

Witches and Whores: Words that Silence Women  
and Voices that Challenge Patriarchy

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Shakespeare's plays are famous for their ability to juggle political, social and philosophical problems over the course of a single poetic story. One issue that comes up frequently is that of gender inequality in a patriarchal society. In Shakespeare's plays, questions of patriarchal authority and power are linked closely with female voice and sexuality. These issues surface in relations between male and female characters and between characters of the same gender. Act II Scene ii of *The Tempest* introduces Stephano to the audience when the drunken butler enters singing a "scurvy" song:

Stephano: "The master, the swabber, the boatswain, and I,  
The gunner and his mate,  
Loved Mall, Meg, and Marian, and Margery,  
But none of us cared for Kate.  
For she had a tongue with a tang,  
Would cry to a sailor, 'Go hang!'  
She loved not the savor of tar nor of pitch,  
Yet a tailor might scratch her where'er she did itch.

(II. ii. 44-51)

In Stephano's song, none of the men care for Kate because she is verbally aggressive, and as the crude reference in the last line suggests, she is promiscuous. Though Stephano is a drunk and a minor character in *The Tempest*, his song is a presumably popular tune that paints a clear picture of what the majority of men in Shakespeare's plays don't respect in a woman: outspokenness and promiscuity. The song also serves as an example of one of the most effective ways to deal with such a woman; by publicly calling her loose or outspoken in Shakespeare's world, a man could undermine the authority of a woman's voice. The double standard inherent in writing a vulgar song that criticizes a woman for

her sexuality and having a ‘tongue with a tang’ is self-evident. Admonishing a woman for being vocal makes defending herself frustrating and self-defeating: Were the fictional Kate to argue the point, she would demonstrate her own outspokenness and confirm the truth in the criticism against her.

Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest* explore the effectiveness of undermining a woman’s credibility by verbally attacking her for her outspokenness or sexuality. In Shakespeare’s plays, women who are referred to as witches possess either a strong, uncompromising voice, as does Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*, or supernatural powers, as we are told is true of Sycorax in *The Tempest*. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes believes his wife to be having an affair and calls Hermione a “harlot” for no apparent reason. Witches, whores and outspoken women challenge male control over female sexuality and voice both symbolically, in their actions, and sometimes in verbalized argument, as Paulina challenges Leontes. In *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*, the word ‘witch’ is a loaded accusation meant to discredit a powerful woman, while the word ‘whore’ is used to undermine the power of a woman’s voice. In the patriarchal society Shakespeare’s characters inhabit, a woman’s voice and sexuality are powerful tools that men can use to gain power over other men. Miranda’s marriage to Ferdinand helps Prospero regain his dukedom in *The Tempest*. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes challenges Paulina’s and Hermione’s credibility by calling Paulina a witch and Hermione a whore. This paper aims to understand how female voice and sexuality threaten male ambition and how the labels ‘witch’ and ‘whore’ attempt to silence Shakespeare’s women. To explore how powerfully these words affect the female voice, this paper will also

reexamine traditionally held opinions about an absent female character in *The Tempest*, the witch Sycorax.

*The Tempest* offers a rich account of how controlling a woman's sexuality can help a man secure power. As Prospero's daughter and the only woman on the island, Miranda attracts a great deal of male attention. We learn early in the play that Prospero's reason for treating Caliban so harshly is that Caliban attempted to rape his daughter. Though Prospero's furious change of attitude towards the boy he once cared for could certainly be a result of protective, paternal love, there may also be some practical reasons he doesn't want Caliban to take advantage of Miranda. A conversation between Caliban and Stephano calls attention to the political implications of Miranda's rape:

Caliban: She will become thy bed, I warrant,

And bring thee forth brave brood.

Stephano: Monster, I will kill this man. His daughter and I will

Be king and queen – save Our Graces! – and Trinculo and

Thyself shall be viceroys.

(III. iii. 94-98)

By impregnating Miranda and killing Prospero, Stephano plans to establish his dynastic rule of the island. This conversation echoes a similar conversation between Caliban and Prospero, in which Caliban admits to having attempted to rape Miranda. Caliban responds to Prospero's accusation: "O ho, O ho! would't had been done!/ Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else/ This isle with Calibans" (I. ii. 349-351). This rhetoric concerning Miranda's rape demonstrates her potential as a pawn to be used both for taking political control of the island and establishing one's own line of heirs. It's no wonder Prospero is so concerned about protecting her sexuality from Caliban: having

already lost his dukedom, he stands to lose his rule of the island, the only political power he has left, if the two were to have a child. What's more, were Caliban to have successfully raped her, the ravished Miranda would not have been able to marry Ferdinand. Prospero's royal bloodline would have been constricted to island, and he would have been unable to use Miranda's marriage in his plan to regain his dukedom.

In her paper "Silencing Sycorax," Abena Busia argues that in the colonial world, power and sexuality are inextricably linked. "Frequently, questions of gender and principles of sexuality sanction access to power. And frequently, women... act as indices of the status of the conquering, authoritarian males" (Busia 91). Though Prospero and Miranda seem to have a loving relationship, Prospero benefits from exercising control over Miranda's sexuality. In his paper "Prospero's Wife," Stephen Orgel explains that in royal families, daughters' marriages are designed primarily to please their fathers. Miranda's marriage pleases her, but marrying Ferdinand is also a part of Prospero's plan (Orgel 10). Prospero is able to regain his own political power by manipulating events so that Ferdinand and Miranda fall in love. Ferdinand is a prince, and by securing a match between Miranda and the son of a king, Prospero establishes a valuable political tie; having the king's support makes reclaiming his dukedom much easier.

Prospero first begins to realize his power over the prince when he sees that Ferdinand and Miranda are falling in love: "The Duke of Milan/ And his more braver daughter could control thee,/ If now 'twere fit to do't. At the first sight/ They have changed eyes" (I.ii .437-40). But Prospero is not going to risk losing Ferdinand's interest. Soon after Miranda and Ferdinand meet, Prospero plays the role of protective father and forces Ferdinand to take over Caliban's difficult manual labor. Watching him carry

multiple loads of heavy logs, Miranda feels sorry for Ferdinand and offers to help him with his work, but Ferdinand refuses and asks instead for her name. Miranda gives it to him, and Ferdinand praises her:

Ferdinand: The very instant that I saw you did  
My heart fly to your service, there reside  
To make me slave to it, and for your sake  
Am I this patient long-man.

(III. i. 64-67)

Ferdinand tells Miranda he loves her, but to whose service does he actually pledge himself? Miranda begs Ferdinand to rest from his difficult labor while her father attends to his studies, but Ferdinand refuses. He is carrying the logs to please Prospero, not Miranda. In giving himself to Miranda, Ferdinand is actually submitting himself to Prospero's control. According to the patriarchal rules of the time period, Miranda is not her own to give away. Although she proposes to Ferdinand, only in winning Prospero's blessing can Ferdinand honorably marry Miranda. Ferdinand's physical labor symbolizes his submission to Prospero, and only after Ferdinand makes this submission clear does Prospero give him permission to marry his daughter. Not only does Prospero gain political influence when his daughter marries the prince of Naples, but he cements an important bond between himself and the royal family as a result of the 'gift' exchanged between them. After giving Ferdinand and Miranda his blessing, Prospero calls attention to his view of Miranda as a possession to be given away:

Prospero: If I have too austerely punished you,  
Your compensation makes amends, for I  
Have given you here a third of mine own life...

Then, as my gift and thine own acquisition  
Worthily purchased, take my daughter.

(IV. i. 1-3, 13-14)

Prospero's reference to Miranda as his gift demonstrates that he views her as something that previously belonged to him. Similarly, his word choice in calling her "worthily purchased" brings to mind Claude Lévi-Strauss' description of patriarchal systems of reciprocity in which women are used as a way for men to form relationships with one another:

"The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners. This remains true even when the girl's feelings are taken into consideration, as, moreover, is usually the case.... The relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion for the relationship. "

(Lévi-Strauss 115-116)

Cultural anthropologists and sociologists use the term reciprocity to describe an informal economic system in which goods and labor are exchanged. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Claude Lévi-Strauss goes into detail about the rules of Symmetrical Reciprocity. According to this informal trust-based system of exchange, if someone gives something to someone else, they should expect a fair repayment at some point in the

future. Does Prospero really give Miranda to Ferdinand as a gift? Or does he plan on gaining favor with the king, and thus regain his dukedom, in return for his daughter? If it's not his only reason for restoring Prospero to political power, it is likely that the king of Naples is at least partially persuaded to help Prospero by Ferdinand and Miranda's engagement. He may have arranged a marriage that pleases Miranda, but Prospero is not above using his daughter as political leverage.

Within the patriarchal society that dominated Shakespeare's times, the functioning of women as objects of exchange necessitated that women appear to be chaste in order to secure good marriages. Up until Miranda meets Ferdinand, and especially during their informal courting period, Prospero has made sure to protect Miranda's virginity. Even after they are engaged, Prospero's celebration masque stresses the importance of pre-marital chastity. Though he benefits from Miranda's marriage, it is likely that Prospero guards his daughter's sexuality for her own good as well as his own. The Elizabethan time period offered few opportunities for women to work, and land ownership was dominated by men. Marriage, then, was really a woman's only socially acceptable way of establishing a life for herself outside of joining a nunnery. In a restricting society that valued the untouched female body, unmarried women had to be careful to protect their virginal image.

These social conditions had the effect of shrouding female sexuality in secrecy, and thus restricting a woman's voice. In the case of rape, a woman would find herself in a difficult and vulnerable position. Many rape victims were, and still are, made to feel responsible for what happened to them; a woman who had been raped could be accused of seducing her attacker. The act of rape is inherently silencing. It takes away a woman's

voice by ignoring her protestation, and in some cases, literally silencing her: Many women freeze up during the act itself and are unable to protest. What's more, a woman who was raped during Shakespeare's time could not openly admit to having had sex without devaluing herself in the eyes of a society that judged her marriageable worth based on her virginity.

Prospero uses Miranda's virginity to advance his political power. Conversely, Leontes feels threatened by Hermione's sexuality. Believing Hermione to have had an affair with Polixenes, Leontes takes his son Mamillius from his mother and throws Hermione in jail. Paulina comes to plead Hermione's case, but Leontes is furious with her audacity. In the beginning of the scene, Leontes' lords warn Paulina not to speak to the king, who hasn't slept and is already in a bad temper, but she insists on coming in and speaking "words as medicinal as true,/ Honest as either, to purge him of that humour/ That presses him from sleep" (II. iii. 37-39). Leontes overhears her arguing with the other lords and asks, "What noise there, ho?" (II. iii. 39). Paulina defends the significance of her voice in responding that her words are not noise but "needful conference" (40) from Leontes' "most obedient counselor" (55). Paulina has come to defend the honor of Hermione, whom Leontes has proclaimed a whore. When Paulina sets Hermione's newborn child down in front of Leontes, he loses his temper completely, calls her a "mankind witch" (67), and orders his lords to remove her from the room.

What does Act II scene iii reveal about the accusatory words witch and whore? Examining Leontes' thought process in the time between Paulina's entrance and when he calls her a witch may lead to a deeper understanding of what threatens Leontes about

Paulina's outspokenness and Hermione's sexuality, and so shed light on the implications of these words.

The most obvious reason Leontes perceives Paulina's speech as threatening is that in insisting on being heard, she challenges the idea that men should control their wives' words. Paulina is the most persistent voice when it comes to defending the queen's reputation. In the beginning of Act II Scene iii, Leontes accuses Antigonus of not being able to control his wife because she is relentless in her criticism of the king. Paulina continues the argument for her husband: "From all dishonesty he can [prevent me]: in this, /Unless he take the course that you have done,/ Commit me for committing honour, trust it,/ He shall not rule me" (II. iii. 47-50). Not only does Paulina exercise the power of her voice by speaking before her husband has a chance to respond to Leontes, but her claim that Antigonus won't punish her for being honest and honorable is a condemnation of the way Leontes is punishing the honest, honorable Hermione. Paulina's chastising of Leontes goes on for longer than one would expect from a woman surrounded by a room full of politically powerful men, although most of the lords seem sympathetic to Paulina's view. Significantly, it is when Paulina places the newborn baby in front of Leontes that he calls her a witch, and her unrelenting references to the child seem to make him angriest. In one furious speech, Leontes lashes out at Paulina:

A callet  
Of boundless tongue, who late hath beat her husband  
... now baits me! This brat is none of mine;  
It is the issue of Polixenes:  
Hence with it, and together with the dam  
Commit them to the fire!

(II. iii. 90-95)

Leontes must feel threatened if he is ordering an innocent child to be thrown in a fire. This quotation exemplifies what about Paulina's speech upsets Leontes the most: she challenges her husband's authority, she's now challenging Leontes authority, and she continues to call attention to the child, which he insists does not belong to him.

There's no way of knowing why Leontes believes Hermione and Polixenes had an affair, but it's clear that Hermione's baby is a sore subject that brings his wife's infidelity to mind. Leontes' hostility towards the baby and his commitment to having it killed demonstrates that he feels threatened by it. Although one could make the argument that Leontes' anger stems from jealousy, it seems unlikely that jealousy alone would incite him to murder an innocent baby. If, however, we consider how his wife's illegitimate child would affect Leontes' political legacy, we may come closer to understanding why he calls Hermione a whore. Hermione's supposed affair exemplifies why men need to control women's sexuality in order to establish and maintain power: Women bear children, and in a monarchy, power is passed on hereditarily. In Shakespeare's plays, politically powerful characters are often preoccupied with establishing a long line of kings or rulers. If Hermione's baby were born illegitimate, the baby would have threatened Leontes' line of heirs; people could call Mamillius' legitimacy into question, and if Mamillius were to die (as he does), another man's child would inherit the throne

and wipe out Leontes' family dynasty. This is a serious threat against Leontes' rule, and though not admirable, his treatment of Paulina in Act II Scene iii is more understandable in this light.

The threat Hermione's child poses to Leontes' legacy calls into question whether male and female voices can coexist peacefully within a patriarchal society. If we consider raising children as an expression of the self, then Leontes' attempt to kill Hermione's child is another way in which he tries to silence his wife. By calling her a whore, he not only establishes her newborn child as a bastard, but he ensures that Hermione no longer has a stake in raising Mamilius. With no children to carry on her name or memory, Hermione's legacy would end with her life. Significantly, Leontes' jealousy reaches its peak when he walks in on an intimate moment between Hermione and Mamillius. Leontes describes the sick feeling in his stomach using some of the most powerful imagery in the play. Though the jealousy depicted in his speech is directed at Hermione and Polixenes, it's important to note that Leontes' first reaction is to take Mamillius away from his mother:

Give me the boy: I am glad you did not nurse him:  
Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you  
Have too much blood in him.

(II. i. 56-58)

Before Hermione has any idea that Leontes suspects her of having an affair, he accuses her of being too close to Mamillius. Given how immediately he takes the boy away, it's likely that Leontes' jealousy stems at least in part from the bond between his son and his wife. In claiming that Hermione has too much blood in Mamillius, Leontes reveals a

rivalry between his and Hermione's competing voices in raising their son. Perhaps Leontes' belief that Hermione is having an affair with Polixenes can be attributed to some displaced jealousy of her influence over Mamillius. To be as preoccupied with royal bloodlines as a king could understandably make a man more uneasy than usual about how much of him he sees in his children. While Hermione may not be carrying Polixenes' baby, the threat to Leontes' dynastic voice may feel to him just as tangible as adultery.

Leontes tries his best to silence and discredit Paulina and Hermione, but his attempts ultimately fail. The oracle reveals that Hermione has not had an affair, and after Mamillius and Hermione die, Leontes allows Paulina to criticize him as much as he deserves: "Go on, go on:/ Thou canst not speak too much; I have deserved/ All tongues to talk their bitterest" (II. ii. 215-17). Throughout the second half of the play, Paulina speaks to Leontes as his closest advisor. When he gazes at the statue of Hermione at the end of Act V, Leontes longs to hear Hermione talk. Having gained respect for the female voice, his wish is granted; the statue is understood as the living Hermione when she speaks. Hermione reveals that she has preserved herself so that she may see Perdita. Driven by love for the purest expression of herself, her daughter, Hermione's rebirth is symbolic of spring.. *The Winter's Tale* ultimately allows the female voice to triumph over doubt and loss. If, however, the oracle did not exist to disprove Leontes' suspicion, and if Leontes' lords were not so sympathetic to Paulina's words or skeptical of his claim that Hermione was having an affair, *The Winter's Tale* would be quite a different story.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero is much more successful in silencing the absent Sycorax than Leontes is at silencing Hermione and Paulina. By calling Sycorax a witch and insinuating that she is the devil's whore, Prospero creates an image of Sycorax as a base

and wicked woman. Prospero's impression of Sycorax allows him to feel justified in taking the island from her son. He cites Sycorax's magic as the root of her corrupt nature, but this is the only evidence we have to say that she is evil. One could argue that locking Ariel in a pine tree is malicious, but Prospero also figuratively traps Ariel in enslaving him, and he is equally unkind to Caliban. If there is nothing else to indicate that Sycorax is evil, we should be suspicious of Prospero's motives in antagonizing her. By harping upon Sycorax's malevolence throughout the play, Prospero could be consciously taking advantage of her silence in order to support his own claim to the island despite the presence of Caliban, who believes he inherited the island from his mother. In altering history's impression of a dead woman, claiming the island for himself and teaching Sycorax's only son to speak in his language, Prospero demonstrates how the very structures that allow men to gain power by controlling women's voices act doubly in their favor by silencing women.

In "Silencing Sycorax," Abena Busia argues that Sycorax is a prototype for the voiceless black woman in colonial literature:

"It is true that Sycorax is invoked quite insistently throughout the play, but only as the disembodied symbol of the men's most terrible fears. She is invoked only to be spoken of as absent, recalled as a reminder of her dispossession, and not permitted her version of the story. The recounting of her story, as we know it, is in itself significant for its absences" (Busia 86).

Like Prospero, Sycorax was banished to the island, but the only information we have about what she did to be banished comes from a third person account. What little we know is what Prospero tells us:

“This damned witch Sycorax,  
For mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible  
To enter human hearing, from Argier,  
Thou know’st, was banished. For one thing she did  
They would not take her life.

.....

This blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child.”

(I. ii. 266-270, 272)

Prospero tells us what Ariel told him about Sycorax, but we should be skeptical of what Ariel has to say; after being trapped in a pine tree for so long, Ariel is probably resentful of her magic. He also gives no indication of what he did to warrant Sycorax’s anger, so it’s plausible that she had a good reason for punishing him. Later in the play, Prospero goes into detail about the magnitude of Sycorax’s power: she practiced sorcery "so strong / That could control the Moon, make flows and ebbs" (V. i. 285-86). It seems strange that Prospero equates Sycorax’s powers with evil when he has spent most of his life practicing an art that allows him to call spirits and create tempests. The language “flows and ebbs” suggests that by controlling the moon, Sycorax could also control the sea. Considering the play’s title *The Tempest* refers to Prospero’s sea storm, this significant detail sets up a comparison between the magic of Prospero versus Sycorax and calls into question whether the stories about Sycorax’s evil powers are accurate. The play tells us that Sycorax’s magic is dark, whereas Prospero’s is light, but the only difference we know of is that Prospero’s magic comes from books, whereas Sycorax’s power is said to come from the devil, who supposedly fathered Caliban. Busia elaborates:

“The terrible deed for which she is banished cannot be mentioned. It is crucial that her absence takes the form of voicelessness – voicelessness in a discourse in which sexuality and access to language together form part of the discourse of access to power.”

(Busia 87)

As a well-educated man, Prospero may be able to rely on books for his magic, but in a time period when few women could read, Sycorax is restricted by her access to language. Perhaps Prospero is hostile to Sycorax because she has found a source of power outside of written language. Magic, then, could be the witch’s form of communication and voice. As this quote suggests, the silencing of women in Shakespeare’s plays has the effect of restricting their access to power. By controlling a woman’s voice and sexuality, a man not only bolsters his own power and stops her from challenging him, but he undermines her power in the process. Prospero can’t control Sycorax herself, but he can alter history’s impression of her sexuality and her supernatural voice. He also has the power to control her son and ensure the silence of her dynastic voice.

As Busia also points out, we have no way of knowing what Sycorax did to be banished, but we can guess that whatever it was, somewhere along the line it threatened a man’s sense of control. We may be able to better understand Sycorax’s circumstances if we examine Shakespeare’s prototype for her character. In Greek mythology, the witch Medea has much in common with Sycorax. Notably, Medea has powers beyond those of the mortal men among whom she lives. As her story goes, Medea falls in love with Jason and uses her powers to help him claim the Golden Fleece, betraying her father in the process. Jason promises Medea he will marry her once they are back in Greece. In some versions of the myth, he goes against his word and agrees to marry the daughter of the

King of Corinth instead. In her wrath, Medea threatens the king's grandchildren and is exiled, much like Sycorax is banished. The only reason Medea is not killed for threatening to use magic against the royal family is that Jason intervenes on her behalf. Jason chastises Medea for being angry at him because his new engagement offers him much more political power. He claims Medea should be happy to have gained influence in having been the mistress to the man who will marry the king's daughter. In this way, Medea is a victim of male ambition. Even after she betrays her father and saves Jason's life, Jason throws Medea's love away for political power.

Medea's story originates in Greek mythology, but it's likely that Shakespeare also read about the Medea described by the Roman poet Ovid, who influenced Shakespeare's plays significantly. Indeed, Act V of *The Tempest* alludes to Medea's soliloquy from Book 7 of the Golding translation of *Metamorphoses*. Ironically, it is Prospero who delivers this adapted speech. In Ovid's myth, after using her knowledge of magic to help Jason claim the Golden Fleece, Medea begins performing much more powerful magic to help restore Jason's father to youth. As her power grows, she becomes disillusioned with the way Jason treats her magic as his prize and herself as his object of control. The more powerful she gets, the crueler her now undesirable feelings towards Jason turn her.

Sycorax's silencing is all the more significant if her story is anything like Medea's. There is a good chance that Sycorax may have been taken advantage of or betrayed in some way by Caliban's father. If Sycorax was indeed an evil woman, there may be an association between her turn to wickedness and male political ambition. In such a reading of her character, Sycorax serves as the perfect example of a woman who is

used for her sexuality, punished for it, and labeled a witch and a whore in order to diminish the power of her voice.

If a man is convincing enough, calling a woman a whore in Shakespeare's plays is a very effective means of control in that it weakens her credibility. If the woman admits to having had sex with a man who is not her husband, her reputation is ruined. Even if she was raped, her marriage prospects are significantly damaged, and there's a good chance the powerful male majority will accuse her of using rape as a defense for her promiscuity. Could this be the crime for which Sycorax was banished? In a society already skeptical of women who cry rape, it is incredibly difficult for a woman who has been labeled a whore defend herself against consequences of nonconsensual sex. If she tries to speak out, she is already at a disadvantage because of her injured name, and she demonstrates her outspokenness. The argumentative or persuasive woman also runs the risk of being called a witch.

These accusatory words diminish the power of a woman's voice by attacking her reputation and trapping her inside the damning implications of a double standard. In figuratively silencing these women by discrediting them, and literally silencing women who are afraid to speak out, the use of the words witch and whore is an effective way for Shakespeare's men to exercise control over women, and so gain power for themselves. The words act doubly to diminish the power of female voices and put power in male hands; not only are they effective vehicles of threat and control, but the words target women who challenge the male structure of power. A woman who is in danger of being called a witch or a whore in Shakespeare's plays challenges either a man's control over her voice or her sexuality. In this way, the words witch and whore may be considered

marks of respect for a woman, even if the speaker means them to debase and discredit her. Paulina, a woman with one of the strongest voices in Shakespeare, hardly flinches when Leontes calls her a witch. Rather than denying her outspokenness, she affirms the power of her words and embraces the supernatural nature of the creative female voice: Paulina's artwork transforms into a living woman. Hermione, having given birth to a daughter, was denied the chance to raise Perdita. After years of silence, Hermione's first and only words at the end of the play reveal that she has come back to life so she may know the purest expression of herself, her child.

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