

# PROSPERA'S WHIP AND OTHER PROPS OF BARDOLATRY: TOWARD AN INTERSECTIONALIST RE-TELLING OF *THE TEMPEST*

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**Abstract:** This essay engages in a cross-analysis of four woman-authored “island stories” from both black and white perspectives, employing disparate vocabularies of skin color, and covering a spectrum of attitudes toward Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, from the thinly veiled bardolatry of Julie Taymor’s *The Tempest* screenplay (2010), to a stance I may go so far as to call “bard-blind.” The bulk of the discussion pits Gloria Naylor’s womanist fable, *Mama Day* (1988), against Caryl Cude Mullin’s young adult novel *Rough Magic* (2009), two texts which seem to offer a feminist critique of *The Tempest* by foregrounding the story of Sycorax, but which radically contrast in their attitudes toward Shakespeare, in their ideological underpinnings, and—ultimately—in their degree of artistic coherence. More specifically, I will argue that Naylor’s deconstruction of racial binaries and critique of phallogocentrism stand as the counter example to Mullin’s misguided pseudofeminism and muddled racial politics—both effects of her uncritical approach to Shakespeare’s masculinist-colonialist message. I conclude with a surprising intertext, Roxane Gay’s *An Untamed State* (2014), whose accidental titular allusion ironically underscores its critical (shall we say) “innocence.” For Gay’s novel, though a rape-narrative set on an island, owes nothing to Shakespeare’s dramatization of misogynist violence in *The Taming of the Shrew* and owes nothing to his colonialist parable, *The Tempest*. Indeed, the book contrasts point for point with the preceding *Tempest* retellings not only by virtue of its realism but also by virtue of its unswervingly progressive gender and racial politics.



Shakespeare didn’t have a bit of soul—I don’t care if he did write about  
Othello, Cleopatra, and some slave on a Carribean island.  
—Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*

My title is deliberately provocative in its allusion to Julie Taymor’s 2010 filmic adaptation of *The Tempest*. It is a staff, not a whip, that Helen Mirren’s feminized Prospero wields against a Caliban played by African actor Djimon Hounsou. But let us suppose otherwise: how would Taymor’s casting read, politically, if the

more historically authentic prop were supplied to the European-born usurper of Shakespeare's fantasy island? Modern productions and adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew* have come some distance from the once popular trend of placing a whip in Petruccio's hand: if anything, the "whip" now belongs to the titular shrew herself, as a signifier of her untamed spirit—be it prop (a feminist paperback?), costume (a black leather bodysuit?), or stage business (a wink at the audience following her obedience speech?). In interviews Taymor has justified her choice of an African actor for the role of Caliban, explaining that she "knew" it would make people "uncomfortable, but the fact is the fact and the history is the history." She goes on to say, "I think Shakespeare, in *Merchant of Venice* and *Taming of the Shrew*, wrote about the conditions and he wrote about people who were racist" (Radish 2011).<sup>1</sup> Her casual linkage of misogyny and racism (and anti-Semitism) in this quote is telling, and underscores the need for a conscientiously intersectional critique of her *Tempest* (Crenshaw 1989, 139–66; 1991, 1241–99; Hurtado 2019, 159–70).

Shakespeare's island—as reimaged by women—seems the ideal locus for fantasies of female omnipotence that must either, by definition, presuppose or resist racist, colonialist paradigms. This essay will engage in a cross-analysis of four woman-authored "island stories" from both "black" and "white" perspectives, employing disparate vocabularies of skin color, and covering a spectrum of attitudes toward the Shakespearean template, from the thinly veiled bardolatry of Taymor's screenplay, to a stance I may go so far as to call "bard-blind" (or, even better, "bard-free"). The bulk of this essay pits Gloria Naylor's womanist fable, *Mama Day* (1988), against Caryl Cude Mullin's young adult novel *Rough Magic* (2009), two texts which seem to offer a feminist critique of *The Tempest* by foregrounding the story of Sycorax, but radically contrast in their attitudes toward Shakespeare, in their ideological underpinnings, and—ultimately—in their degree of artistic coherence. More specifically, I will argue that Naylor's deconstruction of racial binaries and critique of phallogocentrism stand as the counter example to Mullin's misguided pseudofeminism and muddled racial politics—both effects of her uncritical approach to Shakespeare's masculinist-colonialist message. I conclude with a surprising intertext, Roxane Gay's *An Untamed State* (2014), whose accidental titular allusion ironically underscores its critical (shall we say) "innocence." For Gay's novel, though a rape-narrative set on an island, owes nothing to Shakespeare's dramatization of misogynist violence in *The Taming of the Shrew* (Boose 1991, 179–213; Detmer 1997, 273–94; Caputi 2017, 40–52) and owes nothing to *The Tempest*. Indeed, the book contrasts point for point with the preceding *Tempest* retellings not only by virtue of its realism but also by virtue of its unswervingly progressive gender and racial politics.

In respecting chronology, these four readings do not form a progressive ideological trajectory: rather, the adaptations that are "whitest," most conservative, and most reverential in their treatment of Shakespeare's text (Mullin and Taymor) lie at the center of the sequence, framed by novels that represent diasporic and feminist viewpoints and consequently either take liberties with Shakespeare (Naylor) or ignore his work entirely (Gay). The fact that Naylor's and Gay's novels, while ideologically akin, contrast in their treatment

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1 I wish to thank Arthur Little for his encouragement and feedback in the earlier stages of writing this essay.

of racial difference and interracialism complicates an already complex series of juxtapositions. At the very least, I will be making comparisons in reference to three theoretical axes: that of subversion versus bardolatry, colorism versus color-“blindness,” and intersectional feminism vs. all of the oppressive “isms” that it aims to correct (racism, misogyny, xenophobia, antisemitism, etc.). All of this confirms the observations of prior scholars in appropriation studies. According to Christy Desmet, “an appropriation may reproduce the formal or linguistic elements of a Shakespearean text, thus embodying a certain fidelity, while at the time flagrantly challenging” the source, thereby bringing not only “aesthetics,” but also “ethics” (read: ideology) into critical consideration (Huang & Rivlin 2014, 16–17). My theory of appropriation aims ultimately to interrogate the value of “fidelity” to Shakespeare — after all, Shakespeare’s plays themselves were appropriations — for artists with a social conscience (Cobb 2010, 28–37; Scholz 2013). Regarding genre, the discussion embraces magical realism and fantasy — and I include Taymor’s film in the latter category because it reads as sci-fi/fantasy visually — before confronting a text that is both shockingly realistic in its depiction of violence and surprisingly affirming, even “feel-good,” in its attitude toward the heterosexual (and interracial) relationship at the center of the story. The Bard of Avon does not have a monopoly on happy endings. But we already knew that, didn’t we?

### Shakespeare in the Chicken Coop

That Gloria Naylor hoped to have her cinematic, African American answer to *The Tempest* produced as a film (Montgomery 2004, 146–47)<sup>2</sup> renders her novel a fascinating counterpoint and precursor to Taymor’s screenplay which — though it did make it to the silver screen — suffered lukewarm reviews and was otherwise a professional disaster (Turner 2015, 689–704). Beyond this, Taymor and Naylor, born two years apart, belong to the same generation of American artists. So much for the parallels: their identity politics and attitudes toward Shakespeare’s canonical status contrast starkly. Below, I aim to probe beyond the obvious allusions to Shakespeare in elucidating Naylor’s distinctly womanist critique of bardolatry and phallogocentrism — both embodied in her sacrificial hero, George.

The first lines of *Mama Day* signal the book’s preoccupation with varieties of skin tone, introducing the island setting and the legend of “Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her” (Naylor 1988, 3). Like the heroine of the novel, nick-named Cocoa to “put color on her somewhere,” Naylor’s answer to Sycorax is black with a difference (39–40). On Willow Springs neither black nor white as complexional/racial markers are absolute. Cocoa’s light skin, for instance, both gets her teased for her “white blood” and is described by the narrator as “pure black. . . The black that can soak up all the light in the universe” (48). It’s a curious passage, crys-

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2 Drafts of Naylor’s screenplay of *Mama Day* are currently undergoing digitization under the auspices of Sacred Heart University, along with a wealth of unpublished writings, including her unfinished follow-up novel, *Sapphira Wade* (Turner-Williams 2020). I am grateful to Maxine Lavon Montgomery for bringing this exciting soon-to-be-available resource to my attention.

tallizing the novel's deconstruction of racial binaries: "it's the white in us," the narrator counterintuitively explains, "that reflects all these shades of brown running around in Willow Springs. But pure black woulda sucked it all in—and it's only an ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kinda gold" (48). "Pure black" is thus mystified, part of an originary myth that answers and inverts the notion of white racial purity. That this mythology eludes Cocoa herself is, in part, responsible for the book's tragic outcome.

Cocoa's baptismal name, Ophelia, is one of many allusions to Shakespeare in the novel. Though Naylor denies that the book is a conscious adaptation of *The Tempest*, comparisons become irresistible when the reader learns that Miranda is the Christian name of the matriarch and presiding healer/herbalist on this imaginary U.S. island (Montgomery 2004, 57). Miranda—better known as Mama Day—is Cocoa's great-aunt and inheritor of Sapphira Wade's natural magic (Montgomery 2004, 57). Unlike Shakespeare's passing references to "the foul witch Sycorax" (Shakespeare 1.2.259) who birthed Caliban and from whom he claims propriety of the island, Sapphira's backstory is alluded to throughout Naylor's novel—indeed, the figure so captivated Naylor she dedicated her last years to a follow-up novel, *Sapphira Wade*, intending it to be her "magnum opus" (Shakespeare 1988, 1167–89; Rhaisa Williams, qtd. in Turner-Williams 2020). Inverting the common story of black women's rape, forced concubinage, and filial enslavement, Sapphira not only had a large home built for her on a bluff overlooking the sea, but also convinced her master/lover to will the island to his slaves and their descendants, only to "poison him for his trouble" and escape punishment. She then bore "seven sons in a thousand days" (3)—realizing to some degree Caliban's dream of "peopl[ing]. . .the island" (1.2.52–53).

That island, Willow Springs, shares Shakespeare's initials, which are also Sapphira's initials reversed: this and other subversive "Shakespeareanisms" permit a black female author to artistically colonize a culturally powerful white male and his body of work. Like Shakespeare's, Naylor's island is full of voices—explicitly, that of its dead (including one of the narrators, though the reader only realizes this retrospectively). Like Shakespeare's island, Willow Springs inhabits a geographically liminal space, straddling the state lines of South Carolina and Georgia but territory to neither and hence subject to no laws but its own. As Missy Dehn Kubitschek observes: "Even in small details, *Mama Day* recalls its ancestor. Prospero sees other places in his glass; Miranda, other times in the mirror of well-water. Just as Ariel leads Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban on a weary chase through a swamp, so do this island's spirits vanquish an officious young racist deputy from the mainland by leading him into their woods" (Kubitschek 1994, 75–90; 82). Moreover, the island's black matriarch has her own wizard's staff and book, and her alias—"the mother of the Days"—endows her with a divinity comparable to Prospero's, begetter of storms. And yes, there is a tempest in *Mama Day*, though at the climax of the plot, not at its inception, and markedly *not* engendered by the titular sorceress, who, in contradistinction to Prospero, has "never. . .tried to get *over* nature" (Naylor 1988, 262).

Indeed, the book's attitude toward nature — or rather, toward knowledge of and power over nature — constitutes a critique of *The Tempest* as compelling as Naylor's implied anticolonialist message. For close reading unveils a vigorous deconstruction of phallogocentric instrumental reason as embodied in two male characters and their preoccupation with books, tools, and maps. Prefiguring the hero, "Reema's boy" appears only in the introduction; this mainland educated islander comes back "determined to put Willow Springs on the map" (7) with a dissertation on the history of the island that somehow gets it all wrong (Blyn 2002, 239–63). The ensuing chapters constitute a dialogue between Cocoa and her husband George, a hyper-male, football-loving, urban, white-identified engineer. George is also a Shakespeare fan, a quirk that prompts Cocoa's irreverent comments, quoted in the epigram, and his problems with Willow Springs only begin with its absence from all the maps. After being put to various tasks by the island's governing personage (rather like Ferdinand in *The Tempest*), George undergoes the ultimate test when he is required to relinquish his faith in traditional western medicine to help save his wife from the malicious voodoo of Mama Day's rival in natural magic, Ruby. Thanks to Ruby's craft, Cocoa mortally sickens just after a hurricane has destroyed the bridge to the mainland, and a desperate George is prevented from patching up a sinking boat and instead sent on what he perceives to be an absurd and purely symbolic mission. Despite his congenital heart defect, and armed with only Mama Day's book and staff, George must hike across the island and confront nature in the form of a mean, roosting hen, to retrieve from her nest an unnamed talisman. George — who is phobic of birds — assumes this Holy Grail to be an egg, but Mama Day's exact instructions are "*bring me straight back whatever you find*" (Naylor 1988, 300; italics in original). Nesrin Yavaş observes, "Ultimately, what George embarks upon is a rite of passage, from which, Mama Day hopes, he will eventually emerge leaving behind his Western, male, rational, individualistic cultural luggage, and thereby entering into the female, communal, mythical order of Willow Springs" (Yavas 2014, 247–53; 252). But in this he fails. When a terrified and bloodied George finds the chicken nest empty, he goes berserk and wreaks havoc on the coop, not realizing that his empty hands alone — joined with Mama Day's — would have provided Cocoa's magical cure. George's leap of faith does rescue Cocoa, but the effort costs him his life. Mama Day, telepathically perceiving the outcome of George's journey, observes sadly, "he went and did it his way, so he ain't coming back" (Naylor 1988, 302).

"His way" is western, masculinist, instrumental reason. George's way is the way of a motherless man, a "man's man" — a man so touchy about his tie-pin (shaped like a knife) it ruins his first date with Cocoa. "His way" is also Shakespeare's way, Prospero's way: the way of the instrumental, phallic staff (or poet's stylus) and world-defining book. Yavas (2014, 252) writes, "[George's] death symbolizes the devaluation of his Western worldview in the face of an African-derived matriarchal community." George's thinking — linear, teleological, empirical, in a word, phallogocentric — cannot grasp the *power of the empty hand* when joined with another's. He understands his role in Cocoa's salvation as a hero-quest or search: when the search fails *as* a search, arriving at no empowering tool, he can think of no alternative but to use Mama Day's staff as a weapon, leaving behind him a mess of dead birds and broken eggs. Here it should be noted that what I have been calling Miranda's staff more often than not serves her as an ordinary cane. Likewise,

the object I have compared to Prospero's book of spells is, in fact, a decayed notebook of Bascomb Wade's, containing Sapphira's illegible bill of sale, which Mama Day does not discover until nearly the end of the novel. In other words, Naylor offers a very different, non-Shakespearean attitude toward books and book-learning, in the same way that she deconstructs racial binaries and foregrounds non-phallic images (that concave, empty nest, for instance) and anti-phallogocentric understandings of humanity's relationship to nature. Likewise, Naylor's approach to magic powerfully contrasts with Shakespeare's: "Unlike Prospero's magic, Miranda's work exists firmly within the natural context, speeding or slowing processes already there but not creating either processes or potential ex nihilo" (Kubitschek 1994, 84). Most of Miranda's miracles—such as Bernice's pregnancy—are accomplished without the usual implements, either medical/surgical or magical, and her knowledge often comes to *her*, rather than the other way around (in one memorable formulation, "There's something waiting for me to know" [Naylor 1988, 118]).

Central to the book's philosophy is the distinction between knowledge as an object attained by traditional research (like that conducted by Reema's boy) and a more intuitive, passive kind of "knowing" or perception, a kind of "listening" that is not limited to the spoken word and that strikes a distinctly postmodern note when read against *The Tempest*. For Naylor includes the reader's experience of the novel itself amongst these more mystical routes to understanding, thereby deconstructing her own authorial power. The disembodied narrator of the introduction—seemingly the collective unconscious of Willow Springs—evokes African American oral tradition (Donlon 1995, 16–35; Walter 1997, 55–66), yet also urges the reader: "Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you. . . Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own" (Naylor 1988, 10). Unlike Shakespeare, who only appeals to the reader/audience in the Epilogue, here Naylor introduces the entire story as interactive, as co-creation between author and reader. For "it aint about. . . truth or lies" (3).

There is one way in which *Mama Day* approaches Shakespearean traditionalism, and that is its attitude toward interracial relationships. For George's first partner was white. As this first relationship begins to flounder—an impasse George blames entirely on "the stupid, senseless color line" (101)—Cocoa walks into his life, nearly stopping him in his tracks with her "amber" and "cream" complexion (27). But George's white ex-lover can be said to haunt his relationship with Cocoa in the same way that another interracial relationship—that of Bascombe Wade and Sapphira—quite literally haunts the island of Willow Springs. Cocoa's insecurities about her looks in relation to both her freckled, red-headed predecessor and the darker-skinned women of the island fuels the couple's "worst fight ever" (230), a crisis that leaves the heroine vulnerable to Ruby's curse. What, then, is *Mama Day* suggesting about interracial relationships, and is this attitude in keeping with the more subversive elements of the book as an appropriation of *The Tempest*? The question is perhaps too complex for the scope of this essay. Naylor has described herself as having "separatist" sympathies, while also recognizing that neither integration nor segregation is "the answer" (Montgomery 2004, 123). And, in any case, the novel's resistance to narrative closure—regarding *both* the Sapphira/Bascombe backstory (unveiled in tantalizing but incoherent bits of lore and dreamscape),

and the story of George and Cocoa—forestalls a critical conclusion. In the final pages of the novel, when we realize Cocoa has been addressing her dead husband all along, she asks, “what really happened to us, George?” and concludes, “there are just too many sides to the whole story” (Naylor 1988, 311).

*Mama Day* was published in 1989—practically in tandem with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s ground-breaking legal scholarship on intersectionality, and partaking of the same zeitgeist. Three decades later, Crenshaw’s coinage and the critical practice it hailed have only begun to infiltrate Shakespeare studies (Traub 2016, 1–15). Appropriation studies, as the more progressive subdiscipline to the former, would seem to offer more fertile ground for intersectional analysis. With that in mind, I turn to three millennial “tempest tales” by women who—being Naylor’s theoretical new world “sisters”—ought *not* remain artistically enslaved to a centuries-dead white male. Right?

### Bardolatry and Its (Intersectional) Discontents

*Rough Magic*, which won the 2010 Quebec Writers’ Federation award for best young adult novel, constitutes both a prequel and a sequel to Shakespeare’s romance, granting Sycorax a backstory and Miranda and Ferdinand a daughter, Chiara. The book’s cover presents the latter as the embodiment of “girl power.” She stands with arms outstretched across a dramatic seascape, hands flexed as if commanding the seas to part or perhaps buffering or redirecting the wind; her blonde hair is tightly bound and her expression stern. The image spans both front and back covers, the heroine’s torso filling the spine: one billowing sleeve is red and one white, like metaphorical lilies and roses of her complexion (Chiara is Italian for “fair-skinned”). The cover of the book and the press that published it—Second Story, self-described on their webpage as “proudly feminist”—are about as feminist as the book gets, unless we count the dedication to the author’s daughters. Turn to the title page, which references Shakespeare not once but twice (in small print: “A Tempest Tale”; in large print: “Rough Magic”), and Mullin’s divided loyalties emerge. In the reading that follows, I will interrogate the novel’s not-quite-racialized but all-too-Shakespearean tropes of complexional/moral difference as well as its flirting with misogynist binaries, my aim being to highlight its intersectionalist blind spots.

The novel opens not with part 1 but “Act One” (an organizational quirk that further hints at bardolatry), presenting Sycorax as a child, channeling her feminist angst into her first feat of magic. Despite this promising beginning, however, her story, overall, proves equally dismal—even gynephobic—compared with anything Shakespeare might have imagined for her. Though more humanized than her Renaissance predecessor (for instance, she does not copulate with the Devil), she is still, in thought and deed, essentially a witch, murdering a husband and abandoning her first-born, before being exiled to Shakespeare’s island,

pregnant with Caliban. Interestingly, Shakespeare's Algerian-born witch<sup>3</sup> is not racially othered in this novel: Mullin endows her with "honey-colored" hair and skin only darker (implicitly) than an Italian rival she terms "the pale lady" (22; 31). But Mullin's language for Sycorax as a grown woman strikes a remarkably Shakespearean, Dark-Lady-esque note: "She was poison, stench, plague, and swarm to the island" (50).

A white mother may have been deemed necessary for a white Caliban, who will go on to form a special relationship with Chiara in the post-*Tempest* chapters. In re-creating Shakespeare's "savage and deformed slave," the author takes the descriptor "freckled whelp" (1.2.283) and runs with it, portraying Caliban as covered in purple birthmarks, but not otherwise differentiated from the shipwrecked Italians. In fact, Caliban's flawed complexion seems designed to endear him more fully to readers. Of course, the difficulty for Mullin in crafting a perfectly sympathetic, avuncular Caliban is the attempted rape of the heroine's mother. The author's bardolatry does not permit her to abandon this offstage event (as she did the devil's begetting of Caliban), so she introduces a salacious mermaid on whom to pin the blame: "It was the mermaid who put the thought [of raping Miranda] into his head" (Mullin 2009, 75). This is lame, but it gets worse: we will see this green-skinned she-monster again (or, to be precise, one of her purple-skinned sisters), in some aquatic girl-on-girl toward the end of the story.

It is an indication of the book's flawed feminism that the relationships between female characters all read as dysfunctional—until the very last page. Sycorax abandons her daughter, and the relationship between Miranda and Chiara is strained at best. Mullin writes, "Chiara. . . had stared at her mother all her life, amazed that she was the daughter of this perfect woman. There was such a wide chasm between them that it took all their love to bridge it" (115). Victoria Farmer notes that "the novel's unwillingness to" portray women who are both "capable mothers and autonomous women . . . suggests a deeper-rooted cultural agenda at work" (Farmer 2012, 25). The "chasm" Mullin creates between mother and daughter, however, does not apply to their behavior vis-à-vis male authority. Budding feminists attracted by the book's cover art will be dismayed to find the heroine as demure and self-sacrificing as any Shakespearean daughter. When Chiara is ordered to marry the prince of Spain, it is Caliban who urges disobedience, and Chiara resists until learning that her grandfather dedicated his last breath to a spell that would bring her back to the island. Once again, Prospero is running the show; just as he choreographed his daughter's courtship and political marriage, he now dictates, postmortem, his granddaughter's flight from just such a marriage.

The return to Caliban's island is where Mullin's plot begins to spin out of control, but I hesitate to blame the absence of a Shakespearean template. Caliban and Chiara arrive to find the island blasted and desolate, the effect of Prospero's breaking his staff and drowning his book, as an angry Ariel explains. To amend

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3 The geography of the novel's opening is vague—perhaps deliberately so. A scene in which Sycorax contemplates a map of her dominion, avoids naming any of the countries, and references "lands to the west" (Mullin 2009, 18) that would not exist were she situated in Algiers.



the problem, Chiara must dive to the bottom of the sea and retrieve Prospero's book from the claws of a mammoth sea-monster. On the way, she encounters another of those troublesome, *colored* mermaids — a purple-skinned, black-haired “fury” with “snake eyes,” “dagger” teeth, “full, dark, lips,” and “carrion smell[ing]. . . breath” (Mullin 2009, 155; 156; 159).<sup>4</sup> Chiara who—good girl that she is—“never fought anyone in her life” (155), has disturbed the purple siren by liberating one of her imprisoned sailor-souls. Oddly, the mermaid here acts as environmentalist spokesperson, denouncing Prospero as “the enemy of all wild things” and dismissing Chiara's claim that she will use his book to heal the island. “So says every human when they first come to the wild. Soon help becomes control, and then control becomes possession. I know just how far I can trust you, Prospero-girl.” When Chiara rebuts by objecting to the moniker and stating her own name, she verges on an attempt to define her personhood in contradistinction to male authority, but the words that resonate in this scene are “Caliban is a good man . . . and so was my grandfather” (Mullin 2009, 158).

Running in tandem with the above described conflict at the bottom of the sea is a new plotline that once again gives critical pause. Mullin introduces a new character, Calypso, the Turkish-Greek daughter of Sycorax's abandoned first child: Calypso happened to be aboard the same ship that brought Chiara and Caliban to the island. Does Mullin intend this “girl wizard” as the foil to her “Prospero-girl,” or as Chiara's more adventurous alter ego, the Bertha to her Jane? The name Calypso's dual associations with West Indian culture and a Homeric enchantress are both relevant here. How Mullin has managed thus far to present a raceless Mediterranean strikes me as noteworthy: it bespeaks either a conscious, enlightened effort to eschew binaries, or a misguided attempt at “color-blindness”<sup>5</sup> springing from faith in Shakespeare's supposed universalism. I suspect the latter. Along these lines, Calypso's ethnic/racial alterity is denoted in her “dark,” “wool[ly]” hair, her accent, and her “black eyes,” aligning her with those dubiously exoticized and sexualized mermaids (Mullin 2009, 217). Interestingly, this “witch-brat” has been disguised on shipboard as a boy, and though Ariel nominates her as a stand-in for Chiara in the collaborative task of magically healing the island, Caliban has his doubts: “What sort of girl is she?” he asks (Mullin 2009, 192).

It is a good question, and the novel itself seems unsure of the answer, perhaps because the Chiara-Calypso dyad so clearly echoes Shakespearean misogynistic binaries that discomfit the author herself. Calypso immediately lusts for Prospero's broken staff, which Caliban has pieced together, along with its promise of power over the island, and she hopes (guiltily) that Chiara never returns from her quest. Distinguishing herself from the latter, who is naturally docile, Calypso adopts a false docility in Caliban's presence long enough to get her hands on the staff, which, however, proves too powerful for her. Indeed, her contact with the magical tool somehow conjures the ghost of Sycorax, who—as though Mullin will not trust a girl to shoulder a woman's task—takes possession of her granddaughter's body and begins to raise hell.

4 I agree with Farmer that the episode is “not only sexist but probably racist” (Farmer 2012, 26).

5 Here I am borrowing a term from performance theory: “color-blind casting” normally refers to actors of color in traditionally “white” Shakespearean roles (Thompson 2006).

Both woman and girl, however, wind up having a troubled relationship with this phallic instrument: called “mean stick” by the young Caliban for its role in his mother’s spiritual and physical demise, the resurrected staff fuses itself with Calypso’s hand, which itself becomes wood. One wonders why, if the staff is so dangerous to humans, it was wielded so effectively by Prospero, and with no disfiguring side effects. The Freudian reading is tempting but perhaps too facile, as Chiara does prove handy with a magic blade and “thunderball.” But before becoming so empowered, she must undergo a radical transformation that further compromises the book’s message toward young women.

While Caliban and Calypso have been struggling over Prospero’s staff, our heroine has been undergoing a fantastic spiritual test in the belly of the dragon that will either destroy her or remake her as a wizard in her own right. Here, where one hopes for a feminist resurrection story, Mullin makes a most bewildering choice: Chiara emerges from the sea equipped to make all well, but as neither woman, nor witch, nor wizard. Rather, the dragon who swallowed her regurgitates her as one of its own. So as not to jolt reader identification too severely, Mullin does not cover her heroine in scales: only her eyes and teeth become “serpentine” (258). And she can fly. Chiara is thus enabled to retrieve from a Tolkienesque magic mountain the amber blade that will separate Calypso from that pernicious staff, reuniting the latter with the original tree, and healing the island. Caliban dies—but happily—in the magical process, sacrificing his own lifeblood in lieu of Chiara’s. The ghost of Sycorax then departs—as does Calypso’s magical power. On the final page of the novel, the chastened and helpless ex-wizard-girl turns to the dragon-girl for protection, and the latter proposes, “Lets seek out some brave new world together” (Mullin 2009, 264).

*Rough Magic* is incoherent, its plot embarrassingly overwrought. But the question is: what role does the author’s fidelity to Shakespeare play in her failure to control the narrative? What role does it play in her inconsistencies of characterization? Is the painfully complicated finale a result, perhaps, of Mullin’s own discomfort with Shakespearean misogynistic binaries? Shakespeare would never have redeemed the “witch-brat” or reconciled female rivals. So it is to her credit that Mullin tries, but it is too late by “act” five “scene” eleven. The novel becomes, by the end, both too much Shakespeare and not enough. In including and then “forgetting” Caliban’s assault on Miranda, in fleshing out Sycorax only to demonize her, in removing Miranda as a central character only to replace her with another self-effacing good-girl—one who must be recreated as a monster before she is granted agency—Mullin sacrifices originality and artistic coherence out of misguided reverence toward Shakespeare’s text.

### Shakespeare: The White Woman’s Burden?

The same year *Rough Magic* won its award, Julie Taymor’s screenplay was published as a glossy art-book with a forward by eminent Shakespearean Jonathan Bate and an introduction—also, coincidentally, entitled “Rough Magic”—by the director herself (Taymor 2010, 13). Open to the introduction and lay Mullin’s paperback open with the jacket facing up and open inside (it fits), and a curious correspondence



Fig. 1. Helen Mirren's feminized Prospero wields a staff in Julie Taymor's 2010 filmic adaptation of *The Tempest*.

emerges. The stance of “Prospero girl” that we have already discussed perfectly mirrors that of Prospera in the photograph Taymor used to frame her introduction, except that Prospera brandishes her staff in her outstretched fists, and here is shown from behind, with the crew below her in the foreground, curiously Caliban-like in their supine postures, creating the cinematic magic. Readers have already seen Mirren in this commanding pose, from the front and minus the “meta” framework, on the table of contents, and will see the same image of Prospera and her staff replicated in three additional full-page plates elsewhere in the volume (Figures 1 and 2). The absence of Caliban in these images renders them even more seductive, because apolitical, as ideographs for female power.

A picture book can never replicate a viewer's experience of the big screen, and my own first-time viewing experience of Taymor's film can never be replicated (I own the DVD). I rented the film with high hopes, having admired Taymor's *Titus*, and being intrigued by the idea of a woman in the role of Prospero—and that woman no other than the great Helen Mirren, who had kicked ass as Moll Cutpurse in the RSC's 1983 *Roaring Girl*. But it is impossible to applaud Mirren's Prospera when she “raises her staff and causes CALIBAN to crumble” the way feminists applauded her “roaring girl,” because the primary target of Prospera's aggression is black (Taymor 2010, 59). Taymor's Prospera resembles Shakespeare's Portia in the trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice*: a woman empowered only in the furtherance of a racist, antisemitic agenda. Needless to say, in intersectionalist terms, this is nothing to celebrate.



Fig. 2. Helen Mirren's feminized Prospera wields a staff in Julie Taymor's 2010 filmic adaptation of *The Tempest*.

What prompted Taymor to cast Hounsou as Caliban? One curious fact about the actor is reiterated in interviews with the director, in her introduction to the screenplay, and in Bate's foreword. Hounsou believes in magic, which, as Bate's puts it, is "still real" in the actor's homeland of Benin (10). In Taymor's words,

I did say, "You know it's Helen Mirren, who's a small, white woman that's going to come up there with a staff and overpower you." He didn't blink. That made him the perfect actor for this role because he didn't have to even make believe that this dynamic would work. . . I lived in Indonesia for four years and I understand trance and magic and where it comes from. We have a very condescending attitude, in America and many European cultures, about what that means. (Radish 2001)

It is perhaps my own condescending attitude toward believers in magic that leads me to find the logic of this casting choice exploitive. Why was belief in magic not the litmus test for the casting of Ariel? Or of Prospera? There *are* white people who believe in witchcraft, voodoo, wicca, and the paranormal. The implication is that a Europeanized black actor would not have cowered as convincingly when Prospera shakes her big stick: he would have been too tempted to call her out on her racism.

There is another way to look at the casting issue. Taymor expected audience discomfort over the racialization of the Caliban-Prospera power dynamic, but perhaps a *white* man "crumbl[ing]" under the effect of Prospera's staff would have discomfited audiences even more. The androgyny of Ariel, in this film, reinforces my point. His genitals have been digitally erased (in contrast to Calibans', accentuated by his tight

loincloth), and he is sometimes endowed with breasts. When he is visualized as a harpy, he is not only feminized but blackened: indeed, it is this embodiment of Ariel that frames Prospera's image—in a hierarchical axis with Caliban on the bottom—on the cover of the screenplay. Although the spatial valences of Ariel's subordination are reversed in respect to Caliban—Ariel never has to perform “earthy” tasks (1.2.274) such as gathering wood, and he occupies the upper third of the cover-image—his androgyny/feminization renders his servitude to a woman more palatable, from a masculinist point of view.

Taymor admits that her film “isn't a feminist tract” (Radish 2001). Similarly, in her introduction to the screenplay, she denies that her casting of Hounsou is “sociopolitical commentary”—a position lauded by Bate as resistance to “politically correct' reading[s]” of Shakespeare (Taymor 2010, 10). Taymor further downplays the politics of her casting choice by emphasizing the “four-hour make-up ordeal” the actor had to undergo to embody Shakespeare's “unique vision of this character” (17). She goes on to explicate the actor's physical transformation, grounding each detail in the text of *The Tempest*: the circular white patch around his one blue eye and “maplike patches of white on black skin” are warranted by his nick-name of “moon-calf”; the thick, cracked, dark make-up on most of his body “makes him resemble the island's cracked red earth and black lava”; and the scarification of English words on his body is Taymor's rendering of the line “you taught me language, and my profit on't is/ I know how to curse.” Taymor also mentions “webbing between his fingers” inspired by the appellation “strange fish” (18), but that detail shows up neither in the DVD nor in the published volume.

What do viewers *see* in Taymor's Caliban (Figure 3)? Do the above listed subtleties register on first viewing, or does the character merely appear as a muddy African? I, for one, did not see what Taymor calls a “racial mash-up” in Hounsou's body makeup. Nor does the scarification of English “obscenities” (17) strike me as a culturally sensitive reference to a traditional African practice of body-modification: standing in for the “stripes” or lashes Prospera threatens, these scars imply self-harm and linguistic self-colonization on Caliban's part, in lieu of resistance to political oppression. Reviews of the film largely echo my misgivings. Indeed, most reviewers took for granted Hounsou's embodiment of that very colonialist reading dismissed by Bate as “politically correct”; indeed, at least one critic faulted the production for not developing this interpretation fully (Phipps 2010). Other voices bordered on outrage. One reviewer wondered why there were no protestors outside the theater: “Caliban as black beast? What was Julie Taymor thinking?” she asked (Breuer 2010). One review complained that Hounsou was “robbed of his natural dignity” and another scathingly accused Taymor of making the actor imitate a gorilla (French 2011; Stone 2011). Aside from issues of embodiment, however, certain filmic elements do invite a more progressive, revisionist interpretation. I wanted to interpret Caliban's long, final look at Prospera as one of defiance, and her holding his gaze as sympathy; in the final shot of Caliban climbing up a staircase and exiting, framed by clouds, above Prospera, I saw an antiracist, anticolonialist gesture. But I was wrong, according to Taymor's own commentary in the screenplay, wherein this moment constitutes her “tak[ing] in full measure her own responsibility for CALIBAN” (Taymor 2010, 171). Caliban: the white woman's burden?



Fig. 3. African actor Djimon Hounsou plays Caliban in Julie Taymor's 2010 filmic adaptation of *The Tempest*.

Perhaps the *real* burden, if not to Prospera, then to Taymor and Mirren (and Mullin), is Shakespeare's own attitude toward Caliban. Or, viewed another way, the burden is Shakespeare himself, as cultural icon and conduit of literary authority. Might it be that white women directors, performers, and authors are more encumbered than inspired by notions of Shakespeare's universality and greatness—a kind of cross-gender, intraracial “anxiety of influence” unanticipated either by Harold Bloom or his feminist commentators (Gilbert & Gubar 1979, 46–53)? Might the lure of Prospero's staff be a trap? Or, to put the question another way, is exemption from what I'll call here the “Taymor syndrome” one way that artists of color might be freer than their otherwise privileged sisters, in crafting island stories that break the masculinist, Shakespearean mold? Suffice it to say, however, that Hollywood has a long way to go before a black Prospera—or, even better, a *Mama Day*—graces the silver screen. And so our last stop in this “island tour” lands us back in the realm of print as we explore a truly original island story by a major intersectionalist voice of the post-Naylor/Taymor generation.

### Beyond Appropriation

A powerful father. A coveted daughter. A prince from the mainland. A rapist. An island. Savagery, captivity, cruelty, vendettas: woman's body as homosocial battleground. In lieu of a tempest, the “natural” disaster of rape. In lieu of magic, men's ordinary power to build little worlds and break them, too.

Sounds fairly Shakespearean, no?

Like Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, Roxane Gay's *An Untamed State* arises from the nightmarish historical conclusion of the colonialist imperatives reflected in *The Tempest*. Remarkably, Gay's novel *begins* with the Haitian heroine's "happy ending"—her loving marriage (to a white American), her beautiful child, her affluent lifestyle in Miami—before detailing its horrific unraveling when she is kidnapped during a visit to her parents on the island. On their way to an ordinary day at the beach, their baby strapped into his car seat, the young couple is ambushed by armed men and the mother dragged away with still-lactating breasts. The account that follows is more harrowing than Sethe's ordeal in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The protagonist, Mireille, is repeatedly raped, brutalized, starved, and sexually tortured for thirteen days, while her millionaire father sits in the security of his walled estate and—like a black Prospero refusing to wield his staff—withholds, on principle, his daughter's ransom. And if the comparison to Prospero seems a stretch, just consider the name of Shakespeare's island patriarch: Mireille's father, an engineer like Naylor's George, made his fortune building skyscrapers (how phallic is that?) and enjoys conjuring for guests who come to his "castle. . . a Haiti that does not exist . . . a Carribean camelot" (Gay 2014a, 89–90). Yet his enemies are powerful too: "there were always barbarians at both sides of the gate" (144). Mireille's captor—who calls himself The Commander—wields his own antimagic in transforming the heroine's Haiti to an unrecognizable nowhere, a hell: "I was in a new country altogether" (11). Reflecting back on the "Haiti of [her] childhood," Mireille states, "When I was kidnapped, I knew I would never find that Haiti again" (55).

The chapters narrating Mireille's captivity and torture are painful to read, and apparently were painful to write too. Gay describes her authorial dilemma: "How do you write violence authentically without making it exploitive? I worry that I am contributing to the cultural numbness that makes rape such rich fodder for popular culture and entertainment." She goes on to state, "While I have these concerns, I also feel committed to telling the truth. These violences happen even if bearing such witness contributes to a spectacle of sexualized violence" (Gay 2014, 135).

Truth. As opposed to fantasy. As opposed to fairytale. As opposed to romance (a genre Gay—with her inimitable "bad feminist" candor—admits to enjoying) (Edemariam 2018). In searing contrast to both the mystified pseudo-rapes of the bodice ripper genre, and the sanitized treatment of colonialist violence in *The Tempest*, Gay's debut novel narrates in visceral detail the sexual torture inflicted on her heroine—and her ferocious resistance. Viewers of *The Tempest* can smile when Prospera threatens to sting Caliban until he looks like honeycomb, but Gay's antiromance forces readers to reconsider genres that create pleasure out of cruelty. Gay's novel also critiques romance in its organization: it is divided in two parts: "Happily Ever After," followed, in a creative reversal, by "Once Upon a Time." The intermediary chapters are not numbered but introduced with the scratch marks a prisoner makes on the wall—something we can imagine Caliban doing to count the days in his "sty" (1.2.344). At the end of part 1, Mireille's father finally pays

the ransom, yielding to pressure from his wife. Mireille is liberated, but not mentally, and the idiosyncratic chapter headings demonstrate this by continuing in sequence in part 2, rather than starting over. Indeed, Mireille is so damaged emotionally and physically that her previously ideal marriage is unworkable, and she cannot even bear to hold her child in her arms. Nor can peace be found on the mainland: barely maintaining her sanity, Mireille flees Miami alone and winds up at her in-laws' farm in Nebraska. The remainder of the novel narrates her slow recovery in the care of her previously bigoted mother-in-law, and her reconciliation with her husband, Michael. In this respect, *An Untamed State* does have its happy ending. In the penultimate chapter, Mireille encounters and attacks her rapist, both verbally and physically.

Gay's title has a double meaning. Haiti is the only nation in the world established as a result of a successful slave revolt: in this regard, its population is "untamed." Haiti is also a mess — economically and politically. In our analysis, it therefore stands as the realistic anti-type of the imaginary Willow Springs: a historically embattled island nation, torn by geopolitical forces, internal strife, and, not least of all, natural catastrophes that no magic wand was able to curb or palliate. Haiti does not make a good anticolonialist parable because of its complicated history, and that is probably why Gay was not tempted to try. Indeed, the political rage in *An Untamed State* is entirely intraracial: that of Mireille's captor at her wealthy father, and, in turn, her rage at both men. Perhaps because of its unique historico-cultural context, the novel is less concerned with "colorism" than *Mama Day*. The narration is likewise devoid of the Anglo American obsession with fair skin, or romantic clichés about eye or hair color: Michael's blond hair and heat-flushed face draw some attention in Haiti, but otherwise mentions of skin color are scarce and perfunctory: Mireille's narration touches on her baby's "smooth, brown arms" (3), her mother's "fair" but "tanned" skin (54), and the "caramel" skin and birthmark of one of her assailants (120). Beyond this, Michael is guilty of one fetishistic remark about Mireille's complexion (62) as well as a secret penchant for interracial porn (159), but otherwise their differences are not ascribed to what *Mama Day* calls "the stupid, senseless color-line." Rather, their conflicts resemble George and Cocoa's in arising from their different backgrounds, their being from "different worlds" (75)—not New York and Willow Springs, but Nebraska and Haiti. I have introduced Michael as "a prince from the mainland," but the hyperbole has a textual basis: Mireille's husband is a spoiled only child whom she teasingly calls her "pretty, pretty princess" (62) and whom her Haitian friends and family have dubbed "Mr. America" (98).

Interestingly, the reader knows more about Michael's than Mireille's "looks"; the non-attention to the heroine's physical charms is a refreshing change in a rape narrative. This may have been a deliberate strategy in laying bare the brutality and realness of her victimization: Gay's physical descriptions focus on her heroine's injuries and emaciation — days after her release, her scars and bruises are still fresh: "My body was unwilling to let my skin forget" (278). And more traumas are ahead in the form of unwanted gynecological exams and vaginal reconstructive surgery. One reviewer notes: "Mireille's body becomes the landscape, the 'untamed state,' on which a political war is waged by men who want to use it for their own ideological pur-



poses” (Locke 2015). Glancing back briefly at Hounsou’s muddy, scarred Caliban, the political cowardice of Taymor’s *Tempest* is more obvious in contrast.

*An Untamed State* is bold, original, heart-wrenching, and unswervingly progressive, but I do not wish to force a favorable critique for the sake of argumentative closure. Indeed, there are aspects of Gay’s storytelling that I cannot praise. The consensual, loving sex between the heroine and her husband is a bit too rough for my taste, although I appreciate the way this creates psychological complexity. And I passionately wish Gay had ended the book with Mireille’s vindication, as she digs her nails into The Commander’s face during a chance encounter in Miami. Instead, the novel ends with a flashback to Mireille’s last day of captivity, and her flight from The Commander’s car as he taunts her, “You will not forget me” (Gay 2014a, 367). Curiously, the image of Mireille in flight was chosen for the book jacket: we do not see her face because she is looking over her shoulder, the naturalistic background subtly reinforcing the gendering of that “untamed state” and the association between Mireille’s body and the island. The effect is beyond haunting—it’s as though she will never stop running (the same image is replicated on the back cover).

I first took Gay’s title as a reference to *The Taming of the Shrew*—that other problem play Taymor herself associates with *The Tempest*—but the unintentional allusion now seems fortuitous in highlighting an ideological contrast that was four hundred years in the making. Where Shakespeare uses the gerund, presenting his “comedy” as a “how-to” for misogynist violence, Gay’s use of the past tense “untamed” announces the failure of the same process. Gay’s grammar thus encapsulates the book’s feminist vision. Before opening the book, readers know its heroine will escape her ordeal untamed, unvanquished. That the same is true of her homeland and the men who took revenge for oppression on one of their own points us back to the world historic tragedy that *The Tempest*—like it or not—took part in.

### Conclusion: Un-propping Bardolatry

In closing, I return to my initial comparison between Prospero’s staff and the slaver’s whip. In real life, a staff is as distinct from a whip as the latter is distinct from Miranda Day’s cane, when used as, merely, a cane. A cane, a crutch (or a walker), as the symbol of physically weakened (geriatric) patriarchal power is the antithesis of the wizard’s staff—and perhaps the reason someone first dreamed up the idea. Drained of its magic, the prop at the center of this discussion becomes merely that: a “prop” in the OED sense of “a stick, rod, pole, stake, or beam used as a temporary support” (OED 2019, online). And here a fascinating linguistic crux emerges. For the word “prop” in theatrical discourse is an abbreviation of “stage property” and thus shares a genealogy with the term “appropriation.” To appropriate something is to make it one’s private property; to appropriate a work of art is to make it one’s artistic property. At least in theory. Where Shakespeare is concerned, however, to call something an “appropriation of Shakespeare” often amounts to calling it “Shakespeare,” and the cultural value of the artifact is judged along a vertical axis of “good” (i.e., faithful) or “bad” “Shakespeare” (Baz Lurhman’s effort to claim *his Romeo + Juliet* proves my point here).

Here we face a semantic paradox, for a *complete* appropriation of a Shakespearean text would, in theory, subsume the original. Put another way, a successful appropriation would be, by definition, adverse to bardolatry, and artists inclined this way would *not* enact the OED's figurative sense of "prop" as "an upholder of some institution" (OED 2019, online) where the "institution" perpetuates the uncritical adoration of the patriarchal bard.

Taymor has proven herself capable of minimizing Shakespeare's misogyny, even in the specific case of phallic imagery and props. Her rewriting of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*—particularly the scene in which she recriminates her rapists—is a fine example of feminist revision. Instead of following her uncle's instructions, and fellating his staff with her wounded mouth, she effectively takes the thing between her mutilated arms and inscribes the names of her assailants on the ground accompanied by a rock-video-like representation of her rage and humiliation. The "special effects" in this scene—the visual wizardry—act to empower Lavinia far beyond Shakespeare's script. Via Taymor's techniques, Lavinia comes to prefigure Prospera: the victim is "wizardized" in a way that makes her seem capable of avenging her own rape, without the aid of father or uncle. And perhaps a moment like that is the best an adaptation can do, if it is to remain "true to Shakespeare."

This essay has aimed to elucidate the way in which a woman's racial and gender politics can influence her approach to *The Tempest*, suggesting that the most progressive and exciting appropriations are enabled by an intersectionalist stance, a stance that does not take for granted the universality of a dead, male author whose mascot is a great, white bird ("the swan of Avon"). And that stance is likeliest in authors and directors who perceive the Swan of Avon as a kind of cultural albatross, who are conscious of and unafraid to address the ways in which Shakespeare's works have helped perpetuate racism, antisemitism, misogyny, intolerance. For artists who admire Shakespeare and who self-identify as "white," this involves some embarrassment. Gary Taylor, in his analysis of white rapper Eminem's album *The Divided States of Embarrassment*, bluntly and fruitfully states, "White America has often embarrassed me. Embarrassments are self-divided states, combining identification with alienation" (Taylor 2005, 346). When gender is brought to bear on the issue it grows even more complex. For a female artist uncomfortable with her gender, that self-division, that embarrassment, can be artistically crippling. Hence the lure of Prospero's staff.

No one has to linger in that state. Discomfort can be a stimulus to provocative art—as the work of Eminem, and Roxane Gay herself, shows. If the pen is mightier than the sword/whip, it is mightier by far than the crutch. Maybe you will be the one to write the island story of my dreams. The only voice is your own.

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