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## Magical Process

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Magical Progress

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

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and Honors in English

By

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## Abstract

The use of supernatural beings in four of Shakespeare's plays – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest* – is examined in order to show the change in Shakespeare's thinking about magic, and how the mortal and supernatural can co-exist. The shift from properly controlled benevolent female power, to out-of-control malevolent female power, to the eradication of female power and triumph of the male magus is examined; the ideal co-existence of the human and supernatural worlds is assessed.

Keywords: witches, fairies, Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*

“SO PLEASE YOUR GRACE, THE PROLOGUE IS ADDRESSED”

Fairies and witches, magicians and spirits may seem like fictitious creatures to a modern person; they are discounted as figments of one's imagination or as hallucinations, and anyone who claims the ability to use magic is considered to be insane, or lying. However, to Shakespeare and his audience, these supernatural beings were real. Fairies abounded in the countryside; any neighbor could be a witch, conjuring spirits to do her bidding and injure anyone who wronged her; magic could be learned from books as easily as any other academic subject; and a magician's skill was limited only by the power of the spirits he was able to bind to his will. Shakespeare employs various magical figures in his plays, and those figures evolve during his career as a playwright. Written near the beginning of Shakespeare's career, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is dominated by nature-oriented female power; *The Tempest*, which was written near the end of his career, idealizes an organized society headed by men like Prospero, who is often described as a magus. Shakespeare's conclusion on social organization, however, was not this drastically altered without a progression from one ideal to the other, and other characterizations of supernatural beings, such as the witches from *Macbeth* and Queen Mab in *Romeo and Juliet* show Shakespeare's attempts to determine what an ideal society where mortals co-exist with the supernatural would be like. As early modern English men and women struggled to make sense of the religious differences that divided them, Shakespeare is showing how the mortal and supernatural can co-exist.

This examination of Shakespeare's use of the supernatural begins with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play in which benevolent fairies constitute an order of world organization superior to that created by humans, much like Catholic saints or pagan demi-gods. The order of the fairy court determines order in the human world to the extent that the very forces of nature cause the seasons to be disrupted when the rulers of the fairy world, Titania and Oberon, argue. The fairy world is a haven of female power; it is ruled by a queen Titania, and her less-powerful consort. Even when Titania is temporarily incapacitated and forced, by the powers of a certain flower, to fall in love with the mortal Bottom, who has been enchanted to have the head of a donkey, Oberon's compassion allows him to fall under the power of Helena, an Athenian maid whose beloved, Demetrius, loves another. The fairies, however, put everything in their world and Athens right at the end, in order to restore balance to both worlds.

Queen Mab is mentioned in Mercutio's monologue during Act 1 Scene 4 of *Romeo and Juliet*. Like Titania, Mab is a queen of the fairies. However, she is associated more with the fairies of English folklore than those Shakespeare invented for the Athens of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and as such, Mab's realm is less organized than Titania's; Mab is a trickster figure, and the queen of a chaotic realm. She is, indeed, a witchlike fairy, and shares more attributes with *Macbeth's* weird sisters than her fellow queen of the fairies.

In *Macbeth*, the supernatural beings featured are three witches, or as they are called on several occasions, "weird sisters." These witches exist in a state of disorder, which permeates the entire play, characterized by the first line of the incantation, "fair is

foul and foul is fair” (1.1.12) ; they are often considered to be the cause of the play’s tragic ending, as their prophecies lead to Macbeth’s murder of King Duncan in order to claim the throne for himself. They are generally characterized as malevolent beings in the context of the play; they subvert every form of order the play establishes, and are the opposite of both Titania’s nature-based power and Prospero’s academic magic, both of which are extremely well-ordered.

*The Tempest* contains two magic-using humans: the witch Sycorax and Prospero, the magician. Sycorax most closely resembles the witches of *Macbeth*, with the exception that she must exist within the boundaries of her humanity; she must obey human laws and is punished when she breaks them, her magical abilities are limited to what she can do within mortal limits in combination with the help of what spirits she is able to bind to her, and she must die when her body can no longer sustain her. Her magical competitor is Prospero, a magician whose practices are highly organized; he is also limited within the bounds of human nature, working in contest with his subordinate spirits to create the tempest that deposits the ship’s passengers on his island and the displays for his guests. Prospero is the benevolent, academic magician; Shakespeare idealizes the social structure Prospero creates at the play’s end, in which power is put into competent human hands, and supernatural forces cease to be an element of life.

Examination of these four uses of magical beings and magic will show a shift in Shakespeare’s thinking about the supernatural and human co-existence with it; the balance of power within each play reflects Shakespeare’s thinking about female vs. male power, and the importance of culture and nature. The more uncontrolled power women in

Shakespeare's plays wield, the more malevolent these female figures become. Titania's power is destructive when she is alone, but becomes benevolent when Oberon keeps it in check; Mab is a dark fairy who has power over only a narrow aspect of human life, and still abuses it. *Macbeth's* witches escalate the use their magical abilities to cause disharmony and the destruction of society. To restore order, the female magic is eliminated entirely, women are subordinate to men who control any female power that presents itself, and magic becomes the province of learned men.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*, the various uses of supernatural beings show the change in Shakespeare's thinking about magic, and how the mortal and supernatural can co-exist. This thesis will examine Shakespeare's presentations of co-existence of the human and supernatural worlds, which shift from the idealization of properly controlled benevolent female power, to the vilification of out-of-control malevolent female power, until, in *The Tempest*, female power is extinguished and Prospero emerges as a triumphant male sorcerer.



"Come now, a roundel and a fairy song"

Act I: The Fairy Organization of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Through this distemperature, we see  
 The season alter: hoary-headed frosts  
 Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,  
 And on old Hiems' thin and icy crown  
 An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds  
 Is, as in mockery, set

-*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2.1.106-111

The fairy realm in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has a definite order: it is comprised of benevolent fairies and virtuous pranksters like Puck, who are subjects of the queen, Titania, and her consort, Oberon. Their power is based in nature, and the organization of their world is mirrored in the order of nature in the human world. Despite their immortality, the fairies operate in cyclical time: like the changing of the seasons, their relationships grow, die, and re-grow, as is shown in Titania's relationship with Oberon; although their quarrel over the changeling child has caused their relationship to die, the reconciliation that occurs near the end of the play shows that their relationship will re-establish itself. The fairy realm is depicted as a parallel, more civilized court to the earthly and flawed Athenian system; under the fairies' guidance, the Athenians' conflicts are resolved and the human world is returned to balance and harmony.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairy court is shown as an alternative to the Athenian court, permeated by female power. Athens is a male-dominated kingdom, and in it Hippolyta must be subordinate to Theseus, both because she is a woman and because she is the queen of a conquered people; by contrast, her fairy counterpart, Titania, has independent power. The kingdom of fairies as depicted in folklore and other contemporary works, including others of Shakespeare's plays, was traditionally ruled by a lone queen and, though she has a consort in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Titania is clearly more powerful than Oberon. In *Fairies, Fractious Women, and the Old Faith*, Regina Buccola observes that Titania "is the wellspring of the alternative feminine power that the play explores since that exploration takes place in her realm" (72). Titania's power is shown in nearly every direct encounter she has with Oberon; their dispute over the Indian boy shows she is not subject to the king of fairy's wishes, and throughout the scene in which their conflict is made known to the audience she seems to take charge of the conversation. Titania has the power to amend their quarrel while Oberon must "beg a little changeling boy," (2.1.120) and it is she who invites him either to join or shun the fairy court's revels; she is able to issue commands to both Oberon and the rest of the fairy court without disobedience, and has multiple named companions, while Puck is Oberon's only subordinate named specifically in the play, though other unnamed attendants are indicated for both rulers of the fairy kingdom. Although Shakespeare gives the fairy kingdom of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both a king and a queen, it is clear that Titania, as the fairy queen, is more powerful, even when she is separated from her king and made to fall in love with the enchanted Bottom.

At the beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairy kingdom is in a state of misrule due to Titania's argument with Oberon; instead of one harmonious fairy court united under their queen, the courts are divided, with Oberon assuming a position of power equal to Titania's. That fairies control events in the human world is made clear by Titania's description of the disorder her conflict with Oberon has caused in the seasons.

She says that

The spring, the summer

The chiding autumn, angry winter, change

Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world

By their increase, now knows not which is which. (2.1.111-114)

and owns that the chaos in the human world is due to the state of misrule that the fairy world experiences throughout the play. The effect of the divide in fairy rule on the human world shows that in order for the human world to exist in an orderly fashion, with the seasons in the correct order and arriving at the assigned times, the fairy realm must also exist in an organized state. Organization in the fairy kingdom is not limited to its effect on human weather, however; the fairies themselves must also conform to the place created for them in the play. To that end, Shakespeare introduces Puck who was, according to Minor White Latham, previously unknown to the fairy world of English folklore (219), to the cast of characters so that he may fill the traditional fairy function of frightening and misleading mortals. Puck, in turn, must remain wholly obedient to Oberon despite Puck's trickster nature to remain within the organized structure of the fairy kingdom. In order for the human world to remain balanced, the fairy kingdom must first regain order; to that end, Oberon throws the fairy kingdom into chaos and drugs

Titania, as it is the only solution he can see for reconciliation. After the fairy kingdom is brought back to organization, Oberon requires Puck to rectify the mistakes he makes concerning the lovers to complete the restoration of balance to the human world.

The requirement that Puck return the lovers to their correct pairings also helps to establish the fairies' position as benefactors of humanity who ensure a natural order, which is superior to the order humans impose on the world, is kept; when Theseus and the human court would create disorder by forcing Hermia into the wrong match, the fairies set things right. After being found in the fairy-controlled woods, Demetrius admits that before he met Hermia he was, in fact, betrothed to Helena; because of the fairies' intervention on Helena's behalf, Demetrius feels he has been healed of an illness that caused him to temporarily fall in love with the wrong woman. To prevent disorder, Demetrius' natural affection for Helena must triumph over the Athenian cultural expectation that he marry Hermia. As English folklore's traditional guardians of love matches (Buccola 61), the fairies have a special interest in returning the Demetrius and Lysander to their proper alliances as a condition of returning the human world to proper order. From the beginning of Oberon's involvement, the happiness of the Athenian lovers is also a priority to the fairy king. He becomes interested in Helena's pursuit of Demetrius, though he will lose nothing by allowing her to love a man who disdains her; he uses the love potion to her benefit out of concern for her happiness and because he recognizes her predicament as a parallel to his own situation with Titania. When Puck mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, it is Oberon who commands him to set his mistake right and, until he can do so, to prevent the Demetrius and Lysander from fighting by hiding them from one another and leading them apart.

The fairies' concern for human well-being, however, is not simply a characteristic of Oberon. The debate over the changeling boy stems from Titania's attachment to him and her unwillingness to allow Oberon to take him away from her. Even the story of the changeling boy's adoption shows the benevolence of Shakespeare's fairies; their known habits of kidnapping human babies and replacing them with fairy children and of disfiguring children with birthmarks in their cradles are transformed into a concern for the well-being of babies, as shown by Titania's care for the changeling child. In Titania's affection for the changeling boy, Shakespeare has turned the fairies' habitual tricks involving children into compassion for an orphaned child. This can be seen as a triumph of nature over cultural expectations; although changeling children are traditionally stolen and boys become knights of the fairy king's train, Titania's natural concern for her friend's child overcomes the codes of fairy behavior.

The fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are characterized as caring for humankind, even to the extent that Shakespeare deviates from traditional folk knowledge and introduces new characters to the fairy kingdom to fulfill the trickster roles folklore initially assigned to them. The kingdom of the fairies is shown as a political system like that of England which, when in balance, is organized under a single female ruler whose power stems from nature; although Elizabeth's authority was not considered natural because she was female, its basis in the inherited right to rule can be considered nature-based. In this play, Shakespeare idealizes the higher order that Titania's domain represents, characterizing its inhabitants, and especially its rulers, as compassionate towards humankind.

In this first foray into the fairy world, Shakespeare shows that nature and entities whose power is affiliated with nature exert a powerful force on humans; and that ignoring it and allowing culture to triumph in its place may result in dire consequences for humans. Though Titania is the most powerful entity in the fairy world, Shakespeare implies that a woman's power must be under male control to be benevolent; during Titania's quarrel with Oberon, her uncontrolled power causes chaos in both the human world and the fairy realm. Balance is restored only when Oberon manipulates her sexual desires in order to bring Titania back under control. Even the queen's power must be controlled; otherwise the world will descend into disorder.

“The Hag That, When Maids Lie on Their backs...Learns Them First to Bear”

Act II: Queen Mab, a Witchlike Sort of Fairy

O then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes

In shape no bigger than an agot-stone

On the forefinger of an alderman,

Drawn with a team of little atomi

Over men's noses as they lie asleep.

-*Romeo and Juliet* 1.4.53-58

Queen Mab is the miniscule transition between the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the witches of *Macbeth*. Like Titania, she is the queen of a diminutive race of fairies and the highest authority in her fairy realm. However, Mab is not the entirely benevolent entity that Titania is, and that she also shares characteristics with the weird sisters is visible in Shakespeare's characterization of Mab as a dark fairy.

Though Queen Mab's connection to the fairy realm of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is faint, she shares an important characteristic with Titania: they are both the highest power in the fairy land. Shakespeare does not give Mab a fairy consort, and instead makes her the sole ruler of her kingdom. That "she gallops night by night/through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love" (1.4.71-72) shows a connection specifically to lovers that echoes Oberon's concern about Helena's pursuit of unrequited

love. Shakespeare's thinking about female power changes from the general powers he ascribes to Titania to a more specific association with the erotic aspect of the human experience, and especially disorderly, illegitimate erotic experiences; Mab affects lovers, not people in legitimate relationships, with dreams of love.

Though she shares few characteristics with Titania or her fairy subjects, Mab is aligned with the fairies of English folk tradition. The "round little worm/ pricked from the lazy finger of a maid" (1.4.68-69) to which her coachman is compared for size, is a reminder of traditional fairies' practices of punishing lazy housekeepers while rewarding those who kept their houses spotless. Similarly, that she "bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs/which once untangled much misfortune bodes" (1.4.90-91) is an action ascribed to the fairies of English tradition. In Mab, Shakespeare's fairy tradition is returned to its heritage, in which fairies are actively engaged in human existence and may help or hinder mortals.

That Mab blisters ladies' lips because they are "with sweetmeats tainted" (1.4.75) seems to be both a typical fairy reaction to overindulgence and a milder form of the witches' revenge upon the woman who refused to share her chestnuts in *Macbeth* 1.4.76. Fairies bringing mild physical harm to mortals is not unheard of in English folk tradition, though English fairies' preferred method of physical punishment was pinching their victim with a series of "thorough and violent nips of a maximum intensity" that left the subject's skin "a perfect azure" (Latham 121). Though blistering a lady's lips because she has been overindulging in sweets seems extreme, it is appropriate for a being such as Queen Mab who functions as an intermediate character between kind fairies and ill-



intentioned witches. Mab punishes the lady for overindulging in pleasure because, although humans should acknowledge their nature, they must also control it; unlike the witches, who retaliate against the sailor's wife for not sharing food, Mab attempts to correct the mistakes of those she comes into contact with.

Like the fairies from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the weird sisters of *Macbeth*, Mab exists outside of the realm of human society; however, Mab is unique in that she is farther removed from the order imposed on the human world than any other supernatural character discussed here. She has no interaction with humans, as the fairies of Titania's realm or *Macbeth's* witches do; her only contact with humanity is one-sided as she rides across humans while they are asleep. In her ability to work without the assistance of drugs, she is craftier than Oberon. Mab's contact with humans is more sensual than that of the fairies from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, because she must touch the recipient of the dreams she sends.

The dreams Mab brings also tie her to both kind fairies and mischievous witches. The dreams she brings echo Bottom's rationalization of the events that happen while he is enchanted into a fantastic "dream"; both Bottom's "dream" and the dreams Mab bring nightly to lovers. The dreams of war she brings to the soldier parallel the war brought about by the witches' predictions in *Macbeth*. However, dreams brought by fairies like Queen Mab are more similar to the apparitions caused by witches' conjuring than to the nonspecific dreams the Athenian youth may have had while under Oberon's flower's spell. Both are brought to the witness by a third party, both originate in supernatural phenomena, and both should be treated with equal skepticism; the dreams Mab brings

during night rides in her chariot can be considered similar to the apparitions that the witches present to Macbeth, as they both cause psychological disturbances.

Whimsical as the idea of Queen Mab driving about in a miniature carriage to bring dreams to sleeping mortals may be, the coach's individual components echo the potion ingredients of *Macbeth's* weird sisters, for both are made of parts of dead creatures. The spiders' legs that serve as the spokes of the wheel are eerily reminiscent of the lizard's leg that the witches add to the cauldron, as is her whip of cricket's bone (1.4.66). That her coachman is a gnat automatically associates it with the "wool of bat" and other products of biting animals, especially with the weird sisters' baboon's and bat's blood, as gnats are biting, blood-drinking insects. Though the carriage's size, natural construction materials, and Mercutio's well-organized description of it connects Mab to the small fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, its components connect her to the weird sisters; that it combines equipment used by both entities establishes that Mab's character offers a transition between the benevolent uses of nature in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the horrific disruptions of natural forces in *Macbeth*.

By returning to traditional English fairy lore, in which fairies are neither benevolent nor wicked, and share characteristics with both mortals and divine beings, Shakespeare creates a fairy queen who combines elements of both the benevolent fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the witches of *Macbeth*. The resemblance between Queen Mab and the weird sisters is more noticeable than that between Mab and the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Her neutral nature makes her an appropriate transition between the organized, benevolent fairies and the disordered witches.

As Shakespeare's work progresses, female figures evolve into more malevolent, less orderly figures. Due to her position as the sole ruler of the fairy land, Mab's power is uncontrolled, and therefore more dangerous than Titania's. The destruction Titania's out-of-control magic causes in the human world is accidental, a side effect of her quarrel with Oberon, while the psychological disturbances Mab causes when bringing dreams are more purposeful. Shakespeare narrows the focus of the fairy queen's power from the general, and associates Mab's power – and therefore female power – with one specific aspect of human experience: the erotic. The audience is meant to recognize the darkening of the association between powerful feminine figures and magic, which is introduced in Shakespeare's characterization of Mab and escalates to true malevolence in *Macbeth*.

“Secret, Black, and Midnight Hags”

Act III: The Demi-human Witches of *Macbeth*

What are these,  
 So withered and so wild in their attire,  
 That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth,  
 And yet are on't?..  
 You should be women,  
 And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
 That you are

-*Macbeth* 1.3.40-42; 45-47

Banquo's confusion about the identities of the weird sisters in *Macbeth* characterizes their position as disordered beings; throughout the play, they disobey human laws and the laws of nature seemingly without consequences, lack any straightforward method of organization, and lack any control over their familiars and the spirits they summon. Their disorganization permeates the entire play, causing its protagonists' descent into disorder and tragedy. In this sense, the weird sisters are the opposite of Shakespeare's humanitarian magic-workers who exist in their own fairy worlds, but intervene in human affairs – Titania to benefit them, and Mab to correct their mistakes. The weird sisters instead exist in, but are not of, the human world and involve themselves in human affairs to cause chaos and disorder.

The witches of *Macbeth* exist outside of most human organizational schemes and laws of nature. The beards that prevent Banquo from believing the witches are female, despite that they otherwise resemble women, are simply a physical signifier of their difference from the play's other characters and their existence outside of the organization that governs what other characters in the play consider human qualities. Though they appear human, the witches are shown to exist outside of the boundaries of human laws when a king allows them to continue to practice their witchcraft while contemporary women accused of witchcraft were being tried and executed under King James's authority. Their ability to fly, appear, and disappear at will subverts every law of nature and any human abilities known to the play's characters or an early modern theatergoer. Similarly, their knowledge of the future, characterized in one witch's greeting of "All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter," (1.3.50) exists in opposition to every concept of the organization of time, which is considered to be a strict progression from the past through the present to the future; this foreknowledge also defies the human constraint that nothing can be known for certain until it occurs.

The witches' foresight allows them to know when things are going to happen before the events they predict are foreseeable; compared to the play's human characters, the witches know things out of order. This disorder in their knowledge is reflected in the disorder of the kingdom as well as the disorder of the witches' speech; in conversation with mortals, they lie "like truth" and speak in riddles no clearer than those that later give Macbeth false confidence in his continued kingship. This foreknowledge is one of the causes of the play's eventual descent into disorder, as Macbeth's letter containing the

prophecy prompts Lady Macbeth to see the future in the instant and devise a course of action so that her husband may fulfill the witches' predictions.

The witches' knowledge of the future and disordered speech are representative of their existence as disordered and disorganized beings, as is their lack of a ruler. None of the witches is clearly the leader as is seen in Act 1, Scene 3, in which each of the witches take a turn being the "dame, or chief witch" to whom the others report their dark deeds (Reed 168). It can safely be assumed that the witches part after the opening scene, as their next scene begins with the witches questioning each other about where they have been and what they have been doing. The witches act as separate entities in deeds that are not shown in the play, but that happen "offstage" and are described in their scenes; until Hecate appears and chides them for daring "to trade and traffic with Macbeth" (3.5.4) without calling her to participate, the witches seem to join forces only to interact with Macbeth and Banquo and work large magical acts involving the control of nature, such as raising the storm against the *Tiger*.

The disorganization of the society the witches have created for themselves is reflected not only in their lack of leadership but also in their inability to control the apparitions they summon. Though the apparitions enter the scene willingly when the witches to summon them – it may be assumed that if they did not come willingly, they would not appear at all given the witches' inability to further control them – they speak in riddles and will not be spoken to, questioned, or commanded to stay longer than their speech, nor will they return after they have departed. The witches seem to have a similar lack of control over their familiars; in fact, the familiars seem to have control over their

witches, as shown when their familiars call and the witches must leave the scene. One of the witches' familiars, Harpier, is even shown to govern when the time is right to begin the conjuring (4.1.3). This limitation extends even to their goddess, Hecate, who is called away from her scolding of the weird sisters by three spirits, and replies that she returns with all the speed she may. This shows that even the witches' highest authority exists in a state of disorder, when she may be commanded by a familiar spirit.

The three witches exist in a state of disorder throughout the play; the only order they are shown to observe is the internal order of the spells they cast, such as the formulaic “thrice to thine and thrice to mine, /and thrice again to make up nine” (1.3.35-36), but outside of the organized nature of the spells, the witches observe no form of human organization. They have no social structure, and this lack of order infects the order of Scotland, which becomes a “poor/country almost afraid to know itself,” and a place where “sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air/ are made, not mark’d; where violent sorrow seems/a modern ecstasy” (5.3.164-165; 168-170).

From the moment Macbeth tells his wife of the witches' prophecy and, at her urging, kills Duncan in order to become king, the play devolves into disorder, assisted by the riddling apparitions which lead Macbeth to his death, and seem to restore order in the kingdom – though the witches' prophecy that Banquo “shalt get kings, though [he] be none” (1.3.67) remains unfulfilled at the end of the play, indicating that there will be more disorder after Malcom's coronation that causes Banquo's descendants, who are James I's ancestors, to ascend to the Scottish throne. These malevolent female forces are a destructive unleashing of the power Titania controls and Mab misuses. When Titania's

power is out of control, the weather is disrupted, while Mab's misuse of power causes a more personal form of disruption in the form of bad dreams; the weird sisters cause both social and political disruption, and cause Macbeth to take actions that destroy himself, his family, and Scottish society. Because he shared the weird sisters' prophecy of that would be king, his wife prompted him to act upon it; through heeding her urging, he places guilt on her conscience which causes her to go mad, thus destroying his family. By allowing the weird sisters to make him fearless, Macbeth ignores the circumstances leading to his own downfall, and so destroys himself. *Macbeth's* witches show female power at its most uncontrollable, and therefore at its most deadly.



“This Foul Witch Sycorax”

## Act IV: The Place of Disordered Witch in *The Tempest*'s Organized Concept of Magic

This damn'd witch Sycorax,  
 For mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible  
 To enter human hearing, from Argier  
 Thou know'st was banished

-*The Tempest* (1.2.263-6)

Like the witches of *Macbeth*, who are simultaneously on the earth but not subject to the laws of man or nature, Sycorax is both absent and present in *The Tempest*. Unlike *Macbeth*'s witches, however, she functions within human boundaries, and is confined to a human magical structure; her powers, as well, are limited, signaling the decline of any kind of female magic in Shakespeare's work. Unlike the weird sisters, she does not summon spirits but bends the island's native spirits to her control; however, like those witches, she is unable fully to control the spirits she subordinates. Sycorax is the last female character in the plays examined in this thesis that has any supernatural abilities; as such, she embodies the waning of female power in Shakespeare's plays.

Although she never appears as a character, Sycorax maintains an absent presence in *The Tempest*. This is mostly created through Ariel's and Prospero's descriptions of her; this absent presence is one element that functions to identify Sycorax as outside of the organizational scheme of the known world in much in the same way that *Macbeth*'s

witches' otherworldly abilities do. The presence created by Prospero and his servile spirit characterizes her as an evil witch intent on causing mischief, both before and after she is banished to the island. Although the circumstances surrounding her banishment are undisclosed, her commands to Ariel are described as loathsome and it may be assumed that the actions leading to her banishment were of a similar nature to those she attempted once on the island. If Sycorax were a fully present character in *The Tempest*, she could be expected to attempt to use her abilities to cause chaos and command the spirits on the island to assist her in her dark plans; as an absent being, she cannot continue to cast spells, but she remains an example of a magic user whose disorganized practices are used to villainous ends.

Despite Sycorax's lack of a physical presence in the play itself, she is subject to the laws of the human world, because her existence on the island stems from her judicial banishment, presumably for crimes associated with her witchcraft. Even the cause of her absence separates her from her predecessors who exist outside of the laws of men and nature and because of this, at least seem to be immortal, though the witches of *Macbeth* appear to have attained a great age; Sycorax is the first of Shakespeare's supernatural beings who is shown to be mortal. Her son, Caliban, is part of her magical legacy, whether or not he was "got by the devil himself" (1.2.319) as Prospero says, Caliban is a product of uncontrolled female power, which in *The Tempest* may be considered as harmful as being the devil's child. The influence of such unconfined power is shown in his sexual transgression against Miranda, which one would expect Queen Mab to induce, and which leads to his being evicted from Prospero and Miranda's home and confined to live in a rock.

As part of her disordered practice of magic, Sycorax lacks full control of her magical abilities, and of the spirits she attempts to command. Although she is able to give orders to Ariel and the island's other spirits, her control is described as incomplete; though Ariel must carry out any orders Prospero gives him, whether he wishes to or not, Prospero claims Ariel was able to refuse to obey Sycorax's commands, being "a spirit too delicate/ to enact her earthly and abhorr'd commands" (1.2.272-273). When Sycorax imprisons Ariel in the pine tree for his disobedience, she is unable to undo her own spell, a common characteristic of witches and their disorganized methods of magic-working, and Ariel remains trapped in the tree until Prospero uses more organized magic to free him.

Despite Ariel's ability to disobey Sycorax, the island's other spirits seem to be under her full control because they assist her in imprisoning Ariel in the pine tree. Her dominion over these spirits raises her above the wholly disordered practice of witchcraft seen in *Macbeth*, whose witches are unable to control spirits, and makes her Prospero's magical competitor, if not his equal. Her magic is clearly inferior to Prospero's; she is less powerful, as her incomplete control over spirits and inability to reverse her own spells demonstrates. That Sycorax is less of a magician than Prospero demonstrates the subordination of witchcraft to male-dominated academic magic; here, the witch who practices her magic in nature is shown as less powerful than the magus who claims magic as part of a larger culture.

Although she shares many characteristics with the three witches of *Macbeth*, Sycorax is of the human world as none of her Shakespearean predecessors are. She must

live within the bounds of human laws, which includes being punished for her witchcraft by banishment to the islands, and within the laws of nature, which dictate that she is mortal and must die. Her magic is naturally limited by the bounds of what she, as a human, is able to do and to enact any magic beyond those limits, such as imprisoning Ariel in the cloven pine tree, she must have spirits at her command that can transcend the limits of human ability. Shakespeare's depiction of Sycorax is a continuation of the witch tradition of the weird sisters that simultaneously introduces elements of more ordered magic; that Sycorax's powers conform to the same culture as Prospero's may be seen as Shakespeare's attempt to invalidate the idea of alternate sources of power, such as nature or pagan deities.

By creating Sycorax as an absent character, Shakespeare offers a "positive" solution for witchcraft to his mostly male audience: remove the witch and allow magic to become the sole province of men. Sycorax is replaced by Miranda; the educated and tractable daughter figure replaces a dangerous and uncontrolled mother. Through this, Shakespeare implies that the way to control increasingly dangerous female figures is to isolate them and educate them, while keeping them under the control of a male authority figure. In Miranda's case, she is isolated on the island and educated by her father, then tricked into an arranged marriage. By separating Miranda from any supernatural learning, Shakespeare has rendered her a "safe" female character, one whose power is restrained; knowledge is her only power, and that knowledge is closely supervised by the men surrounding her.

“With My Nobler Reason, ‘gainst My Fury Do I Take Part”

### Act V: The Organized Magician of Shakespeare’s ideals

Remember

First to possess his books; for without them

He’s but a sot...nor hath not

One spirit to command

-*The Tempest* (3.2.91-4)

Prospero establishes Shakespeare's ideal portrayal of the magician in *The Tempest*. He is confined to human order; his magical practices operate within the limits of what he as a man is, or is believed to be, capable of doing. He learns magic from books and is incapable of creating the tempest, or of any his other great magical displays, without the help of Ariel or the rest of his subordinate spirits. This combination of male authority, book-learning, and rational use of magic is appealing to Shakespeare’s largely male early modern audience because it makes the idea, if not the practice, of magic accessible to a majority of them. Making magical knowledge a matter of studying books allows for the restriction of these powers to those people who are literate, able to afford books, and have the time to read and study such texts.

That Prospero must subordinate spirits in order to work larger displays of magic than he as one man is capable of is representative of his existence within the laws of nature. This control of the spirits on the island may be seen as the creation of a higher level of order; Prospero at one point refers to himself as king of the island, and the spirits obey him much as subjects would obey their ruler. Like Titania, Prospero is shown using

magic to govern, but at this point in his body of work, Shakespeare idealizes the triumph of culture over nature, and thus Prospero's government of the island is more productive than Titania's sovereignty over the fairy realm.

Even in proving Prospero's magical – and therefore moral – superiority over Sycorax's witchcraft, the magician's goodness remains unsullied in the eyes of the play's audience, despite Caliban's opinions otherwise; their competition remains nonviolent, and the competition is not between magicians but between two types of magical arts. Prospero wins the competition by proving his greater skill when he removes a torment placed on Ariel. Prospero's skill at magic is so powerful that Caliban believes Prospero could contain his mother's god, Setebos, "and make a vassal of him" (1.2.375). As Sycorax is already dead when Prospero and Miranda arrive on the island, Prospero bears no responsibility for either killing or punishing her, allowing Prospero's magic to remain untainted by her death. As a human, however, Prospero cannot be an entirely pure character; he does reveal that he has dabbled in necromancy and announces that "graves at [his] command/ have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let 'em forth" (5.1.48-49). As the only grave we know of on the island belongs to Sycorax, this announcement reveals that Prospero has partially tainted his art by attempting some dark magic, and temporarily resurrecting a wicked witch. However, Prospero's control over his magic allows him to continue to practice and use his magic for benevolent purposes.

That Prospero's magic is mostly good factors heavily into Shakespeare's idealization of this magician character; although Prospero enacts his revenge on the people who deprived him of his rightful position as Duke of Milan, he does so in a way

that teaches his victims how to improve themselves while he punishes them: his magic is tempered with mercy. The punishments Prospero metes out are equal to the crimes his enemies committed against him while stealing Milan, but the underlying message within the events that occur is one of redemption. When Ariel appears as a harpy and makes the banquet disappear, he tells Alonso, Sebastian, and Gonzalo that had they not been men of sin, they could have enjoyed the banquet; all hope for these characters is not lost, however, as Ariel instructs them that through suffering, they can make amends and live a clear life. Like the others, Prospero is taught by his experiences – first when he is overthrown and sent from Milan on a leaky ship, and later through his magical studies – both in Milan and on the island, to seek balance in his life.

Prospero's magic, unlike any other magic discussed here, may be set aside at any time; after he has used it to achieve his goals, he swears to drown his book, which will effectively end his magical career. Shakespeare's ideal world order, then, is one in which all power is in the hands of humans who are capable of controlling their abilities, and use them for the good of mankind; as it has already been established that female power is uncontrollable, Shakespeare places control of magic in the hands of men. Making magic an art to be studied, rather than a supernatural ability, allows it to be controlled more easily; only those who are able to study the required books may learn magic, and by limiting the study of magic there is less chance of out-of-control magic creating chaos. Prospero's magic is also aligned with culture, and the study of the liberal arts, while the magic practiced by Mab, the weird sisters, the fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and – to an extent – Sycorax is aligned with nature; the former requires more study,

knowledge, and organization than the latter, which for the main part requires knowledge of nature and natural ingredients.



"Soft, sir, one word more"

These works of Shakespeare's use the supernatural in order to experiment with Shakespeare's own worldviews; life experiences doubtless shaped the man who first idealized nature in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into the man who favored a the organized system he later created in *The Tempest*.

The shift in Shakespeare's worldview may be tracked through his plays, especially those in which he uses the supernatural to experiment with alternate societies. Female power, which Shakespeare idealized towards the beginning of his career, is depicted in a darker light with each subsequent play. That such power is shown as properly controlled with the help of Titania's consort, Oberon, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and uncontrollable when wielded by only women in *Macbeth* implies that there must be male control over magic; this is reinforced by Shakespeare's conclusion in *The Tempest* that the best way for mortals to coexist with magic is to eliminate the female magic user entirely and replace her with an obedient, non-magical female figure, while transferring all magical ability to a male magus.

This progression in Shakespeare's thinking also has religious implications. He rejects fairies in favor of granting all available magical power in *The Tempest* to a single, male character; this can be interpreted as an allegorical shift from the Catholicism present in Shakespeare's early life to his later career, when his plays must be composed for Protestant English society, as fairies were often associated with Catholicism and a nature-conscious rural lifestyle, while the lack of other powerful characters in *The Tempest*

represents a worldview similar to that of Protestantism, where there are no intermediaries between the worshipper and the divine.

A longer analysis of this shift in Shakespeare's thinking would take into account the relationship between this change and the changing social contexts during his career. His idealization of female power coincides with the reign of Elizabeth I, and the later shift to malevolent female forces and ultimately a male-centered system of leadership can be seen as related to the shift in power from a female to a male monarch. With the change in monarchy came a change in religion; although both Elizabeth and James were Protestant, Catholicism was tolerated less during James's reign, especially after assassination plots against the king by Catholics were discovered, than it was during Elizabeth's, and the Elizabethan church of England had more similarities with the Catholic church than James's. Shakespeare's shift from the fairies as intermediaries between the divine and the human in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to having Prospero control the spirits, who do not act as intermediaries but rather as otherworldly forces subordinate to the magician, in *The Tempest* could be considered to reflect both the political and religious changes over the course of his career.

“Those Being all My Study”

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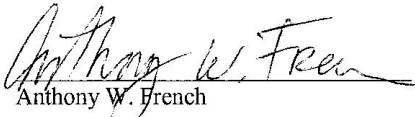
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This is to certify that Patrice Angelle Loar has successfully completed her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

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