



The Two Witch Hunts by Shakespeare

Junxian Ji

School of Humanities, Tiangong University, Tianjin, China

Email: 1715296596@qq.com

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Abstract

As Shakespeare's final work, the existing theoretical literary research of *The Tempest* have mostly neglected the female character Sycorax, the sorceress, who has passed away and is presented in words of characters as a wicked old witch from North Africa. However, the protagonist Prospero has behaviors and experiences similar to those of Sycorax, whom he detests. They get different ends of life as magicians. It's notable that Prospero's attitude towards his political enemies who have exiled him and his daughter is quite different from that of his criticism of the unacquainted Sycorax and her descendant. He can put aside his hatred and share his past with his foes, but he resents Sycorax and her son Caliban almost unreasonably. The settings of Shakespeare's two trials of literary witch hunting are designed to make the two magicians confront their own final end through trials, and only one survives. This article will take experiences and images of the two magicians as the primary point, to try to analyze their intrinsic similarities and differences, and then to clarify the reason why Shakespeare designed them in this way.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

The Tempest, Witch, Orientalism, Witch Hunt

1. Introduction

The Tempest is a comedy written by Shakespeare in 1611 with themes of acceptance and reconciliation. The final abandonment of magic books as a convert to Christianity by Prospero can be perceived as the effect of the Christian thoughts of Shakespeare himself. According to Liu Xiuyu, this has reflected the Christian spirit of forgiveness in Shakespeare's later years, and is a manifestation of his humanist ideology of equality and fraternity [1].

Magic and spirits are essential elements in *The Tempest*. It's the magic arts that Prospero employs to achieve his vengeance. And the airy spirit Ariel, as a supernatural being, is inextricably linked to magic and enchantment. The mother of Caliban was a witch, and the people of Naples, who have been brought to the island by enchantment, witness paranormal phenomena performed by the enchantment arts and elves. In the presence of Prospero who possesses magic books, Alonso the Neapolitan king and his attendants are nothing more than ordinary mortals. While the island once had someone other than Prospero who could use magic, the sorceress Sycorax. Ariel was a servant of Sycorax, and the island seemed to be her land. But Prospero recalls the life of Sycorax with an attitude of contempt and disparagement, treating her as a symbol of the evil and a sinful and wicked witch. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan have argued that the name of her son Caliban is intended to the fact that they are supposed to be the natives and original owners of the new world away from civilization [2], and thus there's a colonial bias in the narrative of Prospero.

The available researches on *The Tempest* tend to marginalize and trivialize or rarely involve the sorceress Sycorax. Huang Chuan attributes the absence of the figure of Sycorax in *The Tempest* to the hegemony of colonial discourse and the stigmatization of the others by the Milanese as the dominating colonial hegemony [3]. However, this also neglects the fact that Sycorax and Prospero actually possess many things in common. Objectively, Prospero and Sycorax share much in common as magicians, yet the subjective judgement between the characters guides the audience's view, creating subjective distinctions between them. These distinctions are the essential parts of Shakespeare's literary trials. And not only does Prospero judge Sycorax with his words, Prospero himself also experiences the witch trial of Shakespeare as a male witch. The play ends with the death of one magician and the cessation of magic by the other. Therefore, this article intends to analyze the similarities and differences between Prospero and Sycorax about their use of magic and further discuss what let Shakespeare to intentionally guide the audience to differentiate between the two magicians.

2. The Trial of Sycorax

The evidence of Shakespeare's trials consists of two parts. One is the purpose the magician achieves with magic, and the other is the magician's relationships with other characters, especially with those without magic.

2.1. The Image of Sycorax with Magic

William Shakespeare did not directly depict this mysterious witch who had died. From the words of Prospero, one can notice that she seemed to be a wicked witch. According to Prospero, she was born in Algiers. Her son Caliban said that her god is named Setebos, which in 16th century travel literature is one of the Patagonian gods in South America. Had Shakespeare not set this up on a whim, he must have had in mind the voyage from South America to North Africa, and Sycorax was

either descended from the natives of South America who had been brought to North Africa, or had been to South America herself. One reason for this is that Algiers is the seaport capital of Algeria. It was recorded that Sycorax was banished to this island for her wickedness and witchcraft. At that time she was already aged and hunchbacked, and pregnant.

In emphasizing her physical features, Prospero describes her image as an evil magician who is an ugly, bow-backed witch with eyelids drooping due to her pregnancy. It's impossible for us to find out what Sycorax had done in Algiers, with Prospero consistently stressing that Sycorax was a supremely villainous woman when reminding Ariel of his mercy. Considering the influence of witch hunt in medieval Europe and later even in the Americas in the late 17th century, the government of North Africa which was then still a Portuguese colony would have had the authority to execute a wicked witch as well as she was accused of any witchcraft without any explanation. Instead of death, the final punishment was that she was only banished alive with some of her servants. It was because of something she had done that kept her alive, Prospero and Ariel said, which neither of them discussed any more. Similar to how Prospero was betrayed and then exiled by his brother because he was adored by his citizens so that Antonio couldn't kill him but to send him away, it seemingly suggests that Sycorax had also done benevolent deeds with her magic and that the virtuous deed was definitely affecting quite a lot. Also, Sycorax was not alone on the island. When punishing Ariel, Sycorax's assistants were involved.

In terms of these objective facts, these evidences of faith in a pagan god and harmful practices with magic provide a sufficient accusation of witchcraft.

2.2. The Testimonies from the Other

Except Prospero who expresses hostility to Sycorax, there are two other characters on the island with immediate associations to her. The first is Ariel, the former servant of Sycorax. When she arrives on the island, Sycorax has more potent assistants other than her. Perhaps they are supernatural beings such as spirits or gods like Setebos as well. When Ariel is too delicate to carry out Sycorax's orders, she enrages Sycorax. Subsequently she is imprisoned by other assistants in a cloven pine, suffering hellish tortures for twelve years. Both Prospero and Ariel agrees that the pain of this punishment was infernal. Prospero taunts Sycorax's orders are "earthy", and anyone who fails to follow her is severely punished. Ariel herself appears to be reluctant to address this and any direct comments about Sycorax are done by Prospero.

Another character is her son Caliban, who was born on an island that was uninhabited before Sycorax is sent there. This means that Sycorax has free access to whatever resources she wants on the island and she owns the island. It's natural for Caliban to be a native of the island. But because of his ugliness in appearance, Caliban is successively called *a monster*, *the dog's head*, and *some species of fish* by Prospero and the Neapolitans. And he is even mocked many times by these

civilized people who wished to bring him back to their country for a paid exhibition. Without telling who the husband of Sycorax was, the father of Caliban is regarded as a demon or devil. Prospero addresses Caliban as “the child of a witch and a devil”, referring to the infidelity and wickedness of Sycorax. While Caliban possesses the respect for his own mother, he is hostile to Prospero, who he perceives as an outsider and usurper. The latter one treats him and his mother as vicious devil worshipers, believing them to be evil by nature [4]. This subjective judgement apparently involves a tendency to confuse the cause and the effect.

Sycorax is identified as a witch who uses black magic. Consequently, she is accused of being cruel and evil, and Shakespeare literally sentences her to death. After her death, Prospero takes advantage of her as an example of a evil witch, addressing her viciousness with a deserved end. The ego of Sycorax is completely missing from this play. Although the image of herself is entirely elaborated and established by other characters, it’s more than sufficiently complete. She has an essentially similar life story as Prospero, with similarities in the way they treat their servants. The deceased Sycorax cannot defend herself, and the power to determine “Who she was?” is left to those after her to define and judge her. This is the hegemony of the colonialist discourse [3], and a foil created by Prospero and Shakespeare to justify Prospero.

3. The Trial of Prospero

3.1. The Image of Prospero with Magic

Prospero was the Duke of Milan, the ruler of the city-state, and was more absorbed in studying the liberal arts than in politics. Jonathan Bate notes in the introduction of *The Tempest* that the word “magic” is derived from the old Persian word “*magia*”, meaning wisdom [5]. Therefore, it refers to the highest form of natural philosophy or belongs to the occult philosophy. The magic used by Prospero obviously belongs to this category. One of his magical assets is his magic robe, which is characterized in European magician legends as the dress code for “the ability to perform magic” [6]. And there is some resemblance to Merlin, the great magician of the Arthurian legends of Britain, their arts are acquired not inborn.

It can be deduced from the assistance he received from Gonzalo when he was exiled that Prospero’s library, where he was intoxicated with knowledge, contained books on magic and the use of magic, known simply as magic books. These books are taken to assist Prospero in dominating against non-magicians and supernatural spirits inferior to him after his exile. As Caliban reminds Trinculo to prevent Prospero from using magic or driving spirits, his books must first be taken away or destroyed. Like any other knowledge, magic is derived from and relies on books. This reliance on magical materials is a reflection of Renaissance humanism. Art, even magic art, can be acquired through personal endeavor, and innate strengths and weaknesses cannot affect an individual from acquiring knowledge.

The process of reconciliation that Prospero uses magic to achieve is effectively a process of mutual chase of his ego and the magic. When he was betrayed by his

brother, he had no access to magic or was unable to perform it due to the situation, which temporarily placed him in the position of an existence rejected by the new era and regime. But his ego has never falls or accepts the situation as it is, and even after retrieving the books of magic and arriving at the island, he remains as a duke and treats all others as such. As his enemies approaches the island, Prospero, who possesses magic, directs the actions of the reluctant visitors on an objective scale through his enchantments. He could have just destroyed them with his magic or forced them into submission, and actually what he does is no much better than destroying his enemies outright. As we say, there's a latent arrogance in his ego.

Magic is the supplement to his ego and knowledge. He resists any murder of his enemies and even defends them and promises to reduce Ariel's service if she works as he commands. And when he catches his daughter in love with the prince of Naples, he attempts to arrange their marriage with the king of Naples. All these actions appear to be benevolent, as Prospero viewed them. He wants to harm no one, not even his enemies who once almost killed him. From this Shakespeare constructs a magician who may opposite to Sycorax, and his magic is therefore can be more reasonable.

3.2. The Testimonies from the Other

The first type of the other to Prospero is his servants, such as Caliban and Ariel. And Prospero identifies himself as their master. As the descendant of a North African woman, Caliban, the original owner of this uninhabited island, is not acquainted with the language or culture of European society. This demonstrates the difference between civilization and the nature. It is Prospero's daughter Miranda teaches him the language. And Prospero teaches him common sense, giving him knowledge of civilized society. Since Caliban has insisted on his status as heir of the island and his natural instincts, he desires to have sex with Miranda to multiply his offspring. This appears to Prospero to be evil, ugly and ungrateful conduct, thus he stops teaching Caliban and treats him only as a slave who can be scolded at his pleasure. No attempts are made to guide Caliban by Prospero, and he simply abandons the idea of civilizing him. Ariel is an immortal who has been rescued from imprisonment by Prospero, and in return Ariel has to be a servant to his commands, with a shorter period of service only possible if she works diligently to complete missions. Confronted by Ariel's reminder of her deserved freedom, Prospero repeatedly emphasizes his kindness to her, allowing no complaints or he would imprison her in a tree again. Although he eventually gives Ariel her freedom after the end of his vengeance, his treatment towards Ariel in no way qualifies him as a master of noble character. Magic is used to maintain their previous subordinate relationship.

The second other is the children, Miranda and Ferdinand. At that time, Prospero is a strict and preachy father. He teaches Miranda about the honor of identity and family relationships, and tests whether Ferdinand is truly fascinated with Miranda. This appears as if he has witnessed, verified, and promoted a fine match, except the truths that Miranda has never seen any ordinary male other than her

father and Ferdinand, and that Ferdinand is firstly attracted to Miranda's beauty. Having limited Miranda's vision without any remedy, Prospero rapidly determines her marriage. He again teaches and trains Ferdinand with magic, which is more of a symbol of patriarchal power.

The third other is the nobles, the King of Naples and his courtiers. It's obvious that Prospero has a clear understanding of who among this group of politicians is the key target of his intercession. All the politicians except Alonso are arranged by him and his spirits to be the bargaining chips to prove his friendliness to Alonso. It is Prospero who evokes the storm with magic, asks the spirit Ariel to awake Alonso to avoid being assassinated, lets spirits to be monsters to frighten the courtiers and to seduce them into confusion. Finally he fixes those who has almost been insane with magic to get them to carefully listen to his accusation. Though he uses magic to restore some of the men's sanity, magic in general is an incredibly important force he employs to control the men. While he didn't intend to kill these people, his and spirits' magic has still inflicted physical and especially mental damage on the others as well.

When confronting the latter two types of the other, Prospero appears to be as modest and courteous as he can to those Europeans, even to his enemies. It's mentioned in *The Tempest* that Naples and Milan were enemies when Prospero was in charge, and that Milan never surrendered to Naples until Antonio colluded with Naples. Prospero shows courtesy to his political rivals, even forgiving Trinculo and Stephano, who attempts to murder him. But when Ariel complains of her freedom, he abuses her with his words. Similarly, Caliban is the object of his verbal attacks, and his mother Sycorax is labeled by Prospero as a wicked witch. Prospero doesn't spend as much time with these Europeans as with Ariel and Caliban on the island, yet he can naturally place himself on an equal position with them once they meet, while always treating the non-European like Caliban as subordinate to him. The inherent in this arrogant attitude is a prejudice against non-European communities known as Orientalism [7]. The European concepts of civilized society, such as Prospero, conflict with the primitive natural instincts of Caliban, who insists on his own nature without any guidance from Prospero. And Prospero simply condemns him as an uneducated, evil creature of the worst quality in the world.

Differing from Prospero's perception of himself, he is objectively tyrannical to his servants and the two children. Although no live is taken, his magic does cause damages and scares. Shakespeare tries to portray him as a white wizard, but his actions are more malicious and selfish. Eventually Shakespeare strips Prospero of his magician status and makes him a Christian. This is a similar solution to the conflict in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare accomplishes this potential witch trial by eliminating Prospero's magic with a conversion in faith.

4. Renaissance and Magic

It seems that Prospero and Sycorax have the same identity in *The Tempest*, and

their behaviors are highly comparable. Both of them has learned magic in their homelands, and were punished for some reason, and then exiled to the island for some possibly good deed that saved them from death. They both uses their magic freely on the island and make spirits work for themselves, and they become masters of the island in turn. But what made Prospero curse Sycorax? The attitudes Prospero has towards the others are in fact the reasons that assist him in surviving the trial, and his behavior must be justified to be exempted from the death after the trial.

4.1. Black and White Magic

In the real world, the knowledge of magic became prevalent during the Renaissance. Magic or enchantment, as an art couldn't be explained by natural science, conversely explained what science could not illuminate at that time. So it was suggesting that while science explained reason, magic could explain "unreason". But considering the religious claims, especially from the Christian Bible, which identifies "those coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders", magic was easily associated with demons and blasphemy. Thereby the concepts of white and black magic are created.

White magic has been attributed to the use of supernatural powers or magic for selfless purposes and been practiced through healing, blessings, charms, incantations, prayers, and songs [8]. Magicians who use white magic to help others are honored as white witches or wizards, typically accompanied by the sign of the Wise One. Some churches such as the Roman Catholic Church supports white magic by providing a religious basis for the belief in the existence of supernatural spirits and the mystical powers they possesses. In general, white magic has a definite connection with nature worship. While white magic and its users are necessarily intimate with nature, these magicians are often associated with forests or secluded natural environments. Then white magic is also known as "natural magic". In contrast, black magic is the magic used for selfish purposes and is filled with malice rather than goodwill towards other [9]. This is believed to be a symbol of the devil and blasphemy, and to be malevolent and harmful. Though the religious institutions of the Renaissance claimed that witchcraft and all occult rituals that were not in accordance with religious doctrines should be classified as black magic, there was in fact no objective criterion for distinguishing between black and white magic. At that time, natural magic developed as a way for thinkers and intellectuals, but even the abbot had to study esoteric and ritualistic studies in secret [10].

Thus neither Prospero's nor Sycorax's magic in any case can be qualified as white magic, according to the conception of black and white magic since Renaissance. What Sycorax has done remains unknown, but the fact that she tortures Ariel with magic for 12 years simply because she refuses to carry out her orders is plainly black magic that harms others. Even though Prospero is characterized as a white magician who is "close to nature" and uses his magic to help Trinculo to

regain sanity, he does use this magic to influence and control others for his own selfish purposes, threatening and suppressing others with his magic. This is the typical feature of black magic. When Ariel refused to carry out Sycorax's commands, she was imprisoned and tortured, and later when Ariel asks Prospero to perform his promise, Prospero accuses Ariel of forgetting his grace and even tries to imprison Ariel again; Prospero mocks Sycorax's witchcraft as being earthy, but he has no noble intentions when he orders Ariel to frighten the Neapolitans on the island and to punish Caliban for him; he accuses Sycorax of harming people with her witchcraft, while he himself destroys ships by a storm caused by his magic, and allows spirits to transform into monsters and hounds to chase after them.

4.2. The Wizard and the Witch

Shakespeare's setting of Sycorax as a foil to Prospero is evidently intentional. The word "Sycorax" has no certain meaning, and Jonathan Bate's commentary on *The Tempest* describes it as being derived from the Greek words "sus (pig)" and "korax (raven)", both of which are symbols of witchcraft [4]. The word "witch" has had an evil connotation in English since the Middle Ages [11]. It was initially a symbol of women who were acquiring knowledge as well as being emancipated mentally. But in the Middle Ages witches were regarded as followers of the devil, and women accused of being witches were also accused of Satanism and executed for it. After the Middle Ages, the custom of witch hunt was still preserved in some countries [12].

Elizabeth I enacted the *Witchcraft Act 1563* in 1563, which was more merciful than the other Acts. At the time, the penalty of death was only imposed for felonies. It's known for the fact that only 9 of the 228 people executed under this act were men, women having been a major target of the movement of witch hunt. The subsequent English monarch, James I, has undoubtedly provided much of inspirations for Shakespeare's writings. The book *Demonology*, written by James I in 1597, provide a background reference to Macbeth [13]. James I kept close watch over and supported witch trials during his reign. In his second year as the king, the application and penalties of the Elizabethan Acts were extended by Edward Coke under his authority, thereby producing the *An Act against Conjurat[i]on, Witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked spirits*. This 1604 Act emphasized death for anyone summoning evil spirits or communicating with them, while the clergy were not to be punished for the same accusation [14]. Considering the erudition of James I and his belief that witchcraft is a branch of theology, some scholars suggest that the figure of Prospero is derived from him [15]. While on the throne, James I repeatedly and publicly declared that magic and spirits are disobedient to God, demanding that all women accused of witchcraft must be trialed and executed.

Even without considering whether Prospero has a realistic archetype or not, Shakespeare's personal opinion is plainly expressed before the end of *The*

Tempest: Prospero sinks his magic books into the sea and wishes to live like a Christian from then on. Shakespeare, the devout Christian who wants his work to conform with the Christian teachings, sets two magicians of different genders of the same behavior and allows one to accuse the other of inhumanity and ultimately to march with his religion. Apparently, Shakespeare was aware of the awkward position of magic in Christianity, so he establishes the image of a kindly white wizard with a foil. Then he has to cut off the connection with magic completely to avoid criticism for privatizing it. Such contradictory treatment is similar to the choices the English made when dealing with the dead Indians and the homeless.

For Prospero is not fundamentally different from the so-called wicked witch Sycorax. The white magic and benevolent wizard are just labels that Shakespeare puts on Prospero, thus his or Shakespeare's accusations against Sycorax are quite absurd. As mentioned earlier, Prospero justifies his verbal insults and torment by demonizing Caliban, thereby anchoring Caliban in a subordinate position. The image of Sycorax is constructed by attaching her to evil witchcraft and the devil, without providing more tangible evidence of her evil deeds to harm others. With this, Prospero emphasizes his kindness and benevolence towards Ariel and that he doesn't kill any man, for the purpose of differentiating himself with her. By assigning Caliban and Sycorax characteristics such as viciousness, wickedness, and primitiveness, he dwarfs them as barbarians outside the European world, which is the typical demonstration of the Orientalism proposed by Said [16]. This peremptory discrimination doesn't care about the real situation of the discriminated party. It aims at constructing false subordination to justify one's own aggressive behavior and to construct a sense of European collective identity at the same time. And this always serves both colonialism and imperialism. This is both Prospero's and Shakespeare's Orientalism.

5. Conclusions

While Shakespeare attempts to distinguish between evil magic and kind magic, he also confuses the boundary between black and white in his comparison of the two images of magicians. As in the case of the original black and white magic of the medieval times, William Perkins in 1608 proposed that the distinction between black and white was inherently contradictory, and if the definition of "execution for a crime" could be well followed, anyone who attempts to have contact with magic and witchcraft, whether or not they harms or saves others, should be sentenced to death [17]. The mockery and contempt Prospero expresses for Sycorax are unjust, since they are essentially the same person, otherwise Shakespeare would not require Prospero to throw away his books of magic and to convert to Christianity.

Their differences exist only in the genders and the geographical identities of them. Shakespeare has created two characters at opposite extremes of the dichotomy of good and evil to portray an image of justice, and to prove how awful Sy-

corax and the group she represents. He wishes to demonstrate the indecencies of Sycorax and her community, to illustrate the relative nobility and righteousness of Prospero. No one has ever defended Sycorax with any word.. The wizard's criticism of her is even founded on the disobedience of her son to the rules of civilized society and her son's unusual appearances.

Shakespeare judges Sycorax guilty and sentences her to death through the words of the sorcerer, which is the first witch hunt he accomplishes in *The Tempest*. And the whole play is virtually the process of Prospero's judgement as a wizard. He keeps defending his conduct, citing Sycorax as his counterexample to legitimize what he does. However, it's revealed in this defence that there's the embodiment of the Orientalism in him as well as in Shakespeare. At the end of this play, Shakespeare lets him forsake magic to be a Christian, thereby finishing the stripping of the wizard's identity by the second and the last witch hunt. There's no magician exists in this play any more.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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