

= Sycorax =

Sycorax / ˈsɪkˌræks / is an unseen character in William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* (1611) . She is a vicious and powerful witch and the mother of Caliban , one of the few native inhabitants of the island on which Prospero , the hero of the play , is stranded .

According to the backstory provided by the play , Sycorax , while pregnant with Caliban , was banished from her home in Algiers to the island on which the play takes place . Memories of Sycorax , who dies several years before the main action of the play begins , define several of the relationships in the play . Relying on his filial connection to Sycorax , Caliban claims ownership of the island . Prospero constantly reminds Ariel of Sycorax 's cruel treatment in order to maintain the sprite 's service .

Scholars generally agree that Sycorax , a foil for Prospero , is closely related to the Medea of Ovid 's *Metamorphoses* . Postcolonialist writers and critics see Sycorax as giving voice to peoples , particularly women , recovering from the effects of colonization . Later versions of *The Tempest* , beginning with William Davenant 's eighteenth @-@ century adaptation , have given Sycorax a vocal role in the play , but maintained her image as a malevolent antagonist to Prospero .

= = Role in the play = =

In *The Tempest* , Prospero describes Sycorax as an ancient and foul witch native to Algiers , and banished to the island for practicing sorcery " so strong / That [she] could control the Moon " . Prospero further relates that many years earlier , sailors had brought her to the island , while she was pregnant with her bestial son , Caliban , and abandoned her there , as by some ambiguous reason , she was spared being put to death . She proceeded to enslave the spirits there , chief among them Ariel , whom she eventually imprisoned in a pine tree for disobedience . Sycorax birthed Caliban and taught him to worship the demonic god Setebos . She dies long before the arrival of Prospero and his daughter , Miranda . Caliban grows to hate Prospero 's presence and power on the island , claiming that the land belongs to him since it was his mother 's before Prospero appeared .

= = Analysis = =

= = = Silent Sycorax = = =

Sycorax 's silent role plays an important part in postcolonial interpretations of *The Tempest* . Because she is native to Algiers and her story is only heard through others (Prospero , Ariel , and Caliban) , she is championed by some scholars as a representation of the silenced African woman . Postcolonial authors have also claimed her ; for example , Kamau Brathwaite , in his 1994 work *Barabajan Poems* , includes " Sycorax 's book " as a counterpart to " Prospero 's book " (mentioned in Act 5 of Shakespeare 's play) . In an attempt to give voice to unspoken indigenous cultures , Brathwaite 's poems outline the history of the Caribbean through Sycorax 's eyes . Sycorax is presented as Brathwaite 's muse , possessing him and his computer in order to give full voice to the history of the silenced , who in Brathwaite 's philosophy are not only Caribbean natives , but any culture underrepresented during the colonial period .

Other postcolonial scholars have argued that Shakespeare 's audiences would have connected Sycorax with the threat of Islamic expansionism . Islam had successfully conquered and colonized much of the Middle East and some of southern Europe during the Middle Ages . The Algerian Sycorax may represent Christian Europe 's fear of Islam and its growing political power . This interpretation inverts the traditional postcolonial interpretations of *The Tempest* , however . If Sycorax is viewed as an Islamic expansionist , then she herself is the colonizer , not Prospero (who becomes merely a re @-@ colonizer of the island) . However , Sycorax 's portrayal as an absent , silent woman still allows the play to solidify the idea of European over Islamic power .

Interpretations of Sycorax as silenced focus not only on her race but her gender as well . Most of what is said about her in the play is said by Prospero . However , as scholars point out , Prospero has never met Sycorax ? all he learned about her he learned from Ariel ? and his suspicion of women makes him an unreliable source of information . Skeptical of female virtue in general , he refuses to accept Caliban 's prior claim to the island , accusing him of being a bastard " got by the devil himself / Upon thy wicked dam . "

= = = Sycorax and Prospero = = =

In *The Tempest* , Shakespeare presents two powerful sorcerers , Sycorax and Prospero , who have both controlled the island . Initially it appears that the two characters are a contrasting pair : the benevolent Prospero and the rapacious Sycorax . However , upon closer analysis , the differences between the two characters disappear and the similarities grow . For example , Prospero , like Sycorax , coerces Ariel into doing his bidding , using the sprite to regain his inheritance as a Duke , and tortures Caliban with magic the way Sycorax tortured Ariel . Also , both Prospero and Sycorax were exiled from their respective homelands and both have children , which was possibly the reason why they were both spared being executed . The fine line between Sycorax 's black magic and Prospero 's white blurs even further during his renunciation of magic in Act V , a speech which has strong parallels to one given by the dark witch Medea in the *Metamorphoses* . In comparing himself to Medea , Prospero is implicitly comparing himself to Sycorax . Emphasizing the relationship between Prospero and Sycorax demonstrates the ambiguity of Prospero 's supposedly benevolent character .

= = = Sycorax as mother = = =

Sycorax has been described as the matriarchal figure of *The Tempest* . Modernist authors such as Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes have alluded to Sycorax in their writing in order to illustrate destructive feminine power . As Hughes writes , " ... the difficult task of any poet in English [is] to locate the force which Shakespeare called Venus in his first poems and Sycorax in his last . " By emphasizing the female power found in characters such as Sycorax , Plath and Hughes hoped to counteract what they saw as the patriarchal nature of canonical Western literature . Feminist critics , however , have maintained that matriarchal readings of Sycorax are shallow , as they often find importance only in Sycorax 's motherhood rather than her thoughts , feelings , and past life .

= = = Ethnicity = = =

Some critics have seen both Caliban and Sycorax as instances of indeterminate racial or ethnic identity . Leah Marcus argues that the phrase " ... blue @-@ eyed hag " , suggests racial uncertainty because " as a blue @-@ eyed Algerian Sycorax would have failed to fit our racial stereotypes in a number of interesting ways . We tend not to think of Africans as blue eyed , even though North Africans of ' Argier ' and elsewhere sometimes are . " Most critics have interpreted the phrase " blue eyed " to be a reference to blueish rings around the eyes , indicating tiredness or pregnancy , on the grounds that this was the most common meaning of the term at the time . However both Marcus and Diane Purkiss suggest that a reference to race might be implied , suggesting that Sycorax 's ethnicity cannot be clearly defined , as although she was born in Algiers , her parentage is not known .

= = = Avoiding execution = = =

Scholars have wondered what it was that Sycorax did to avoid execution , as described in Act one , Scene two by Prospero : " for one thing she did / They [the Algerians] would not take her life . " Charles Lamb , a Romantic writer fascinated by Shakespeare and his works , and particularly intrigued by this question , found in John Ogilby 's " *Accurate Description of Africa* " (1670) two

versions of a story about Emperor Charles V 's invasion of Algiers in 1541 , relating that a witch (not named in the source text) had advised the commander of the city not to surrender , predicting the destruction of the besieging fleet , which was accomplished nine days later by a " dreadful tempest " . The principal version given claims that she was " richly remunerated " but the alternative version , " to palliate the shame and the reproaches that are thrown upon them for making use of a witch , " attributes the storm to the prayers of a holy man named Cidy Utica .

Later scholars , however , have argued that Sycorax was saved from execution because she was pregnant . This was not uncommon , as many female criminals in Shakespeare 's day got pregnant in order to avoid execution .

= = Sycorax in later versions of the play = =

Sycorax has been conceptualized in a variety ways by adapters and directors of *The Tempest* . In John Dryden and William Davenant 's version of *The Tempest* (1670) , Sycorax is survived by two children , Caliban and a daughter also named Sycorax . This second Sycorax makes sexual advances toward Trinculo , the drunken sailor , and (according to Trinculo) also has incestuous relations with her brother Caliban . *Die Geisterinsel* , a 1778 version of the play in German , includes a living Sycorax , a witch who has full power during the night , while Prospero rules the day . In this play , she is the one who causes the tempest and shipwreck , not Prospero ; Prospero is extremely wary of her actions as each night approaches , as she has power over those who sleep . Several times he struggles to keep Miranda awake to protect her from Sycorax 's power . In Eugène Scribe 's French 1846 version , Sycorax is alive but imprisoned behind some rocks out of sight . She spends most of the play trying to convince her son , Caliban , to free her . Peter Brook 's 1968 British version of the play portrayed Sycorax as an ugly witch , including her in a birth scene in which the equally ugly Caliban is born .

Film versions of *The Tempest* have portrayed Sycorax in flashbacks of the island 's history . In Derek Jarman 's 1979 version , Sycorax is shown leading Ariel around by a chain and breast feeding an adult Caliban . Peter Greenaway 's *Prospero 's Books* (1991) depicts Sycorax as a bald , naked woman covered in peacock feathers ; Steven Dillon suggests that Greenaway 's vision of Sycorax was inspired by Jarman 's .

= = Sycorax in later literature = =

In Ernest Renan 's play *Caliban* the anti @-@ hero states that Sycorax went to " all the devils " but left him as rightful ruler of the island . Marina Warner reimagined the witch in her 1992 book *Indigo* , in which Sycorax is a healer and dyer of indigo who uses her magic to help slaves . Her attempts to give up sorcery fail , because " she cannot abjure , give up , control the force by which she is possessed " .

J.B. Aspinall 's novel *Sycorax* (2006) places the origin of the story with a 14th @-@ century peasant woman from Yorkshire . The Indian poet Suniti Namjoshi in *Sycorax : New Fables and Poems* imagines Sycorax returning to the island after Prospero and the others have left (including Caliban) . Namjoshi has stated , " The Sycorax in my poem is still alive . . . She is still defiant , still fierce , but she is old and knows that death is no longer so far away that it need not be thought of ... I wanted to follow Sycorax , keep her company , as it were , up to the final moment " .

Sycorax is also revived in the " Baroque pastiche " opera *The Enchanted Island* , devised by Jeremy Sams , in the first production of which she was played by Joyce DiDonato .

= = Sycorax in music = =

The Decemberists ' 2006 album *The Crane Wife* features the song " The Island / Come and See " which references " Sycorax and Patagon / watching in parralax " .