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Rape and the Romanticization of Shakespeare’s Miranda

JESSICA SLIGHTS

In 1981, Jean Elshtain issued a plea that political philosophy recognize female agency as a valid focus of study: “The feminist political thinker aims to transform her discipline as well as her social world in important ways. This necessitates locating the woman as subject of political and social inquiry, moving away from the abstracted, disembodied ‘product’ of social forces featured in much contemporary social science. This female subject, as the object of inquiry, must be approached as an active agent of a life-world of intense personalization and immediacy.”¹ Twenty years later, I am taking up Elshtain’s call in a literary context in order to suggest that the history of Tempest criticism stands as powerful proof that political criticism of Shakespearean drama has yet to devise a solid theoretical basis from which to approach female characters as dynamic participants in the fictional worlds of which they are constitutive members. Specifically, this paper seeks to account for, and to challenge, Miranda’s exclusion from critical discourse. By exploring what happens when Miranda is treated merely as an emblem of a colonialist ruling class rather than understood as an active agent in the life-world of the play, my paper participates in a recent dialogue concerned with evaluating the role a rehabilitated notion of character might play in the development of an ethical—and also historically aware—criticism of Shakespearean drama.

These days, “character criticism,” an approach initiated in the eighteenth century and popularized in the early twentieth century by A. C. Bradley, is most often considered synonymous

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with the twin sins of essentialism and ahistoricity. I want to join here with a growing number of challenges to this dismissive account and to argue instead that this now-unfashionable approach has much to offer contemporary readers of Shakespeare. Christy Desmet has argued persuasively that it is time for Shakespeareans to stop emphasizing the distinctions between their own interest in the playwright's language and the "naive explorations" of his characters by earlier critics. Rather than insisting on difference, Desmet's work proposes a critical model that depends on layering—in her words "heaping up"—poststructuralist accounts of the relationship between the self and the literary text with early character criticism's interest in exploring the mechanics of a reader's imaginative engagement with fictional characters in an explicitly ethical context. Christy Desmet has argued persuasively that it is time for Shakespeareans to stop emphasizing the distinctions between their own interest in the playwright's language and the "naive explorations" of his characters by earlier critics. Rather than insisting on difference, Desmet's work proposes a critical model that depends on layering—in her words "heaping up"—poststructuralist accounts of the relationship between the self and the literary text with early character criticism's interest in exploring the mechanics of a reader's imaginative engagement with fictional characters in an explicitly ethical context. Michael D. Bristol is also concerned with resemblances, and he offers the work of Harry Berger Jr. as an antidote to a postmodern tendency to differentiate too emphatically between an "aggressively historicist" materialism and an older tradition of ethically based criticism. Berger, in turn, challenges materialist criticism's tendency to efface individual human agency by reading dramatis personae as figures for the depersonalized movements of ideological forces, and he proposes a return to a "modified character-and-action approach" as a means of reviving a notion of individual agency. Even the influential cultural materialist Alan Sinfield has been preoccupied, of late, with the issue of character. Identifying character as "one of the major discursive formations" at work in Shakespeare's plays, Sinfield argues in Faultlines that character "needs to be addressed if we are to explore how subjectivities are constituted." Although wary of returning to a character criticism originally based in essentialist humanist values, Sinfield is also unwilling to dismiss character as an "altogether inappropriate" category of analysis. Instead, like Desmet, Bristol, and Berger, Sinfield wants to mediate between "subjectivity and character, between traditional and poststructuralist criticism."

That such a diverse group of critics should be returning to character as an analytical category suggests that a new synthesis between "traditional" and poststructuralist modes of criticism is emerging in Shakespeare studies. None of these critics proposes a wholesale return to the essentialism of Bradley; rather, each insists in a different way on the importance of developing an approach to reading Shakespeare that acknowledges that fictional characters can effectively model human actions, but that accounts too for the influential role that historical and cultural
forces play in the formation of individual identity. My reading of *The Tempest* contributes to this new synthesis by arguing that employing character as an analytical category can enable a feminist reading of the play that identifies Miranda’s agency and at the same time insists on her embeddedness in a formative social and political community. Using the work of the late Romantic critic Anna Jameson as a springboard for a re-evaluation of Miranda, I contend that past and present readings of *The Tempest* alike have misread the play by emphasizing the nature of Prospero’s relationship with the island of his exile without considering the alternative models of selfhood, moral agency, and community life posited by the magician’s daughter. An ethically based reading of the play can, I argue, provide an antidote both to a nineteenth-century tradition that understood Miranda merely as a trope for a feminized conception of nature, and to a more recent materialist tradition that conceives of her merely as an unwitting object of exchange in a matrix of colonial and nuptial economies.

I

Sentimental readings of *The Tempest* reigned throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century. Most critics seemed to agree that the play was a complex allegory in which a series of archetypal binary opposites—nature/culture, instinct/reason, savage/civilized man—vie for supremacy. From Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 pronouncement that Prospero’s magic had “something in it very Solemn and very Poetical” to William Hazlitt’s 1817 characterization of him as a “stately magician,” critics emphasized Prospero’s dignity and intellect, discovering in Shakespeare’s princely necromancer a model of patriarchal wisdom and refined authority. In contrast, Caliban—the island’s original inhabitant—appears most often in the readings of nineteenth-century critics as an unregenerate brute, naturally resistant to his master’s attempts to educate and to civilize him. In accordance with an earlier tradition of primitivism that idealized the figure of the noble savage, critics did periodically attempt to recuperate Shakespeare’s “salvage and deformed slave” by depicting him as an uncorrupted innocent destined to follow his own uncontrollable instinctual urges. Hazlitt, for instance, associates Caliban with the “earthy” elements of nature: “Shakespear has described the brutal mind of Caliban in contact with the pure and original forms of nature; the character grows out of the soil where it is
rooted, uncontrouled [sic], uncouth and wild, uncrammed by any of the meannesses of custom. It is ‘of the earth, earthy.’ It seems almost to have been dug out of the ground, with a soul instinctively superadded to it answering to its wants and origin.” While in Hazlitt’s account, Caliban’s connectedness to the “original forms of nature” lends him a kind of wild purity, this is hardly an association to be envied. Although free of the “meannesses of custom,” Hazlitt’s “natural” Caliban is barely human; his soul is apparently tacked on to an earthy body and a brutal mind merely as a sort of divine afterthought. Such recuperative readings may have understood Prospero’s attempts to acculturate Caliban as in some respects destructive, but they continued to cast Prospero as a civilized creative genius and Caliban as a savage beast.

On the subject of Miranda, these critics are notably silent. When she is mentioned at all, Miranda appears either as an archetype of pliant womanliness or as an allegorical, sentimentalized figure for the tender and fecund aspects of untamed nature. The Victorian actor Fanny Kemble, for example, characterizes Caliban as a “gross and uncouth but powerful savage” and associates him with “the more ponderous and unwieldy natural elements,” while arguing that the play’s young lovers are symbols of nature’s undomesticated bounty. Like many of her contemporaries, Kemble emblematizes Miranda while reserving in her account of The Tempest a more central authoritative role for Prospero. Constructing the magician as the physical and moral center of The Tempest, Kemble both celebrates and naturalizes his centrality by figuring him as the “middle link” in a “wonderful chain of being.”

Reacting, in part, to such characterizations of Prospero’s autocratic rule as essentially benign, much recent criticism has sought means to critique what it reads as a glorification of The Tempest’s exploitative colonialism. Rereading Caliban against traditional views of his savagery and ineducability, these critics have queried the play’s relation to British imperialism in both the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. Like the nineteenth-century readers they seek to challenge, however, these contemporary scholars dispense with discussions of Miranda in favor of analyses of the politically and culturally charged confrontation between Prospero and Caliban. While such commentators as Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Paul Brown, Stephen Orgel, and Eric Cheyfitz define their political and interpretative projects against the sentimentalized readings of their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors, their treatments of Miranda bear some
important similarities to this earlier tradition. Not unlike the nineteenth century’s habit of allegorizing Miranda, postcolonial readings of *The Tempest* that seek to emphasize the exploitative nature of Prospero’s relationship to his island home have a tendency to exclude Miranda by focusing on the enslavement of Caliban. This new critical orthodoxy often presents Miranda not as emblematic of the natural world, but as a cipher, a figure important only for her unwitting role in helping to realize her father’s political aspirations.

Miranda has not fared much better at the hands of many recent feminist critics. Although occasionally more sympathetic to her situation, contemporary feminist readers of *The Tempest* also appear reluctant to focus attention on Prospero’s daughter, often preferring instead to discuss female characters who are either marginal to the action or absent entirely from the narrative. Caliban’s dead mother Sycorax, Alonso’s daughter Claribel, and the various female spirits who dance attendance on Prospero have all figured prominently in a variety of recent articles about the play. When feminist critics do elect to discuss the play’s only human female presence, Miranda appears in their commentaries most often as a prototype of that unlikely invention of Puritan conduct book authors and late-twentieth-century scholars: the woman who is chaste, silent, and obedient. Small wonder then that Ann Thompson’s female students find Miranda “an extremely feeble heroine and scorn to identify with.”

Turning now to Jameson, I want to argue that her reading of *The Tempest*—which appears in her 1832 study, *Shakspeare’s Heroines*—creates an avenue for challenging interpretations of Miranda as a disempowered subject whose actions are merely reactions to the various male agential forces with whom she shares an island. Rather than either ignoring her completely or reading Miranda through traditional Romanticism’s figuring of nature as a source of divine creative power, Jameson associates Miranda with nature as a means of showing up the destructive-ness of misguided social pressures on women. For Jameson, it is Miranda’s “total ignorance of the conventional forms and language of society” that makes her capable of both independence and love. Arguing that she is “ignorant of those usages of society which teach us to dissemble the real passion,” Jameson contends that Miranda’s sympathetic nature results from her lack of contact with a coercive notion of propriety generated by a society seldom kind to women, especially those who find strength in passion. On Jameson’s account, Miranda’s “naturalness” is constructed
not as an alternative to reason or refinement, but as a model of compassionate independence.

Miranda first appears in Jameson’s critical narrative as an emblem for an almost impossibly immaculate vision of celestial perfection—in an early passage Jameson calls her “all but ethereal”—but Miranda gains both shape and substance as the account continues.22 Noting that Shakespeare has elected to remove her “far from all comparison with her own sex,” Jameson points out that Miranda’s humanity is deliberately juxtaposed with the magical nature of the island’s other inhabitants.23 When she is compared with the “subtile essence” of the “ethereal sprite” Ariel, “Miranda herself appears a palpable reality, a woman, ‘breathing thoughtful breath,’ a woman, walking the earth in her mortal loveliness, with a heart as frail-strung, as passion-touched, as ever fluttered in a female bosom.”24 Bracketing for a moment its dated prose, I want to point to this passage’s clear attempt to move us away from an account of Miranda as an incorporeal being and toward an understanding of her as a material girl. As the repetition of the word “woman” insists, the rhetorical emphasis here is on Miranda’s humanity, her physicality, and her sexuality—in short, on what Jameson would call her womanliness.

Jameson’s insistence on Miranda’s gendered corporeality should not be dismissed as naïve effusion. She is in no danger of confusing the character of Prospero’s daughter with the milliner’s assistant in her local hat shop. Rather, her treatment of Miranda as a “real” person signals a deliberate decision to invoke lived experience as an interpretative context appropriate—even integral—to the study of The Tempest. Jameson makes this theoretical move explicit when, in the introduction to Shakspeare’s Heroines, Alda—the author’s fictional alter ego—argues that Shakespeare’s characters “combine history and real life; they are complete individuals, whose hearts and souls are laid open before us.” She continues: “We hear Shakspeare’s men and women discussed, praised and dispraised, liked, disliked, as real human beings; and in forming our opinions of them we are influenced by our own characters, habits of thought, prejudices, feelings, impulses, just as we are influenced with regard to our acquaintances and associates.”25 Such an understanding of the vital role that a reader’s ordinary knowledge of people, places, and things plays in the practice of literary criticism is at once distinctive and distinctly Romantic.
Like Jameson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge constructs the experience of reading or watching a play as an interaction between reader or audience member and dramatic character. For Coleridge, however, this experience of encountering unfamiliar characters in new and different situations is associated with the unconscious acquisition of a universalizable self-knowledge. In Shakespeare’s plays, he argues, “[e]ach speech is what every man feels to be latent in his nature; what he would have said in that situation if he had had the ability and readiness to do it.” Elsewhere, Coleridge’s universalizing impetus is even more pronounced: in Shakespeare’s plays, he declares, “every man sees himself, without knowing that he does so.” Jameson, on the other hand, describes the process of engaging with Shakespearean drama as a meeting between reader and character, but is eager to particularize what she describes as an inherently moral interpretative encounter. That is, lived experience for Jameson consists in specific “habits of thought,” “prejudices,” “feelings,” and “impulses”—the ethically weighted means by which people evaluate each other and the larger world and thereby assert their personhood. Criticism, she seems to suggest, ought also to partake of this moral realm.

What I am proposing in essence—following Jameson’s comments on the ethics of reading—is a literary critical model of what philosopher Charles Taylor has described as an orientation within the space of moral questions. According to Taylor, being oriented in moral space is constitutive of human agency; that is, knowing oneself as a person requires situating oneself in a space within which questions can be formulated about what is good and what is bad, what is valuable and what is worthless. By locating criticism within this moral space, I want to lay the theoretical groundwork for an ethically oriented reading of The Tempest that refuses to dismiss its characters as allegorized ciphers.

Miranda’s humanity and gendered physicality are confirmed for Jameson by a discrete identity that sets her apart from the more generic creatures of fable with whom she shares an island. “Miranda is,” Jameson argues, “a consistent, natural, human being. Our impression of her nymph-like beauty, her peerless grace and purity of soul, has a distinct and individual character. Not only is she exquisitely lovely, being what she is, but we are made to feel that she could not possibly be otherwise than as she is portrayed.” Jameson recognizes Miranda’s particular qualities not as unimportant variations within the same basic human nature, but as fundamental differences that set her apart from
those around her. In Jameson’s account, Miranda is more than simply her father’s daughter; she has an immutably “distinct and individual character” all her own. Finally, it is not her ethereality, then, but Miranda’s identity as an independent moral agent that Jameson celebrates.

If Jameson acclaims Miranda as an independent young woman, she also, nevertheless, acknowledges Miranda’s embeddedness in a complex array of familial relationships, and much of her analysis of *The Tempest* is devoted to a discussion of Miranda’s roles as daughter and wife. Rather than grounding her account of the play, as her male counterparts so often do, in a celebration of Prospero as autonomous master of the cosmos, Jameson foregrounds Miranda’s more collaborative model of social interaction. By locating identity within a larger social matrix of family and community, Jameson focuses attention on Miranda’s filial duties and romantic desires as a means of better understanding her as a fully developed self. This reading of the self as a relational construct—as a creation shaped by the nexus of relationships that give meaning to its existence—in turn allows us to read Miranda as at once daughter, wife, and independent human agent.

II

Moving now to a fuller discussion of Miranda as both independent and embedded self, I want to argue that her romance with, and marriage to, Ferdinand is best understood not merely as a political affiliation effected for Prospero’s pleasure, but also as a crucial opportunity for Miranda to derive a sense of herself as an agent in the world. Many critics have assumed that Prospero maintains an iron grip over his strange little family throughout *The Tempest*. Marilyn Williamson, for instance, argues that the “absolute power of the ruler to control the lives of others is unquestioned” in all four of Shakespeare’s late romances, and she sketches a picture of Prospero as a manipulative father and governor who exerts a rough and self-serving authority over his daughter. Political and personal ambitions are certainly prime motives for Prospero’s actions throughout the play. As rightful duke of Milan, he is anxious to regain his home and to consolidate his power by arranging a marriage between his daughter and the heir to the Neapolitan throne. As a betrayed brother, he is eager to avenge his exile and to confront Antonio with his treachery. At the same time, however, love for his daughter and concern for
her future also prompt Prospero to action. He tells Miranda: “I have done nothing, but in care of thee / (Of thee my dear one, thee my daughter).”

Williamson is doubtless right to remind us that Prospero’s displays of affection for his daughter should not blind us to his manipulation of her, but I am unconvinced by the claim that Miranda remains merely “an object of exchange between Prospero and Ferdinand.” Such a reading grants too much control to the play’s male characters and too little agency to the quick-witted Miranda. While she is certainly influenced by her powerful father and by the expectations imposed upon her as the daughter of a duke, Miranda proves to be strong-willed and independent-minded in her dealings with both Prospero and Ferdinand. Her moments of domestic defiance are brief, but they constitute a repeated challenge to the dynastic preoccupations of the men who rule her world.

Consider, for instance, the moment in which Miranda and Ferdinand first catch sight of one another. Rather than depicting a sterile meeting between two heirs destined to marry purely for reasons of political expedience, this scene presents a moving and comic portrait of romantic attraction and sexual awakening. Miranda, awed by Ferdinand’s arrival on the island, believes, at first, that she has come upon a specter of some kind. Curious rather than afraid, and eager to share her find with her father, she discusses the apparition with Prospero:

Mir.

What, is’t a spirit?

Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir,
It carries a brave form. But ’tis a spirit.

Pros. No, wench, it eats, and sleeps, and hath such
senses
As we have—such. This gallant which thou seest
Was in the wrack; and but he’s something stain’d
With grief (that’s beauty’s canker), thou mightst call
him
A goodly person. He hath lost his fellows,
And strays about to find ’em.

Mir.

I might call him
A thing divine, for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble.

(I.ii.410–20)
Despite her father’s assurance that Ferdinand is indeed a man, Miranda seems captivated by the notion that she has discovered a spirit, and even Prospero’s gruffness cannot succeed in dampening her enthusiasm for her handsome new discovery. Ferdinand, too, appears convinced that he has discovered some supernatural creature when he first catches sight of Miranda and he assumes that she must be “the goddess / On whom these airs attend!” (I.ii.422–3).

While these confusions of the real with the magical, the natural with the celestial, underscore the mysterious essence of the powers which have brought the lovers together, they also insist on a genuine magnetism between Miranda and Ferdinand. Prospero may have contrived their meeting, but, as his reaction to their flirtation testifies, even he is surprised by the intensity of the impetuous lovers’ attraction to one another. He observes to Ariel:

\[
\text{At the first sight} \\
\text{They have chang’d eyes. Delicate Ariel,} \\
\text{I’ll set thee free for this . . .} \\
\text{................................................} \\
\text{They are both in either’s pow’rs; but this swift business} \\
\text{I must uneasy make, lest too light winning} \\
\text{Make the prize light.} \\
\text{\quad (I.ii.441–53)}
\]

Prospero’s account of the mutual infatuation between Miranda and Ferdinand acknowledges Ariel’s role in bringing the lovers together, but it also constructs love as a potent force and implies that the magician is well aware that they are in thrall not to him but to each other. Nevertheless, fearing that an overly brief courtship will lead his daughter and her suitor to take the serious business of marriage lightly, Prospero exerts his parental authority in an attempt to slow their wooing.

Miranda, however, immediately subverts her father’s attempts to meddle in her love life. Rather than obeying his instruction that she refrain from speaking with Ferdinand, Miranda instead seeks out the handsome shipwreck victim and announces her attraction to him. Her defiant passion for the prince of Naples is ardent, and bears none of the hesitancy of a woman about to embark on a marriage of convenience. She tells him:
How features are abroad
I am skillless of; but by my modesty
(The jewel in my dower), I would not wish
Any companion in the world but you;
Nor can imagination form a shape,
Besides yourself, to like of. But I prattle
Something too wildly, and my father's precepts
I therein do forget.

(III.i.52–9)

Though mindful of Prospero's "precepts," Miranda is willing to risk her father's wrath in order to spend more time investigating a man whose "shape" she clearly finds irresistible. While this scene presents a funny and touching image of Miranda's love for the Neapolitan heir, it also emphasizes her willingness to defy her father in search of her own destiny since, for Prospero's daughter, heterosexual desire and marriage entail a measure of resistance rather than simple capitulation to patriarchy.

The politically subversive potential of Miranda's deliberate disobedience of her father should not be exaggerated. Like a teenager who breaks her curfew and defies her parents in order to date the boy of her choosing, Miranda resents her father's attempt to intrude in her social life and resists his efforts to constrain her. Her defiance is localized, and she clearly risks little more than her father's displeasure by her rebellious behavior; although powerful and easily angered, Prospero is never presented as a physical threat to his daughter. Nevertheless, Miranda's decision to marry Ferdinand should not be dismissed as the inevitable consequence of Prospero's political ambitions. Miranda's choices are admittedly few, but she is presented as an imaginative and headstrong young woman who shows no signs of acquiescing unthinkingly to her father's wishes.

While Prospero is outwardly acknowledged as the legislator of his island, Miranda proves to be a subtle and consistent challenger to his autocratic ways. Indeed, even before Ferdinand's arrival on the island, Miranda is unwilling to let her father manipulate her world. Guessing that her father has been responsible for creating the storm, which has destroyed a ship before her eyes, Miranda demands that Prospero calm the seas: "If by your art, my dearest father, you have / Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them" (I.ii.1–2). Miranda's command underscores the extent of Prospero's remarkable abilities, but as her speech continues she grants herself an equal or even superior power to control the cosmos:
Had I been any God of power, I would
Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere
It should the good ship so have swallow’d, and
The fraughting souls within her.

(I.ii.10–3)

Prospero at one point describes himself as a “prince of power” (I.ii.55). Here his daughter goes him one better, as she imagines herself a “God of power” and claims the ability to command nature and to save lives.

If Miranda proves she is aware of the operation of magical power on the island and ambitious for a compassionate power of her own, she also demonstrates that she is conscious of the more mundane workings of political power. Although Prospero’s repeated admonitions that she listen to his story—“Ope thine ear. / Obey, and be attentive” (I.ii.37–8); “Dost thou attend me?” (line 78); “Thou attend’st not!” (line 87); “Dost thou hear?” (line 106)—imply that Miranda may be a less than attentive listener; her responses to his tale indicate quite the opposite. Miranda appears not only alert, but also attuned to the political nuances of Prospero’s description of their past as she punctuates her father’s narrative with perceptive questions. “What foul play had we, that we came from thence?” she asks upon hearing of her illustrious Milanese ancestry (I.ii.60). And later, when Prospero has described Antonio’s treachery with the Neapolitan king and recounted their removal from the city, Miranda asks: “Wherefore did they not / That hour destroy us?” (I.ii. 138–9). Such questions reveal that she is listening intently and quickly grasps the import of the situation in which Prospero finds himself. Miranda’s persistent questioning might also be read as a subtle form of challenge to Prospero’s authority; as John Robinson notes in his 1625 Observations Divine and Morall: “it is a kind of impeachment of Authoritie, to examine the Reasons of Things.”

Miranda’s assertiveness also extends to her dealings with Ferdinand. Although smitten with him, she retains a strong sense of her own worth and an earnest faith in her own abilities. Indeed, it is Miranda who must teach Ferdinand a thing or two about effective wooing. Having defied her father and sought out Ferdinand, Miranda is met not with words of tenderness, but with grumbling as he complains about the laborious task Prospero has assigned him: “O most dear mistress, / The sun will set before I shall discharge / What I must strive to do” (III.1.21–3). Only when Miranda offers to carry the logs herself—“If you’ll sit down,
I'll bear your logs the while. Pray give me that, I'll carry it to the pile" (III.i.23–5)—does her prince awaken to his role as courtly lover. Invoking the terms of Petrarchan discourse, Ferdinand then claims to have been in “bondage” to “full many a lady” and he declares that his heart is now in “service” to the “perfect and . . . peerless” Miranda (III.i.39–48). As the scene continues, Miranda pushes his generic flirtation toward a more personal commitment to love and marriage by adopting for herself the role of courtly lover and domesticating Ferdinand’s extravagant conceits. “Do you love me?” she asks her “patient log-man” (III.i.67). Ferdinand responds with a strangely inverted affirmative:

O heaven, O earth, bear witness to this sound,
And crown what I profess with kind event
If I speak true! If hollowly, invert
What best is boded me to mischief! I,
Beyond all limit of what else i’ th’ world,
Do love, prize, honor you.

(III.i.68–73)

The backward shape of Ferdinand’s vow belies the apparent certainty of its hyperbolic imagery. Indeed, by postponing his declaration of love until after he has raised the possibility that he may not “speak true,” Ferdinand appears almost uncertain about his feelings for Miranda. This rhetorical inversion provides an effective parallel to the social inversion of this unconventional courtship.

Apparently unaware of the ambiguity implicit in his speech, Miranda claims that the gladness inspired by her lover’s words has moved her to tears. Her commentary on her inner turmoil suggests, however, that sexual arousal, rather than chaste gladness, is prompting her. “Wherefore weep you?” asks a bemused Ferdinand. “At mine unworthiness,” responds Miranda, that dare not offer
What I desire to give; and much less take
What I shall die to want. But this is trifling,
And all the more it seeks to hide itself,
The bigger bulk it shows. Hence, bashful cunning,
And prompt me, plain and holy innocence!
I am your wife, if you will marry me;
If not, I’ll die your maid. To be your fellow
You may deny me, but I'll be your servant,  
Whether you will or no.

(III.i.76–86)

With its conventional pun on orgasm as a "little death," Miranda's speech reveals her as both engagingly self-aware and forthrightly honest about her erotic desires. Labeling her own attempts at self-discipline as "trifling," and vowing instead to validate the growing "bulk" of her passion for Ferdinand by banishing "bashful cunning," Miranda borrows from his masculinist Petrarchan tradition by apostrophizing "plain and holy innocence" to spur herself to the decidedly anti-Petrarchan action of proposing marriage to her male lover. Reversing the conventional pattern of courtship, Miranda offers herself to Ferdinand in unequivocal terms that recognize the submission that marriage entails—"I'll be your servant"—but that insist, too, on her right to self-determination—"Whether you will or no." Ferdinand's reply picks up on Miranda's terminology, the language of domestic hierarchy, and offers her an alternative to the roles of wife, maid, fellow, and servant that she has proposed for herself: "My mistress, dearest, / And I thus humble ever" (III.i.86–7). According to the OED, a "mistress" is "a woman who rules, or has control ... the female head of a household or family." By offering her a domestic title that claims some measure of control for its holder, Ferdinand acknowledges the sacrifice that marriage necessitates for Miranda. The two lovers then conclude their betrothal with a metaphoric exchange of hearts and hands, another moment of intimacy initiated by Miranda's emphasis on the specific domestic roles that await them:

Mir. My husband then?  
Fer. Ay, with a heart as willing  
As bondage e'er of freedom. Here's my hand.  
Mir. And mine, with my heart in't. And now farewell

(III.i.87–90)

Miranda's marriage to Ferdinand is often read as a manifestation—even a consolidation—of Prospero's irresistible regulatory force. For instance, Peter Greenaway's 1991 cinematic adaptation of the play, Prospero's Books, presents a powerful visual image of the exiled duke as author of his daughter's nuptial fate. Such readings ignore, however, the extent to which Miranda involves herself in the process of selecting a husband. Prospero certainly engineers and closely supervises the initial encounter between
his daughter and the man he hopes she will marry, but Miranda quickly takes the matter of falling in love and becoming betrothed into her own capable hands. As Natalie Zemon Davis's work on marriage practices in sixteenth-century France has demonstrated, occasionally early modern women responded to restrictive cultural practices in enterprising ways. Davis argues, indeed, that "a thread of female autonomy may have been built precisely around [a] sense of being given away, that women sometimes turned the cultural formulation around, and gave themselves away." Miranda's clandestine flirtation with Ferdinand, her decision to marry, and the inverted courtship that follows present, I would argue, a convincing fictional analogue to this real world strategy for achieving self-expression and even, perhaps, a sense of agency through marriage.

While Miranda and Ferdinand seem to have reached a meeting of hearts and minds upon their engagement, some good-natured tension develops between them not long after the wedding masque. In the final scene of the play, Prospero and Alonso witness an odd exchange in which Miranda calls Ferdinand on an attempt to cheat her at chess:

Mir. Sweet lord, you play me false.
Fer. No, my dearest love,
I would not for the world.
Mir. Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle,
And I would call it fair play.

(V.i.172–5)

A political realist, Miranda is aware that "wrangling" over kingdoms sometimes entails "false plays," but her accusation also reminds Ferdinand of the value of loyalty in matters of the heart as well as in matters of state. Her public challenge to his authority consolidates her own domestic power by demonstrating that she will not let herself be manipulated by her new husband any more than she will by her father.

III

I have argued thus far that The Tempest encourages us to recognize Miranda's interactions with both her father and her husband as the defiant actions of a self-fashioning woman rather than the programmatic reactions of a dehumanized cipher. Such a reading, I have suggested, puts the dynastic preoccupations of
Prospero and Ferdinand into stark relief. I want now to turn to a consideration of Caliban’s obsession with lineage and to the direct threat that his fixation with dynasty poses to Miranda.

It is Prospero who first refers to Caliban’s attempted rape of Miranda. He tells Caliban:

I have us’d thee

...with human care, and lodg’d thee
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honor of my child.

(I.ii.345–8)

“O ho, O ho,” retorts Caliban, “would’t had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans” (lines 349–51). “Abhorred slave,” replies Miranda in her turn,

Which any print of goodness wilt not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endow’d thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy vild race
(Though thou didst learn) had that in’t which good
natures
Could not abide to be with; therefore wast thou
Deservedly confin’d into this rock,
Who hadst deserv’d more than a prison.

(I.ii.351–62)

For the editors of the 1999 Arden edition of the play, this “stinging rebuke” confirms both Miranda’s assertiveness and a “timely and appropriate anger” at Caliban.38 However, the nature of the attack that provokes Miranda’s furious response and the implications of Caliban’s highly politicized desire to impregnate her have received little attention from most commentators. Dismissing Miranda’s fury at Caliban’s posturing as part of a colonialist powerplay, many critics either ignore the attempted rape or imply that Miranda is responsible for it.

Although Caliban clearly admits to his attack on Miranda, there has been considerable reluctance among many critics to acknowledge it.39 Others seem aware of Miranda’s vulnerability,
but resist holding Caliban responsible for his acts. Lorie Jerrell Leininger, for example, comes close to excusing Caliban’s violence when she argues that “anyone who is forced into servitude, confined to a rock, kept under constant surveillance, and punished by supernatural means would wish his enslavers ill.”

If Leininger blames Miranda and her father for Caliban’s attack, Paul Brown’s influential account of the play transforms the attempted rape into an issue of colonialist interpellation and interpretation. Suggesting that Prospero’s principal aim in recounting his history is to authenticate his role as master, Brown reads the narrative of Prospero’s arrival on the island as his attempt to interpolate Ariel, Miranda, and Caliban as both subjects of his discourse and legatees of his civil philanthropy. For Brown, then, it is not the effects of rape itself, but rather the effects of the charge of rape that are of interest. Its first effect, he says, “is to circumvent Caliban’s version of events by reencoding his boundlessness as rapacity: his inability to discern a concept of private, bounded property concerning his own dominions is reinterpreted as a desire to violate the chaste virgin, who epitomises courtly property.”

Although her victimization is the ostensible subject of Brown’s account, Miranda is abruptly sidelined as Prospero’s concern for his daughter becomes an attempt to “reencode” Caliban; rape becomes a process of “reinterpretation,” and Miranda herself becomes “courtly property.”

Kim F. Hall tackles the issue of Caliban’s culpability when she acknowledges that “it may seem . . . possibly offensive to seem to ‘explain’ Caliban’s behavior.” Nevertheless, she reads Caliban’s attack as the “ultimate threat” to Prospero’s “quest for social and political integrity” without discussing the threat that it poses to Miranda’s bodily integrity. Calling Miranda the “emblem of purity . . . whose person is the grounds of [the] struggle” between Caliban and Prospero, Hall exposes the need for control over women that underpins the territorial claims of the play’s male characters; Miranda is relevant to this discussion only insofar as she represents her father’s economic interests. Like Hall, Jyotsna Singh reads Prospero as an omnipotent ruler interested in controlling his subjects’ sexuality as a means of perpetuating an exclusionary colonialist project. Finding an analogy for this sexual economy in the models of gift exchange developed by such social anthropologists as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss, Singh presents Caliban’s attempt to rape Miranda as an effort to challenge Prospero’s right to control the gift of sexual access to his daughter. On this account, Miranda’s narrow escape functions
not as an assertion of individual identity, or even as a symbol of the vulnerability of women within patriarchy, but rather as a denial of Caliban’s rights as political rapist. “Neither Prospero nor Miranda,” Singh argues, allow Caliban an identity as a desiring subject who wishes to gain sexual access to Miranda for the legitimate aim of “‘peop[ling] . . . This isle with Calibans.’”

Clearly, Singh does not mean to propose rape as an acceptable means of asserting national identity in the face of oppression. Nevertheless, like so many of her predecessors in both the distant and the more recent past of Tempest criticism, she understands Miranda as a counter in a power game dominated by the male characters in the play. It is this objectification of Miranda that, in turn, legitimates Caliban’s attempted rape as the self-actualizing act of a “desiring subject.” As Caliban’s gleeful politicization of his violent assault on Miranda emphasizes—and as horrifying recent events in Bosnia, Algeria, and Kosovo have demonstrated—rape can be deployed as a powerful tool of war. By generating terror, by violating social and ethical standards, and by hijacking the reproductive cycle of entire communities, political rapists’ attacks on individual women become a means to ethnic cleansing. Singh recognizes sexism in the failure of both Shakespeare and the mostly male revisionists who have recast, revised, and rewritten his play to provide an aboriginal mate for Caliban, but she never questions Caliban’s right to force a woman—any woman—to “people his isle” for him.

Such accounts of The Tempest substitute an acknowledgment of Caliban as “desiring subject” for a humane reading of Miranda. They assume that Miranda is merely an unwitting pawn in a game of political intrigue being acted out by the men in the play, and accept that her chastity can have value only as a symbol of her father’s power and his political aspirations. As a result, they blind themselves to the possibility that Miranda refuses to allow her victimization to silence her and actively chooses to be Ferdinand’s wife so that she may play an active role in her own self-definition. Eager to present Caliban as a victim of colonial usurpation, such critics tend to understand his attack on Miranda as either the inevitable act of an unregenerate savage at the mercy of his “intrinsic evil nature,” or as the emancipatory apex of a colonized subject’s bumbling attempts at self-fashioning. Rather than problematizing nineteenth-century readings of the play that present Caliban as a monster who is either incapable of understanding the immorality of his attack on Miranda or unable to restrain his violent impulses, many critics of The Tempest either
follow their forefathers in the paternalist claim that Caliban is unable to control his own behavior—Marilyn Williamson, for instance, refers obliquely to Caliban’s “rampant” sexuality—or they imply that his attempt to rape Miranda should be understood as some kind of a revolutionary accomplishment rather than as a morally repugnant act.50 Ironically, even as they attempt to reclaim Caliban as an oppressed revolutionary, these contemporary critics repeat the primitivization of Caliban initiated by their predecessors and thereby deny him the moral agency upon which the political rights they are rightly so eager to grant him must necessarily be predicated.

Understanding Caliban as a moral agent, which entails acknowledging that he is wrong to try to rape Miranda, does not logically (and certainly not ethically) require either that we justify his enslavement or that we deny Miranda the right to freedom from violence. The assumption that both Miranda and Caliban cannot act simultaneously as moral agents in the life-world of *The Tempest* is the product, I suspect, of the epidemic of binary thinking that swept through academe as postcolonial criticism was gaining a hold in both North America and Britain. The political issues raised by the interpretative minefield of Caliban’s attempted rape of Miranda are only problematic, however, if Caliban’s and Miranda’s claims to freedom (and to our sympathy) are understood as mutually exclusive. This case offers a particularly vivid illustration of the limitations of a critical binarism that has been unable to reconcile feminist theory’s insistence that women be read as active agents of discourse and postcolonial theory’s insistence that ethnic and racial others be recognized as legitimate subjects within that same discourse. I have argued that a feminism that cannot deplore Miranda’s attempted rape is no meaningful kind of feminism at all. I have also combined Jameson’s model of ethical criticism with postcolonial theory’s insistence that the institutions and practices of Western literary criticism recognize and remedy their tendency to read past an ignoble imperialist history in an effort to grant Caliban the moral agency too often denied him. An agent at the mercy of either uncontrollable social forces or irrepressible psychological yearnings is surely not a moral agent in any meaningful sense of that term.

I want to make clear that I am not arguing that Miranda is a completely unencumbered self, free to behave exactly as she pleases. Her world is dominated by powerful men whose overwhelming preoccupations with questions of lineage necessarily
limit her choices. Rather, I am proposing a reading of The Tempest that accepts Miranda as a moral agent in her own right. This reading, and the understanding of selfhood on which it is predicated, acknowledges that there are limitations on her behavior and at the same time allows us to recognize the importance of the choices she is able to make. An emphasis on Miranda as a bravely independent but always embedded self reminds us that The Tempest does offer some alternative to the paternalist order with which the play opens. The play’s emphasis on Miranda’s fierce protection of her chastity and her desire to marry Ferdinand combine to present her as a desiring self who gains a sense of moral agency not by seeking complete autonomy, but instead by recognizing the importance of her domestic ties.

NOTES

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3 Desmet, Reading Shakespeare’s Characters, p. 9.


7 Sinfield, p. 58.

8 Sinfield, p. 61.


10 This phrase stands as Caliban’s descriptor in the First Folio of 1623, although there is no evidence to indicate whether it is Shakespeare’s own or whether it was inserted by later editors.

11 Hazlitt, p. 90. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s claim that although Caliban is “a sort of creature of the earth” he is “in some respects a noble being” (Shakespearean Criticism, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, 2 vols. [London: Dent, 1960], 2:137–8).

12 I am thinking here of Mary Shelley’s use of Miranda as a model for Ethel in Lodore ([1835], ed. Lisa Vargo [Peterborough ON: Broadview Press, ...
1997], pp. 79, 155). The Folger Shakespeare Library’s art files contain numerous engravings depicting windblown Mirandas inspired by this critical tradition. Sentimental romanticizations of Miranda were also popular on stage throughout the nineteenth century. One contemporary photograph, reproduced as an illustration in the 1900 George Bell and Sons edition of Anna Jameson’s *Shakspeare’s Heroines*, shows Mrs. F. R. Benson as a typically pensive Miranda, draped in a flowing white gown and posed at the intersection of forest and sea (facing p. 148).


14 Kemble, p. 132.

15 Readings of *The Tempest* in “the discourse of colonialism” began in earnest in North America with the publication of Stephen Greenblatt’s influential 1976 essay “Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century” (in *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli, 2 vols. [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976], 2:561–80). Since then Greenblatt’s postcolonial project has been adopted and adapted in articles by numerous critics. For an account of the most notable of these see Ben Ross Schneider Jr., “Are We Being Historical Yet?: Colonialist Interpretations of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*,” *ShakS* 23 (1995): 120–45. For an early challenge to this approach, see Meredith Anne Skura’s “Discourse and the Individual: The Case of Colonialism in *The Tempest*,” *SQ* 40, 1 (Spring 1989): 42–69.

16 See, for example, Marjorie Raley’s thought-provoking article about Claribel’s Tunisian marriage. While Raley is most interested in locating the king of Tunis at the center of a dynastic European regime which must suppress the claims to racial difference upon which its own claims to authority are based, she also investigates the commodification of Claribel by reading her marriage as a form of transnational trade (“Claribel’s Husband,” in *Race, Ethnicity, and Power in the Renaissance*, ed. Joyce Green MacDonald [Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1997], pp. 95–119). See also Sylvia Wynter’s discussion of what she calls the play’s “most significant absence of all, that of Caliban’s Woman, of Caliban’s physiognomically complementary mate . . . the ontologically absent, potential genetrix” (“Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman,’” in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido [Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1990], pp. 355–72, 360).


18 Jameson, *Shakspeare’s Heroines*, originally published as *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*, Jameson’s study takes as its subject twenty-five of Shakespeare’s female protagonists and is the first substantial and systematic discussion of these characters on record. The book’s impressive publication record (it was reprinted at least eighteen times before 1925) testifies to its early popularity, but currently Jameson’s work is most often dismissed as hopelessly sentimental. For an account of Jameson’s reception, see Desmet, “‘Intercepting the Dew-Drop’: Female Readers and Read-

19 For a discussion of this conventional trope, see Anne K. Mellor, Romanticism and Gender (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 209.

20 Jameson, p. 151.

21 Jameson, pp. 151–2. Jameson argues throughout Shakspeare's Heroines that intelligent, passionate women are particularly vulnerable to the restrictions and attacks of a narrow-minded society. See especially her discussions of Portia of Belmont and Lady Macbeth (pp. 31–54 and 318–41).

22 Jameson, p. 149.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Jameson, p. 10.

26 Coleridge, 2:252.

27 Coleridge, 2:125.

28 For a more extensive comparison of Jameson and Coleridge, see Desmet, "Intercepting the Dew-Drop," pp. 42–3, 52. Desmet observes that identification is central to the process of reading character for both critics, and goes on to argue that for Jameson the "advocacy" produced by her identification with Shakespeare's heroines is "temper[ed] ... with cool judgment" (p. 43).


30 Jameson, pp. 149–50.

31 Ibid.


34 Williamson, p. 156.


38 Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, eds. The Tempest, by William Shakespeare. Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (Surrey UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1999), pp. 27, 135. While they argue here that Miranda is not as "meek and submissive as she is often portrayed," Vaughan and Vaughan finally characterize her as "the chaste ideal of early modern womanhood" (p. 27).

39 In their 1991 cultural history of Caliban, for instance, Vaughan and Vaughan raise the possibility that the attack on Miranda is a fabrication by
arguing that "it is a matter of textual interpretation to accept or reject the characters' 'accuracy' in reporting 'events,' as in Prospero’s charge that Caliban tried to rape Miranda" (Shakespeare’s Caliban: A Cultural History [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991], p. 4). Although in a later synopsis of the play Vaughan and Vaughan seem to assume that the attempted rape has taken place, no explanation of their earlier hesitation is offered (p. 17).


42 Brown, p. 62.


44 Hall, p. 151.

45 Hall, pp. 142, 151.


47 Singh, p. 198.

48 See Singh, p. 207.

49 Leininger, p. 288.

50 Williamson, p. 163.