

THE FEMALES AND THE NON-HUMANS IN JULIE TAYMOR'S
THE TEMPEST

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Abstract: *In Julie Taymor's film version of Shakespeare's The Tempest (2010), Prospero is changed into a female, Prospera. As almost all the original lines and plots are retained, the film would appear to be a 'straight' film version of Shakespeare. However, changing the sex of the main character sheds a new light on the original play and proves the film to be an inspiring adaptation. By examining the relationship between the female characters (Prospera, Miranda) and the non-humans (Caliban, Ariel) in the film, this paper will show how deeply sexuality is related to the power struggle and the final reconciliation.*

Keywords: *adaptation, Julie Taymor, sexuality, The Tempest*

1. Introduction

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, little is known about Prospero's wife. In Act 1, scene 2, Miranda recollects her memories of her infant days: 'Had

I not / Four or five women once that tended me?’ (1.2.46-7). The ‘women’, however, do not necessarily include her mother, but may just refer to her nurse and other waiting women. Informed that her father was the Duke of Milan, she asks Prospero with astonishment, ‘Sir, are not you my father?’ (1.2.55), to which Prospero answers, ‘Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter’ (1.2.56-7). This is the only time Prospero’s wife is mentioned in Shakespeare’s play.

In Julie Taymor’s *The Tempest* (2010), Prospero is changed into Prospera, the wife of the Duke of Milan. As almost all the original lines and plots are retained, the film would appear to be a ‘straight’ film version of Shakespeare. It is true that this film is not among the striking adaptations with surprisingly new settings such as *Forbidden Planet* (1956) or *Yellow Sky* (1948). *Forbidden Planet* ‘takes the Shakespeare movie into the realm of science fiction’ (Rothwell 1999:221) and is ‘the most famous *Tempest* offshoot’ (Howard 2000:306-7), while *Yellow Sky* had earlier ‘turned *The Tempest* into a harsh post-war Western’ (Howard 2000:306). However, changing the sex of the main character sheds a new light on the whole play, making the film a very challenging adaptation of Shakespeare. By examining the relationships between the female characters, Prospera and Miranda, and the non-human Ariel and Caliban, I would like to explore how sexuality relates to the play’s power struggle as well as to the final reconciliation.

While most people accept Ariel as a spirit, some would argue that Caliban, the son ‘got by the devil himself / Upon thy wicked dam’ (1.2.321-22), the ‘foul witch Sycorax’ (1.2.259), is not a non-human but a human being who is native to the island. It is true that ‘a century ago, Sidney Lee identified Caliban with the natives of the Western Hemisphere, thereby

inviting an association between Shakespeare's savage and colonized peoples' (Vaughan 1991:xv). In this paper, however, I group Ariel and Caliban together under the category of 'non-human' in the sense that they are very different from the European norm of 'human beings'.

2. The Females and the Non-humans

2.1. Additional background

In the film, Prospera was not the powerful Duchess of Milan from the beginning. To explain how Prospera, a woman, came to a position of power, the film provides some original lines. Prospera tells Miranda that she was the wife of the Duke of Milan, who tolerantly let her devote herself to study of 'the power contained in some elements to harm and to heal'. 'After thy father's death,' she continues, 'authority was conferred as was his will to me alone, thereby awakening the ambition of my brother, thy uncle, called Antonio.' While Shakespeare's Prospero says almost nothing about his wife except to declare her chastity, Taymor's Prospera describes her husband's title, generosity, and will that enabled her to have both scholarly knowledge and political power. It is noteworthy that her husband's will was essential to make a female the ruler of Milan. In addition, the word 'thereby' implies that Prospera's brother thought it unfitting for a woman to hold power by herself.

Another important addition in Taymor's version is that Prospera's brother Antonio slandered her, saying that she was 'a practiser of black arts, a demon, nay a witch', which threatened her life and deprived her of her authority; because of this false and dangerous rumour, '[her] councillors turned against [her]' and thus caused her to lose her position in her Dukedom. Antonio strategically attacked the femininity of Prospera,

because in Shakespeare's time it was thought that 'witches [...] are usually unchaste, and unchaste women take the risk of being labelled witches' (Dusinberre 1975:70). Sexuality moves centre stage once Prospero is turned into a female figure.

2.2. Caliban and the females

On the island, Prospera's most potent opponent is Caliban. In this film, Caliban's most striking feature is his physical strength in contrast with Prospera's signs of physical decline and ageing. When Prospera causes the storm through her magic, it seems she has to muster all her strength. When the camera shows her face in close-ups, her deeply wrinkled skin tells us that she is an old and physically weak woman. While controlling the tempest, she stands on a cliff top and cries out against the strong wind she herself has called up, but she is sweating and panting. It seems that the magic she uses requires much energy and that she becomes weary when she practises the magical art. From an early point, the film clearly shows that Prospera is getting old, which is making it difficult for her to execute any large-scale magical enterprise. Thus the tempest she causes is her last chance to manipulate all her enemies at once, not only because they will never again sail near her island but also because she would never physically be able to endure the use of such strong magic again.

On the other hand, Caliban seems young, physically energetic, and powerful. When Prospera and Miranda visit him in his cell-like dwelling, Prospera has to point her magic wand at him so that he does not come near enough to attack her and her daughter. Caliban once tried to sexually abuse Miranda, and it would not be a wild guess to assume that he could have tried to abuse Prospera too. The two women seem to be afraid of him – afraid of his physical and sexual power. Caliban's plot to assassinate Prospera is more

dangerous than the one against Prospero in the original play simply because she is a woman, that is, a member of the 'weaker' sex. It is only Prospera's magic power that just manages to keep the women superior to him.

Nevertheless, Caliban is indispensable for Prospera and Miranda, as the former admits when she tells her daughter 'We cannot miss him: he does make our fire, / Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices / That profit us' (1.2.313-15). Though the lines are identical to those in the original, their meaning differs markedly from when they are spoken by Prospero, the male character. In this film, a mother and daughter really must have needed someone to do the heavy physical work necessary for their survival. The physical weakness which is stressed visually in this film also makes Prospera more dependent on Caliban.

Thus too, at the end of the film, the dialogue between Prospera and Caliban is carefully recast. In the original play, it goes as follows:

Alonzo. (pointing to Caliban) This is a strange thing as e'er I looked
on.

Prospero. He is as disproportion'd in his manners

As in his shape. *(To Caliban)* Go, sirrah, to my cell.

Take with you your companions. As you look

To have my pardon, trim it handsomely.

Caliban. Ay, that I will; and I'll be wise hereafter,

And seek for grace. What a thrice-double ass

Was I, to take this drunkard for a god,

And worship this dull fool!

Prospero. Go to, away!

(5.1.292-301)

However, in Taymor's film, Prospero/a's first speech and Caliban's first one and a half lines are omitted, so that the passage proceeds like this:

Alonzo. (pointing to Caliban.) This is a strange thing as e'er I look'd
on.

Prospera. Go, sirrah, to my cell.

Take with you your companions. As you look

To have my pardon, trim it handsomely.

Caliban. What a thrice-double ass

Was I, to take this drunkard for a god,

And worship this dull fool!

Prospera. Go to, away!

The master-servant relationship almost dissolves while Caliban's self-recognition remains.

After this conversation, when the other characters have left, Caliban and Prospera stay where they are. Without saying anything, they look at each other for a while with a kind of respect and even a hint of love. Then Caliban climbs up the stairs and finally disappears through double doors; obviously, he is well aware that he is now free, and Prospera sees him go with a kind of grief and relief at the same time. She does not scold Caliban away but seems to understand and accept him after all as if he were one of her fellows.

2.3. Ariel and the females

While Caliban in this film is masculine and powerful, Ariel is rather nonsexual or asexual. Ariel's gender has been unstable, and the part is

sometimes played by actresses (Dymkowski 2000:34), though Shakespeare must have intended Ariel as a male figure because he included the line ‘Ariel and all *his* quality’ (1.2.193, emphasis mine). Taymor’s film casts Ben Whishow as Ariel, following the original gender. Though Whishow’s Ariel looks asexual from time to time, it is interesting that his existence emphasises the heterosexual love in the film.

Ariel is supposed to have no human feelings, such as sexual desire or love in general. However, he almost always appears very close to Prospera, almost so close that his cheeks or lips could touch her. Their intimacy, together with Prospera’s repetitive use of ‘my’ and her various affirmative words addressed to Ariel – ‘my Ariel’ (1.2.189), ‘My brave spirit!’ (1.2.207), ‘my spirit’ (1.2.216) ‘fine spirit’ (1.2.423), ‘fine Ariel!’ (1.2.497), ‘my industrious servant Ariel’ (4.1.33), ‘my bird’ (4.1.184), ‘my spirit’ (5.1.6), ‘my diligence’ (5.1.244), ‘My Ariel, chick’ (5.1.320) – presents their in fact asexual relation as somewhat akin to heterosexual love.

Though Miranda never sees or talks with Ariel, Ariel observes Miranda with her new admirer, Ferdinand. After looking for a while at the young couple who are affectionately leaning towards each other, Ariel asks Prospera, ‘Do you love me, master? No?’ (4.1.48) This line may strike us as rather sudden and odd in the original, as Ariel the male figure puts the question to his male master, Prospero. However, in this film, Ariel’s question reminds us that the line is the same as Miranda’s question to Ferdinand: ‘Do you love me?’ (3.1.67). Ariel’s wording reveals his curiosity and inclination toward heterosexual love, that is, love for his female master. It also hints at the loneliness of the non-human spirit who will never be able to enjoy sexual love.

At the same time, his question also crystallises the loneliness of Prospera, who cannot have enjoyed any love on this island except in her relationship with her daughter Miranda. The description of Prospera's life back in Milan – which is, as I have already pointed out, much more detailed than in the original play – shows how she loved and was loved by her husband. Her brother and the King of Naples have not only deprived her of social and political power but also forbidden her the diversity of love that would have been available if she were among other human beings. The same must have been true for Miranda, though she now seems happy to have Ferdinand.

When Prospera answers Ariel's question after a short pause, 'Dearly, my delicate Ariel' (4.1.49), it is obvious that she truly means it. She is now asking Ariel's question to herself once again and discovers her own love for Ariel, the non-human. This notion paves the way for her generous forgiveness of and reconciliation with her old enemies and with Caliban. Ariel pushes Prospera one step further:

Ariel. Your charm so strongly works 'em
That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.

Prospera. Dost thou think so, spirit?

Ariel. Mine would, [master], were I human.

Prospera. And mine shall. (5.1.17-20)

In the film, it is a moment before Prospera utters her last line. She looks at Ariel in astonishment and seems to be wondering about the feelings of non-human Ariel as well as her own. The film makes the audience understand

that it is at this moment that she reaffirms her plan to forgive all her enemies.

3. Conclusion

By changing Prospero into Prospera, Taymor presents Prospera as much closer to the non-humans. The paternal world of the original play becomes more maternal, and links between the females organise the relationships afresh. For example, whether the person who encourages Miranda and Ferdinand to love each other is Prospero or Prospera, it is true that their marriage is necessary in order for their parents to be reconciled and to unite their realms. But at the same time, the mother-daughter relationship sets up a parallel between Prospera and Miranda on the one hand and Sycorax and Caliban on the other. The rather short additional explanation about the time she spent in Milan suggests that Prospera, being falsely rumoured to be a witch, might have followed the same course as Sycorax, who was called a witch and was ousted from her own country to this island. Consequently, Miranda could have grown up like Caliban.

In the final reconciliation scene, several original lines mentioning Caliban's mother are omitted. A comparison of Shakespeare's original lines with the film version will help us understand what has changed. The original lines are as follows:

Mark but the badges of these men, my lords,
Then say if they be true. This mis-shapen knave,
His mother was a witch, and one so strong
That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs,
And deal in her command, without her power.

These three have robb'd me, and this demi-devil,
For he's a bastard one, had plotted with them
To take my life. Two of these fellows you
Must know and own. This thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine. (5.1.270-279)

The film version goes as follows:

These three have robb'd me; and
Had plotted together
To take my life. Two of these fellows you
Must know and own; this thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine.

It seems that at this point, for Prospera, Caliban is no longer a son of a witch but a son of a mother, or even a son of herself, a part of Prospera.

Likewise, Prospera and Ariel are in parallel: just as Ariel was 'Imprison'd' (1.2.279) in a pine tree for 'A dozen years' (1.2.280), Prospera was also imprisoned on this island for a dozen years, as it is 'Twelve year since, Miranda, twelve year since' (1.2.53) that 'thy mother held the Dukedom of Milan'. When she finally frees Ariel, she also frees herself from her exile and her vengeful thoughts. When she throws her wand into the sea at the end of the film, it breaks into small glassy pieces, with a tiny but sharp crashing sound. Something hard and cold is now broken in her and she is at last reconciled with her former self as well as with all the other creatures, both human and non-human.

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