

Miranda and The Other Missing Women in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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Abstract

The Tempest by William Shakespeare was one of Shakespeare's last romances. The play throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was seen more from a historical perspective or as a tussle of binary powers fighting for supremacy which ultimately led its way towards postcolonial contextualization in the twentieth century. It was only in late twentieth century with the advent of feminism that the play began to be noticed for its nuanced portrayal of gender and body politics. The earlier critics of the play were silent on the character of Miranda and other missing women but their existences should not be taken for granted for they too have a story to tell. In this essay I attempt to revisit them and deconstruct their characters for what they represent now away from earlier romanticized myths and representations.

Keywords: Miranda, Gender, Absent Women, Power Politics, Feminism

William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a romance first performed in 1611. A lot has happened to the play since then. One of them being a recent happening in late twentieth century when feminism as a literary theory began to emerge. Due to the portrayal of Miranda and absence of any other women characters, the play got the due attention it deserved from many feminist writers and their works such as Hilda Dolittle's *Avon River*, Diana Brydon's *Sister*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Sarah Murphy's *The Measure of Miranda* which opened its door to new feminist criticism of the play as well as an attempt was made to present Miranda in a different light. It was not only confined to its former sociopolitical realm and the play became a crucial resource for appropriations to revise, reshape and refocus.

The character of Miranda, Prospero's only daughter is also the play's only female protagonist; rest others are just talked about. It is interesting to note that Miranda as one of Shakespeare's heroines never got much attention like her other counterparts as an individual like Ophelia, Desdemona, Cleopatra or Juliet got because of their visible issues. But Miranda too needs our critical attention. In early ages of the play, she was concluded simply as Samuel Taylor Coleridge says "In the very first speech of Miranda, the simplicity and tenderness of her character are at once laid open." (Norton, 122) Thus, she was perceived as an embodiment of virtue, compassion, beauty, nobility and chastity which implies that she was virtue personified.

Moreover, she is highly romanticized as the ideal, as a “goddess” and as the “perfect” woman that can ever exist as Ferdinand keeps repeating. But can anyone be that perfect? Or are we dehumanizing her by putting her on a pedestal? As a matter of fact, the focus on Miranda is crucial as she is both an agent and a sufferer of social conditioning, patriarchal politics and the issues run deeper complicated by the play’s racial, social and gender politics; which is why Anne Thompson speaks out that “The specific repression of Miranda has been neglected.” (Thompson,176)

The play seems to give too much significance to female chastity and fertility; and Miranda herself believes that being chaste is her biggest virtue and therefore a prized possession as is evident when she says to Ferdinand during her confession of love that “but by my modesty (The jewel in my dower)...” (Norton, 44) that she is ready to marry him. She has metaphorized her modesty as a precious object with monetary connotations and hence is fit for matrimony. Now the question that arises is this- is her belief in modesty her own opinion or is it conditioned and influenced by her father’s lessons on female virtue? It is the latter as Prospero can be seen to have an innate obsession for ideals of virtue. He even adds the prefix of virtue to his wife. This fixation is further strengthened by Ferdinand, the prince of Naples who says to Miranda that “O, if a virgin...” (Norton, 22), he is also ready to marry her. The use of ‘if’ catches our attention as he has declared that he has pre condition to his offer that is, he shall marry only if she is a virgin. Now the word virgin can have two meanings, one is literal which refers to chastity and the other is virgin can also mean an unmarried woman. But by looking at the play’s poignant attention to chastity the meaning implied might be the former one. In addition to this, critics have pointed out that although Miranda is intelligent, assertive and emotional, her position in the play is secondary to her father. She holds a subordinate position but is central to the play because she is the vehicle of his master plan, the only way to restore his former position and glory as a duke. She acts as the means by which he can achieve his end goal. Thus, she is a victim of power scheme and treated as a movable possession. Her chastity is an important political card for him, and in some ways maybe his only card. Therefore he takes great care for everything to go as planned. Prospero’s role as a father has got its share of criticism as readers often feel that his major interest lies in his taking revenge from his Neapolitan usurpers and thereby regaining his throne. Miranda, although a daughter remains just a master key to invert his status. He is not interested in her as an individual. In fact, the education that he provides her is in the nature of a formality. She acts as the prize to be won but don’t want her to be to “Make the prize light.” (Norton, 23)

It stands true that he acts as the active agent in her life as he is the one who pre planned everything and fixed her marriage also his approval was essential for smooth sailing of things. Being her first and only mentor he is the controller of her sexuality as she has very limited experience of the real world. If Miranda would have lost her chastity she would have become

useless or at least it would have brought irreparable damage. Prospero initially pretends to be a hurdle in Miranda and Ferdinand's courtship but their betrothal is already planned in advance way before they even met. She stands central and crucial but is "deprived of any possibility of human freedom, growth or thought. She need only be chaste – to exist as a walking emblem of chastity." (Leininger, 291); and Miranda too "has completely internalized the patriarchal order of things, thinking of herself as a subordinate to her father." (Thompson) Miranda understands her father's darker side more when even though he was acting rudely accuses and dismisses Ferdinand as a spy and usurper of the island to the point that Miranda consoles Ferdinand that Prospero isn't generally this cold and contemptuous. This side enhances even more when he doubts his own brother's birth and legitimacy and attacks Antonio of his usurpation. This attack is an indirect attack on their mother's fidelity which becomes disturbing. Ultimately, abhorred by what her father is doubting as he says, "Mark his condition, and th' event; the tell me If this might be a brother" and she comes to defend her grandmother's virtuousness and replies "I should sin To think but nobly of my grandmother. Good wombs have borne bad sons." (Norton,10)

When we closely observe Miranda we understand that she is not as meek, docile and submissive as is often portrayed. Inside her lies a young assertive young woman whose glimpses can be seen from time to time. One of her biggest merit is that she lacks the petty artificiality of coquetry as well as assumed coyness. The first time that we are taken by surprise is when she rebukes and denounces Caliban for his attempted sexual assault. She insults him and declares that he is fit to live in a cave. Her angry outburst shows her strong nature. Second, during her courtship she takes on an active role; her agency is not passive and this is also the time when we witness all her disobediences. She meets and talks to Ferdinand without her father's permission, reveals her name despite his warning and tries to help him when Ferdinand is given the task of manual labor. In exception to all this, "Still despite occasional disobedience and outspokenness, Miranda remains the chaste ideal of early modern womanhood." (Arden, 27) Her role in life is fixed as a dutiful daughter and future wife and mother of future kings of Naples.

The Missing Mother

Miranda's mother is a complete absence in the play not just physically but also psychologically. Prospero never brings her up except when he had to tell his tale of past domestic history and misery. It seems as if he suffers from selective amnesia when it comes to his wife. Who was she and what happened to her no one knows. It is to be noted that the only time she is mentioned is also in reference to value of chastity. Hence, it is quite clear that Prospero was skeptical when it comes to feminine virtues as his ambiguous remark about his own wife's fidelity leads to an uncomfortable situation. The situation arises when Miranda asks him, "Sir, are you not my father?" to which he replies "Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and She said thou wast my

daughter” (Norton,8) it becomes to an extent surprising to see that Miranda’s legitimacy comes from her mother’s side not her father’s; because his wife was virtuous he accepts Miranda as his child. It means that not all women are virtuous and she is an exception. He has taken a safe refuge in the teachings of chastity and refuses to give further information about his wife. This signifies according to Stephen Orgel that “although she was virtuous, women as a class are not, and that were it not for her word, Miranda’s legitimacy would be in doubt.” (Norton, 201) Like Prospero, Miranda too cannot recollect anything about her mother. She remembers several women tending to her during her infant days but her mother’s memories are absent. The only one thing we know for sure about Prospero’s past is that he neglected his duty as a duke as he was too immersed in his magic books which made his seat vulnerable. Could that also mean that he didn’t really care anymore about Milanese citizens than he cared about his wife? Is his feeling for both of them is indifference?

The Missing Sycorax

Although, unfortunately in Prospero’s memories his wife is absent but Sycorax, Caliban’s mother from Algiers is consistently present. Critic Leah Marcus indicates that “Sycorax is a shadowy figure.” (Norton, 287) We observe that whenever Sycorax’s reference comes up or Prospero shows signs of great rage and vehemence. We keep wondering what did she do or what grave crime did she commit? What wrong did she do to him for him to get so furious when it is indeed evident that he never met her; only Ariel did but can he be a reliable narrator ? Did he possibly ‘edit’ many things? All we have is second hand information about her and Prospero trying to monopolize her narrative. It might be true that the information that Caliban’s father is a devil might be Prospero’s addition to the story. Even John Dryden indicates about Caliban’s ancestry as “begotten by an incubus on a witch.” (Norton, 119), this too can come under scrutiny. Are all the doubts about Sycorax’s past, her character and sexuality partly because Sycorax was with a child when she was banished? Maybe, as she is consciously contrasted with all the other virtuous women in the play and mainly with Miranda. That is why critic Ania Loomba correctly indicated that Miranda and Sycorax are opposites “between them they split the patriarchal stereotype of woman as the white devil-virgin and whore, goddess (Miranda is mistaken for one by Ferdinand) and witch.” (Loomba,151) That is also why Sycorax is referred with every form of loathing possible by Prospero, examples “foul witch”, “hag” and “This damned witch Sycorax, For mischief manifold and sorceries terrible” (Arden, 168)

Prospero attacks Sycorax’s magic as “wicked dew” involving “toads, beetles, bats.” Whereas his magic is benign and “There’s no harm done”(Arden, 150) even though his boasts that his is more potent and morally superior than hers. Is his attack on Sycorax something to do with his unconscious feeling that they both are similar in many ways and hence he tries to suppress and deny it? All critics have observed that Prospero and Sycorax are binaries consciously constructed

by Shakespeare in the play. He is in fact Sycorax's mirror image, an alter ego that he never admits and wishes to run away from. Their stories run parallel from their arrival each with a child and relying on magic for survival. As a duke, he is every bit opposite of 'dukely' qualities of nobleness and kindness. He is obsessed and keeps questioning Sycorax and Caliban's origins which ultimately debases him; as a duke he should have stopped himself from using vile and lowly language. Hence, "Prospero as a colonialist consolidates power which is specifically white and male, and constructs Sycorax as a black, wayward and wicked witch in order to legitimize it." (Loomba, 152)

The Missing Claribel

Claribel as a character is only spoken about in the play. She is the daughter of Duke Alonso of Naples and sister of Ferdinand. Her reference comes only twice in the entire play, once - while returning from her wedding to King of Tunis the European travelers undergo shipwreck and second when the conspiring Sebastian asks usurper Antonio who is next in line after Ferdinand and Antonio replies it is Claribel. Although absent in the play, Claribel represents all princesses who are victims of political alliances, as an object of transaction, married off to faraway foreign kings never to return to their homelands. Her alienation is symbolic.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* portrays a patriarchal world where women are either treated as materials, as prizes to be won or for exchange in power dynamics between males where the power is transferred from father to husband or at least women are under constant scrutiny of societal and gender expectations, roles, codes of conduct by a male-centric world. Most interesting of all is why is Prospero unable or incapable of imagining good mothers? Thus, gender, body politics, power, racial and social dynamics play a larger role in the play than initially thought and in a more insidious way.

CITATION:

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