a perfectly inimitable portrait of this familiar figure in Elizabethan life. Vulgar, resourceful, with dozens of trades and with innumerable tricks up her sleeve, she nevertheless, through her vigorous if coarse humor, her abounding good nature, and her essential kindliness, endears herself to the reader (Herrington 481).

Among the prominent examples of more realistic stage witches was Shakespeare’s Macbeth in 1606, followed by Ben Jonson’s Masques of Queens of 1609. Although these plays appear late in the Elizabethan era, Herrington asserts that the witchcraft creed was not vehemently believed in the earlier years of Elizabeth’s reign; if epidemics of witch persecution be taken as evidence, it will be recalled that some of the most famous of all English witch trials took place before 1600, for instance, in 1566, at Chelmsford, Essex, not far from London, Mother Waterhouse was executed for the keeping of cat and toad that she used to kill geese, hogs, and cattle of neighbors and…to kill a neighbor whom she disliked and finally her own husband (Herrington 469). “In 1579 and 1589 further outbreaks resulted in the execution of three women on each occasion” (Herrington 469).
The possibility of a Sycorax character likely began with studies of wise women, as in Lyly’s *Mother Bombie*, in 1594. Earlier in the same year Philip Henslowe notes in his diary a performance of *The Witch of Islington* and by the next year had been written *Black Joan*. The former was either an out-and-out witch play, or else such a play with political bearings. The latter, in all probability was a witch play also (Herrington 478). Herrington says, “If we may judge from the titles and the growing realism of dramatic treatment, they were of a kind of far closer to actual life than those hitherto considered (478). Other writers joined this trend toward realism. Ben Jonson and Thomas Dekker started about 1597; John Heywood probably in 1596; and George Chapman, probably in 1596; and John Marston, about 1599 (478). “In some degree in all these writers a trend toward realism is evident—a trend continued in others who shortly followed. The stage career of Thomas Middleton, for instance, begins by 1602; of John Webster, c. 1602” (Herrington 478).

The plays of the highest interest in realism that illuminate the witch and conjurer all belong to the Shakespearean canon, starting with the first and second parts of *Henry VI*. Herrington says, “Shakespeare and his collaborators in the first *Henry VI* have often been reviled for degrading the heroic figure of Joan of Arc to a common witch; yet they were but perpetuating the English national tradition; following the well-reputed authority of [Scot’s] Holinshed [Chronicles]” (Herrington 473). Herrington adds that throughout the play, Talbot and others are made to hurl at Joan the accusation of witchcraft (473). “Certain details, gathered from current knowledge of witches seen in part one of Henry VI are the most commonplace stock features of witchcraft…” (Herrington 474).

Irish critic and poet Edward Dowden, who asserts that the play was written by more than one hand, namely Greene Peele and Marlow, says, "It is a happiness not to have to ascribe to our
greatest poet the crude and hateful handling of the character of Joan of Arc, excused though to some extent it may be by the occurrence of view in our old English chronicles” (qtd. in Dyer).

Margery Jourdayn, a witch in the second Henry VI, is fashioned after real-life Witch of Eye Next Westminster, Margery Jourdemayne, who was burned at the stake for treasonable witchcraft during the fifteenth century. The stage witch Margery is summoned by the Duchess of York, along with others to engage in the art of necromancy to summon a spirit that will predict of England (Shakespeare Henry 1.4).

The witch of Brentford, mentioned by Mrs. Page in Shakespeare’s The Merry Wives of Windsor (4.2), lends itself to realism because according to Dyer, she was “an actual personage, the fame of whose vaticinations [prophesying] must have been traditionally well known to an audience of the time, although the records we possess of her are scant enough.”

The true-to-life witches in Macbeth according to Scottish writer William Gunnyon, “are probably Scottish hags.” He describes them as “hellish monsters, brewing hell-broth, having cats and toads for familiars, loving midnight, riding on the passing storm, and devising evil against such as offend them” (qtd. in Dyer). Some critics claim that they are not witches at all, but “are allied to the Norns ofr Fates of Scandinavian paganism (Dyer). Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge observes, “The weird sisters are as true a creation of Shakespeare’s as his Ariel and Caliban—fates, fairies, and materialising witches being the elements.” He adds:

They are wholly different from any representation of witches in the contemporary writers, and yet presented a sufficient external resemblance to the creatures of vulgar prejudice to act immediately on the audience. Their character consists in the imaginative disconnected from the good, they are the shadowy obscure and fearfully
anomalous of physical nature, elemental avengers without sex or kin” (Coleridge qtd. in Dyer).

From these stage witches evolves Sycorax, the final Shakespearean witch. She is the culmination of all the political and social influences that created her predecessors. At her inception, knowledge of all that she represents is already part of the collective psyche of that age. And that which is already indelibly ingrained, needs not appear on stage. Additionally, if Shakespeare did want to make a political statement with Sycorax, it behooved him to relegate such a powerful image to the margins of the play.

Purkiss asks, “Could it be that this authentic or ‘real’ witch was more awkward and unmanageable as a signifier than the theatrical display of sorcery?” (208).
While many contemporary writers and scholars either gloss over or completely ignore Sycorax in their responses to *The Tempest*, there are those who resurrect Sycorax with the intent of giving her the voice denied her in the play or to use her to express their emotions. Among those writers are contemporary British novelist, Marina Warner author of *Indigo*, African American novelist Gloria Naylor author of *Mama Day*; British poet Ted Hughes, and Chicana scholar, Irene Lara. Naylor and Warner in their resurrection of Sycorax, validate and perpetuate her incontrovertible power. Both writers rescue Sycorax from phallocentric oppression, thus giving her a socially resonant and relevant voice. In the absence of patriarchal rule, their Sycoraxes can rise to their full potentials: both constructive and destructive powers. Naylor and Warner illustrate how Sycorax handles opposing powers with wit, spirituality, and by harnessing the powers of nature. Lara calls for a literacy of Sycorax.

In Warner’s *Indigo*, Sycorax thrives in a non-phallocentric community of gender equality. However, she has psychic and has other magical abilities that neither men nor women in her community have. Warner exposes greed and other evils of colonialism and patriarchal rule. As in *The Tempest*, Sycorax’s spirit endures even after death, while the British patriarchal invaders of her island ultimately come to ruin. Naylor’s character, Mama Day (Sycorax), exists in a matriarchal society in which men are subtly subjugated to secondary roles. In addition to Mama Day, there are other characters in the story that practice magic: one male and one female.
However, only the woman proves to be competition for Mama Day. The self-professed male wizard proves to be a sham.

Poet Ted Hughes gives a unique interpretation of Sycorax as both goddess and demoness. According to Ann Skea, an associate of Hughes, he was a student of mysticism, magic, occult neoplatonism, and metaphysics. She says that all things Hughes studied, he did so seriously and understood well and discerned all of these in Shakespeare’s work (Skea). In the poem “Setebos” in his collected works Birthday Letters [to Shakespeare], Hughes uses characters from The Tempest to describe his tempestuous relationship with his mentally unstable wife, Sylvia Plath. In the poem, Sycorax is a metaphor for Plath’s dark moods. Hughes writes that the ever-present Sycorax “bobbed in the hazy surf at the horizon” (132). Hughes also writes, “I heard the bellow in your voice that made my nape-hair prickle.” Ted Hughes’s terror of Sylvia is Prospero’s terror of Sycorax. She is a metaphor not only for his Sylvia’s dysfunction, but also for the tempest that she causes in Prospero’s mind. Hughes’s ambivalence about Sycorax is apparent in his works. Like Prospero, he at once vilifies and glorifies her. In the poem “An Alchemy,” Hughes’s Oedipus repudiates Jocasta in the same manner that Prospero repudiates Sycorax (Collected Poems 279). Hughes refers to Sycorax first as, the “Black Venus,” followed by “Double-tongued swine-udderred Sycorax.” He compares her to the female demon purported to be the Biblical Adam’s first wife, Lilith, who slides from a tree like a serpent as she “releases the rainbow-breasted dove with a leaf of light” (279). Hughes acknowledges Sycorax’s pervading presence in The Tempest when he says, “Sycorax, the ultimate queen of hell, is still everywhere like the natural pressure of the island’s atmosphere” (382). Unlike many who from a Eurocentric perspective dismiss Sycorax, Hughes not only acknowledges her power, but also her ownership of the island. He says, “Prospero’s statement that she died is little more than a figure of speech:
the island is hers.” Skea’s says, “She [the goddess] is also the alienated female energies in us and in our world” and that Hughes embraces the idea that “suppressed female energies become demonic hallucinatory, dream figures.” Hughes’s poetic ambivalence regarding Sycorax exemplifies the patriarchal inclination to at once acknowledge the goddess-like or godless nature of women while oppressing and suppressing her to her a powerless space.
Chapter VIII
Conclusion: Sycorax as Artifact

More than four hundred after *The Tempest* was written, she continues to be resurrected. For some she presents the opportunity to give voice to the voiceless African woman and indigenous cultures. To others she represents the colonial oppressed. Sometimes she is a political pawn: a symbol for European suppression of Islamic expansion. Most often she is the voiceless and marginalized woman of color. Abena Busia states, “Imperial fictions are choreographed to keep darker men and women subject” (94). This fictive choreography can be intentional or subliminal. Busia believes that non-European women are “rarely rendered as human beings; they are presented as insubstantial symbols” (94). This is clearly the case with absent, voiceless Sycorax. It is this inactive silence of the African woman that Busia addresses, much like Lara, who seeks to give voice to the unvoiced. Lemuel A. Johnson also addresses the “tongue-snatched” incarnation of Sycorax. Lara urges the construction of a “literacy of Sycorax by exploring Eurocentric reluctance of writers and critics to seriously address issues of racialized feminine spirituality, which is coded as magic or superstition.” Sycorax for me is a historiographical, psychological, social, political, and anthropological study of oppression that creates Sycoraxes in a never-ending grapple for domination and power among humans. It is also important that various texts like *The Tempest* be periodically re-examined for their relevance to human existence. Isidore Diala believes that a continuing trend in the current re-evaluation of texts “is recognition of a hidden polemic in narratives, as well as their inherent malleability,
which makes re-staging invaluable for both the interrogation…and for the invention of a new human image” (1).

The application of Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction to *The Tempest* confirms that the absent presence of Sycorax is worthy of close examination: a breaking down and examination of textual meaning and implications. Derrida, a Jewish Algerian, understands marginalism and otherness. The father of deconstruction theory, Derrida deals in dualism, hierarchies, and orders of subordination. In Academician Jack Reynold’s study of Derrida, he finds that deconstruction functions by engaging in sustained analysis of the literal meaning of a text, and yet also to finding within that meaning, perhaps in the neglected corners of the text, internal problems that actually point towards alternative meanings (Reynolds). Sycorax offers a study of alternative interpretations and meanings. Reynolds, say, “Deconstruction must hence establish a methodology that pays close attention to these apparently contradictory imperatives: sameness and difference [being and not being]”. He continues, “Deconstruction contends that in any text, there are inevitably points of equivocation and 'undecidability' that betray any stable meaning that an author might seek to impose upon his or her text” (Reynolds). Reynolds contends that in Derrida’s theory, “The process of writing always reveals that which has been suppressed, covers over that which has been disclosed, and more generally breaches the very oppositions that are thought to sustain it.” So, regardless of Shakespeare’s intent in *The Tempest*, whether to allegorize colonialism in the New World or if there was some other political or literary agenda, by suppressing Sycorax, he sustains her. She has become a literary artifact. She undoubtedly will continue to survive the centuries, whether it is as demoness or goddess. Shakespeare’s suppression of her has created an ongoing dialogue about her.
However abbreviated Sycorax’s role, Shakespeare at least gave her a name, a country, and powers that rivaled those of the most powerful in his society, the European man. And although societal norms dictated that she must be damned if she must exist, Shakespeare’s inclusion of a powerful African witch was progressive. What he created, whether consciously or unconsciously, is a symbol of enduring feminine power.
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