

Double Erasure in *The Tempest*: Miranda in Postmodern Critical Discourse¹

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Miranda is the only female character present in *The Tempest*, but she has a paradoxical role as the dependent female who is however crucial for the dynamics of power in the play. Political readings of Shakespeare's plays over the last thirty years have tended to side always with the victims of the power structures represented in each play. In the case of *The Tempest*, the predominant readings of what we will call the Postmodern paradigm in Shakespearean studies have sided with Caliban as the victim of colonial oppression. We could say that the text of the play erases Miranda as the virtuous and rather bland daughter whose main role is to obey her father and serve his purposes. What I am calling the double erasure of Miranda in *The Tempest* is my sense that she has also been frequently neglected in recent political readings of the play, which have centered their analysis of its power scheme on the issue of colonialism. Thus they have seen Caliban as a symbol of the exploited native but have often underplayed or ignored the specific repression of Miranda. It is clear that from a feminist perspective the power scheme in *The Tempest* must be opposed from an anticolonialist stand that also takes into account gender issues.

The contributions of Postmodern criticism to our reading of *The Tempest* have emphasized aspects of the play before unacknowledged and they have shaped what could be called a new paradigm in Shakespearean studies. I use the term paradigm to describe the shifting ways of understanding Shakespeare that take place every number of years and I take the concept from Hugh Grady's illuminating book *The Modernist Shakespeare* (1991) in which he proposes to adapt this concept originally applied to the development of science by Kuhn to the study of the evolving ways in which Shakespearean plays have been read. Thus, the most innovating interpretations of Shakespeare's plays in the last thirty years would constitute a new paradigm in Shakespearean studies, distinct and in many ways opposed to (what could be called) the Modernist paradigm of the earlier years of the twentieth century.² I am thus proposing to analyze the views of *The Tempest* that one type of Postmodern critical discourse, that of feminist critics, has to offer, because I think that it complements what can be considered a deficiency in the contributions of the Postmodern critical discourse of

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² In *The Modernist Shakespeare*, Hugh Grady gives as key examples of Modernist criticism of Shakespeare: G. Wilson Knight, E. M. W. Tillyard, and L. C. Knights.

cultural materialists and new historicists, two critical approaches which in the case of *The Tempest* can be seen as a single group, since their interpretations of the play coincide.³

We could say that before the seventies 'idealist readings' of *The Tempest* were predominant, and the governing allegory when interpreting the play was aesthetic or religious. Prospero was seen as a benevolent artist magician, a wise ruler and an excellent father who controls the events on the island for the good of all involved. The play was thought to articulate the power of humankind to regenerate itself on a human level or even at a religious level, so that the rebirth and regeneration embodied in the happy ending were celebrated as a sign of the best qualities in humankind. Representative of these readings in Great Britain and North America are for instance Frank Kermode, who in 1954 wrote for the Arden edition of the play a seminal introduction that has come to be regarded as "a standard approach to *The Tempest*" (Palmer 1968: 22) and Northrop Frye, who in his writings in the fifties and sixties took the idealizing of the play to its extreme, reading into it an allegory of the spiritual salvation of humankind.⁴ These Modernist readings of the first half of the twentieth century can be seen connected with the contemporary need, especially after World War II, to perceive in literary works the kind of order and harmony at that point desirable for society at large –the same kind of motivation behind E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943) with its vision of a harmonically structured society in the Elizabethan period.

The new cultural climate in North America in the late sixties and the new importance of theory in Europe, especially in France, were the basis for the new paradigm in Shakespearean studies, the Postmodern paradigm we are in the midst of. In the case of *The Tempest*, the focus of attention moves from Prospero as the agent of reconciliation to Caliban the victim of colonial oppression, from considering *The Tempest* as a play about restoration and final achievement of harmony to seeing in it discontinuities and disruption of order and harmony. This emphasis can be felt in studies that cover all aspects of the play. Even music, usually associated with harmony and beauty in the play, has been recently analyzed as an element of subversion of Prospero's power, on the premise that the play's music is characterized not by order but by dispersion (see Fox-Good 1996). Overall, the most significant contributions of the new paradigm to the analysis of the play come from two approaches: cultural materialism and new historicism on the one hand, and feminism on the other. The basic difference between the British cultural materialists and the American new historicists is that the former tend to find radical readings in all of Shakespeare's texts, which are seen as sites of subversion and resistance, while the latter tend to find containment to the resistance and therefore conservative integration.⁵ In this sense *The Tempest* occupies a peculiar position in their readings of Shakespeare's plays because it is, together with the other romances, the only work on which cultural materialist and new historicist views coincide. For both, the connection of the play with the origins of the British empire makes of it a conservative play in which Shakespeare aligns himself with the forces of colonial oppression.⁶

³ In fact, Carol Thomas Neely has coined the term "cult -historicists" to refer to both approaches as a single group, stressing thus how much they have in common when considered from a feminist perspective (Neely 1988: 6).

⁴ It is significant that Arden has not published a new edition of *The Tempest* with an introduction more in keeping with recent developments in criticism of the play. The credits to the 1998 volume *Critical Essays on The Tempest*, however, indicate that the editors of this collection, Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, will be coeditors of the new edition for the Arden, which is "in progress".

⁵ The difference between these two views lies in the origins of its discourse: "The progressive appropriation in England attacks the central, elitist, and conservative function of Shakespeare in the national culture. The new historicist demystifying insistence on Shakespeare's conservatism challenges the more peripheral, aestheticist, and liberal oppositional use of the playwright in the United States" (Cohen 1988: 36).

⁶ The closeness between the enterprises of cultural materialists and new historicists is suggested in Dollimore and Sinfield's volume, which under the subtitle *New Essays in Cultural Materialism* includes two articles by well-known figures of new historicism, one by Stephen Greenblatt and another by Leonard Tennenhouse.

The political criticism of cultural materialists and new historicists of *The Tempest* has emphasized the issue of colonialism present in the play.⁷ Basically it has told us that the play itself participated in the contemporary discourse of colonialism and enacted its practices by presenting an all powerful white master that subjugates a savage and deformed slave. In general, in these new historicist and cultural materialist readings we are encouraged to sympathize with Caliban as the representative of an exploited Third World, and the play is thought to be involved in the crime of colonial oppression. In the play Caliban directly accuses Prospero of having dispossessed him of his island, a moment in the past history that Prospero tries to erase, and this denial has been seen as a typical move in the discourse of colonialism, “the characteristic trope by which European colonial regimes articulated their authority over land to which they could have no conceivable legitimate claim” (Barker and Hulme 1985: 200). For these critics, previous criticism of the play that did not pay attention to the play’s cooperation with the discourse of colonialism may be accused of having collaborated with colonialist ideology.⁸

The binary opposition that these critics perceive in the play is that between Prospero as the oppressor and Caliban as the oppressed. This polarization can be qualified from a feminist perspective, since Prospero is not only the white imperialist who subjugates the native islander; he is also the patriarch who uses his daughter for his own purposes. If political criticism sides with the victims of power structures at play in Shakespearean works, Miranda and not only Caliban should receive attention as the victim of oppression. In general we can say that feminist critics have been much more sensitive to the subjugation of Caliban than materialist critics have been attentive to the subjugation of Miranda in particular and women in general in this play.

Miranda is the only woman present in the play, and there are occasional allusions to three other women: her mother, Ferdinand’s sister (Claribel), and Caliban’s mother (Sycorax). Miranda’s mother is casually mentioned in Prospero’s comment “Thy mother was a piece of virtue and / She said thou wast my daughter” (I. ii. 56-57),⁹ and Miranda does not inquire more about her at this or any other point in the play. As Orgel indicates, “she is identified as Miranda’s mother in a context implying that though she was virtuous, women as a class are not” (Orgel 1992: 99). Claribel, Ferdinand’s sister, is mentioned by Alonso and others as the daughter who is now Queen of Tunis, and far removed from the court in Naples, a distance not so much physical as psychological, that which separates the West from the East. She has been handed in matrimony as an object to ensure a political alliance. As for Sycorax, we know from Caliban that he inherited the island from his mother, and Prospero gives us a horrible portrait of her. She is described as non-white (“from Argier”) and the illegitimacy of her pregnancy suggests her lust. As Ania Loomba has indicated, she is the counterpart to Miranda, and “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 1992: 151). In recent readings, however, her role as a witch has been reconsidered, in the sense that the clear difference between her black magic and the white magic of Prospero has been blurred. Ania Loomba is a feminist critic that has paid great attention to the figure of Sycorax. She writes from the perspective of a woman in the Third World, and it is clear to her that Prospero’s conquest of the island has meant

⁷ Seminal articles in this line are Stephen Greenblatt (1976), Paul Brown (1985), Francis Barker and Peter Hulme (1985), and Thomas Cartelli (1987).

⁸ For instance Barker and Hulme insist that this collaboration can be seen in the blind acceptance of what they call the “denial of dispossession” in later critical discourse. They take the example of Kermode’s gloss to Caliban’s line “I’ll show thee every fertile inch o’th’island” (II. ii. 148). Kermode glosses it with the following statement: “The colonialists were frequently received with this kindness, though treachery might follow”, and Barker and Hulme are amazed that he can present this idea “as if this were simply a fact whose relevance to *The Tempest* we might want to consider, without seeing that to speak of ‘treachery’ is already to interpret, from the position of the colonizing power, through a purported ‘description’” (Barker and Hulme 1985: 200).

⁹ All references to *The Tempest* are from the Oxford edition of the play edited by Stephen Orgel (1987).

“both a *racial* plunder and a transfer to *patriarchy*” (Loomba 1992: 152; emphasis in the original). Loomba is a good example of the effort that some feminist critics make to combine an anticolonialist stance with a gender critique of the play, in an attempt to suggest a possible common cause between Caliban and Miranda as both victims of the power scheme in the play. Thus in her analysis of *The Tempest* she considers that “Prospero as a colonialist consolidates power which is specifically *white* and *male*, and constructs Scyrorax as a black, wayward and wicked witch in order to legitimise it” (Loomba 1992: 152; my emphasis).

The absence of female characters in *The Tempest* has been the focus of Ann Thompson’s article “‘Miranda, Where’s Your Sister?’: Reading Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*” (1995), a text that takes its title from the first sentence of Dryden and Davenant’s 1667 version of *The Tempest* in which a lot of female characters were introduced (Miranda and Caliban each got a sister and Ariel a female companion). Thompson sets out to explore the ideology of femininity in a text which paradoxically seems to deny the importance (even the presence) of female characters yet “attributes enormous power to female chastity and fertility” (Thomson 1995: 173).¹⁰ Miranda is a subordinate figure and yet her role is crucial for the development of events in the play. As Loomba indicates, Prospero offers his daughter as justification for most of his actions in the play. Thus at the beginning he tells her that he has started everything “but in care of thee” (I. ii.16). In this same scene the slavery of Caliban is presented as the consequence of his attempt to rape her (I. ii. 345-48). Later Miranda is described by Prospero as “a third of mine own life, / Or that for which I live” (IV. i. 3-4), and he says that after her wedding his objective will be achieved and he will retire to Milan where every third thought shall be his grave. The main reason for the enslavement of Caliban has to do with Miranda. In a sense it can be said that the play articulates “the racist assumption that Caliban’s subordinate status will naturally lead him to desire (and hence) rape Miranda” (Loomba 1992: 149). There is no doubt that Miranda has a paradoxical role in the play. She is the dependent female who is however a key element in the dynamics of power. She is crucial for the action of the play and yet she 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 1980: 291).¹¹

Feminist critics insist that the power scheme in *The Tempest* must be opposed from an anticolonialist stand that also considers the repression of Miranda. The future that awaits Caliban at the end of the play is obscure –Prospero’s sentence “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine” (V. i. 275-76) can be read in a variety of ways, but it is clear that Miranda will remain a property that has passed from father to husband. Leininger mentions a moment in the text in which Prospero responds to Miranda’s defense of Ferdinand with the enraged words “What! I say, / My foot my tutor” (I. i. 471-472, a response that leaves no doubt: Miranda is no more than a foot in a family structure in which the controlling head is Prospero. In her 1996 contribution to the book *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture*, Jyotsna G. Singh calls for new rereadings and rewritings of *The Tempest*, since she believes that texts like Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest* fail “to address adequately the relationship between liberation movements and the representation of sexual difference” (Singh 1996: 206). In his revision of Shakespeare’s play, Césaire makes no attempt to articulate the relationship between Caliban and Miranda in any new way, or to make them aware that they can join forces

¹⁰ Ann Thompson notices several cases in which images related to these themes are used at different points in the play. For instance, the treachery of Prospero’s brother is described in a birth metaphor: “my trust, / Like a good parent, did beget of him / A falsehood” (I. ii. 93-95), and Prospero himself conceives of their ordeal at sea as a birth-like process: “When I have decked the sea with drops full salt, / Under my burden groaned, which raised in me / An undergoing stomach to bear up / Against what should ensue” (I. ii. 155-58).

¹¹ A good feminist response to the erasure of Miranda in *The Tempest* is found in fiction written by women in recent years. In these rewritings of Shakespeare’s play women are given a chance to develop fully as human beings. Good examples of these rewritings are for instance Marina Warner’s *Indigo, Or Mapping the Waters* (1992) and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988).

against patriarchal oppression. In her request, Singh maintains the line of argument of Ania Loomba, who as we have seen devotes one chapter to *The Tempest* in her 1989 *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* and criticizes the tendency of political readings of *The Tempest* to focus exclusively on Caliban in their analysis of oppression in the play. Unlike feminist criticism that has tried to find a common cause for Caliban and Miranda as victims of Prospero's power, "some anti-colonialist or anti-racist readings have been unthinkingly sexist: The specific repression of Miranda has been neglected" (Thompson 1995: 176).

Given the enigmatic nature of the actions that take place on the island, *The Tempest* has been frequently read allegorically, since "even more than *Hamlet*, it tempts us to fill in its blanks, to create a history that will account for its action" (Orgel 1987: 11). And thus the history of this magical play since it was first performed has been "a series on intersecting journeys, transformations, interpretive confrontations, and uncertainties" (Vaughan and Vaughan 1998: 1). *The Tempest* has always been particularly open to new readings, and how we fill in its blanks has been crucially determined by the critical stance we adopt. Most criticism of *The Tempest* in what we have called the Postmodern paradigm has moved away from the serenity and restorative vision which predominated in Modernist readings. Recent interpretations of *The Tempest* are representative of the new emphasis on the ambivalences, faultlines, and unresolved ambiguities in Shakespearean texts. Political readings of the play in the last thirty years have centered on the issue of colonialism and defended the rights of the "savage and deformed slave" Caliban. From a feminist perspective, not only Caliban but also Miranda should be the focus of attention. We would be thus avoiding what I have called her double erasure. She has a clearly subordinate role as a woman in the play and an attempt is made in it to erase her and women in general. Our readings of *The Tempest* in our Postmodern context should avoid erasing her again. After all, the defining feature of political readings of Shakespearean plays in the Postmodern paradigm is that "[they] have sided with the victims of power structure, be it class hierarchy, patriarchy, racism, imperialism or state power" (Cohen 1987: 20).

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