

THE TEMPEST AS TRANS ARCHIVE: AN INTERVIEW WITH SCHOLAR MARY ANN S. SAUNDERS

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Abstract

This interview with Dr. Mary Ann Saunders, conducted by Alexa Alice Joubin, offers a new interpretation of Julie Taymor's 2010 film *The Tempest*. Bringing her life experience to bear on cisgender biases in non-trans artists' works, Saunders proposes a new interpretation of Ariel, as performed by Ben Whishaw, as a trans woman who is "both beautiful and bittersweet." Reading Shakespeare as a "trans archive" enables us to more effectively interrogate the long history of associating trans bodies with monstrosity and bodies in distress.



How might we read a Shakespeare play through transgender perspectives? Dr. Mary Ann S. Saunders, a writing and discourse studies scholar in the School of Journalism, Writing, and Media at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, offers enlightening answers at the crossroads of medicine, trans, and Shakespeare studies. She spoke to Alexa Alice Joubin about her reading of Ariel and Julie Taymor's film *The Tempest*, bringing her life experience to bear on cisgender biases in non-trans artists' works.

Alexa Alice Joubin (AAJ): You have spoken eloquently, in your public presentations, such as the one at the "Moving Trans History Forward" conference in Victoria in 2016, about the need to examine all assumptions about variously gendered bodies. What drew you to Shakespeare's works?

Mary Ann Saunders (MAS): Well, it might be helpful to know that my background is in literary studies, and that I do still teach the occasional literature course in UBC's English department. And, if I can take a very brief detour here, one of my scholarly passions is children's and young adult fiction. As this issue goes to press, I am teaching the second iteration of what may be the first course of its kind—I've not heard of anyone else doing this—on children's and YA fiction exclusively written by trans and nonbinary authors. Anyway, the origins of the presentations you mentioned lie in a course where I used *The Tempest* to introduce undergraduate students to feminist and post-colonial theories. That work exposed me to the harmful

ways that some feminist scholarship framed discussions of what looks to me like trans embodiment [see Lisa S. Starks’ “Transmisogyny in Popular Culture, Feminisms, and Shakespeare Studies” in this special issue], particularly in relation to Julie Taymor’s film version of *The Tempest*.

To address your question more broadly, though, one of the great joys of Shakespeare is the malleability of his plays, which is why we get such interesting and varied productions of them. Transgender actors and directors, scholars and dramaturges, have much to contribute to our understanding of Shakespeare. (For discussions which highlight the urgent need for such involvement, see Kemp 2019a, 2019b). To take the example of *The Tempest*, we can intentionally engage with the play’s trans potential in ways which value, rather than devalue, non-normative embodiments and which value the knowledge which those of us who live in such bodies possess, thereby moving representation from the realm of monstrous othering to thoughtful centering.

AAJ: Speaking of representation, were you able to find publications that share your conviction?

MAS: When I first started this research a few years ago, using the search terms “transgender” and “Shakespeare” turned up exactly zero results, much to my surprise, in the Modern Language Association article index. In revisiting the MLA index later, I found one result, a brief article about the Transgender Shakespeare Company, a workshop project for transgender actors. That brief article includes these lines:

When scenes were played, immediate links were discovered between the lived experiences of [the transgender] participants and the emotions explored in Shakespeare’s work. [These connections] allowed individuals to contextualize their contemporary feelings of alienation into a temporal narrative stretching back to early modern England. (Craig 2017, 7)

There is a tiny bit more of such scholarship now, but still not much. Thank goodness for this special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders*!

AAJ: It is indeed important to talk about, rather than gloss over, experiences of alienation.

MAS: Absolutely, yes. I have been advocating responsible representation which attends to such alienation. In their work, cisgender artists and critics should offer responsible representation of trans experience and, when appropriate, embodiments. Trans-identified artists can do this as well, of course, but it takes a village.

AAJ: Could you give us an example of how Shakespearean characters and trans individuals have been misrepresented, perhaps from *The Tempest* since you’ve already spoken of it?

MAS: The gender of Ariel in *The Tempest* seems a perennial source of discussion, if not confusion. Throughout the play’s performance history, the role has been played by both women and men, and perhaps even by actors of other genders, although that information is harder to come by. When I read the play in high

school, discussions arose about Ariel's gender, and I suspect generations of students have wondered about this, as well as readers and audiences. Indeed, this ambiguity has been present from the very beginning, with the first published text of the play—in the First Folio—using masculine pronouns for Ariel three times (twice in stage directions, and once by Ariel, speaking of themselves in the third person) while placing Ariel with the female characters in the *dramatis personae*, positioned between Miranda, Prospero's daughter, and the goddesses Iris, Ceres and Juno.

In 2004, Bianca Summons argued that Ariel would likely have been regarded as a woman when the play was first written and performed, and suggested we should do the same. On the other hand, Miranda Garno Nesler argued in 2012 that the reason why Ariel is “othered” in the play, and therefore enslaved, is because of Ariel's androgyny. More recently, Ezra Horbury (2021) has developed a compelling reading (very different from mine!) of Ariel as a transgender figure.

AAJ: What happens if we approach Ariel as transgender?

MAS: Well, let me venture an interpretation of Ariel as, specifically, a trans woman (or, perhaps, a trans feminine “airy spirit”), taking Julie Taymor's film as a starting point. As I'm sure your readers are aware, Taymor changed Prospero, the play's patriarchal authority figure, to a female character named Prospera. This change fundamentally shifts most, if not all, of the gender-based relationships in the play. While Prospera's change of gender and its effects isn't my primary concern, it does, in a sense, underpin what I am interested in.

Ariel, played by Ben Wishaw, appears as an explicitly female figure in some scenes, all at Prospera's bidding: first as a sea nymph, and second as a harpy. However, the third instance departs slightly from Shakespeare's original. In the Shakespeare script, Ariel solicits the aid of other spirits to present the masque of the goddesses Iris, Ceres, and Juno, but with no indication in the script that Ariel plays any of these roles. However, Taymor substitutes a kind of magical light show for the masque in which, near the beginning, a brief and blurry Ariel reprises their role as the sea nymph. What's striking to me in the film is that Wishaw's Ariel is naked most of the time and, when appearing as these female figures, has small breasts but retains Wishaw's somewhat angular, arguably “masculine” face (figure 1).

AAJ: What does this combination of a masculine face and feminine breasts say about gendered patterns of imagining otherness? How was this Ariel received?

MAS: Well, Ariel's body and appearance seems an awful lot like my body and appearance, and like those of other trans women I know. Despite what detractors say about us, and despite one Shakespeare scholar's characterization of Wishaw's Ariel's physicality as “grotesque” (Lehmann 2014, 53), such bodies are not monstrous. Trans women's bodies are not grotesque. We are not “purveyor[s] of body horror” nor, clearly, do we represent “impossible embodiment” (Hurley qtd. in Lehmann 54).



Figure 1. Ariel as the sea nymph. Source: *The Tempest*, directed by Julie Taymor, 2010.

I know there is an important and productive tradition in feminist film criticism which examines “the monstrous feminine” and “body horror,” but to equate a trans-seeming body with these concepts seems, at best, insensitive, and is certainly damaging. To read the Ariel in Taymor’s film as monstrous is to reflect a deeply cis-centric and cis-sexist point of view which emerges from dominant cultural assumptions about what constitutes an acceptable body, and from our wider culture’s fear, perhaps even loathing, of non-normative embodiments. I would add that such a position seems to me distinctly anti-feminist.

AAJ: Words matter. I agree it is high time that we be more cognizant of terms we employ in film criticism. From the perspective of people who inhabit such bodies, how might Ariel’s body be read?

MAS: If we ditch the cishnormative lens, we will see that Ariel’s and trans women’s bodies are not monstrous but ordinary; not grotesque, but beautiful; not impossible, but very possible, and absolutely necessary. Here my body becomes a vital critical methodology for analyzing the film.

AAJ: Thank you for your candor and enlightening comments on Ariel. Could you elaborate on this methodology?

MAS: In bringing my body to the task of analyzing this film, I read Ariel’s trans body through my embodied experiences and through the histories and knowledges of embodiment that trans women possess more generally.

We might first consider materiality. In Shakespeare’s play, the punishments with which Ariel is threatened, or which she has experienced, are connected to being caught in material forms which are at odds with her nature. When Prospera first encountered Ariel, she had been imprisoned in a pine tree, represented



Figure 2. Ariel trapped in the pine tree. Source: *The Tempest*, directed by Julie Taymor, 2010.

in Taymor's film as a painful entrapment where spirit and wood are knit together (figure 2). While Ariel is grateful for the release, she longs to be freed further because Prospera now holds her in another kind of bondage. However, Prospera is clear that, if Ariel is not obedient, Prospera will return her to much the same state, threatening to place her back into a tree—an oak this time—returning her to the former torment.

If we are thinking of Ariel as a trans character, the pain of being caught in an inappropriate material form becomes very tangible, and the difficult relationship she has with Prospera—someone with the power to both rescue her from the pain of an inappropriate materiality but to also return her to it if she is disobedient—resembles the gatekeeping practices that mark the relationships trans people have with those who have power over us and our lives. I'm thinking here particularly of how medical gatekeeping, with the capacity to limit access to gender-affirming care, claims control over our embodiments. However, gatekeeping also occurs in other contexts, including legal and social limits on our access to public restrooms consistent with our identities.

AAJ: This is such a poignant point.

MAS: Thank you. And it deepens further when we consider the role of science in Taymor's film, which I find key to understanding Ariel through this trans lens. Not only does Prospera have control over Ariel's embodiment, she is also explicitly represented as a scientist (figure 3), representation which only reinforces the parallel I am suggesting to the troubled history trans people have in relation to medical science [see Alexa Alice Joubin's "Trans as Method: The Sociality of Gender and Shakespeare" in this special issue]. Medical practitioners have long exerted profound control over our bodies, imposing cultural norms of



Figure 3. Prospera in her laboratory. Source: *The Tempest*, directed by Julie Taymor, 2010.

embodiment on us. Like Ariel (when Prospera commands her to take on the form of a sea nymph or a harpy) many of us have acquiesced to medical demands regarding our embodiments as a way to satisfy the requirements of practitioners whose power over us can leave us with few avenues, or opportunities, for resistance.

Ariel’s situation, then, looks very familiar. She takes on the embodiments that Prospera requires of her while repeatedly asking “have I met your requirements yet?” and being told “no, just do one more thing, oh and another.” “When will you let me go,” she is asking, “so that I can finally just be myself? When do I get to be myself on my terms, not yours?”—questions that will seem very familiar to many trans people.

AAJ: Are there other parallels that you see between Ariel’s experience and trans life?

MAS: When Prospera tells Ariel to take on the form of the sea nymph, it’s to seduce Ferdinand into a position where he will meet and fall in love with Miranda, Prospera’s daughter. To accomplish this, Ben Wishaw’s Ariel sings in an interesting vocal register that negotiates between a delicate high tenor and hesitant falsetto, and once or twice dips, almost accidentally, into a more “masculine” chest voice. This is a complex vocal register that trans women are intimately, and sometimes excruciatingly, familiar with. Anyway, Prospera’s plan works: Ferdinand follows Ariel, the trans girl, but ultimately gets rewarded with the “real” girl, Miranda, not the “deceptive” Ariel.

AAJ: The toxic idea of trans “deception” is very harmful, especially the instrumentalization of Ariel in service of Prospera, Ferdinand, and Miranda.



Figure 4. Ariel watching Miranda and Ferdinand after bringing them together. Source: *The Tempest*, directed by Julie Taymor, 2010.

MAS: Indeed, and again the parallels to trans women’s lives are striking. There is a dangerous stereotype about trans women which maintains that we are inherently deceptive, that we take on “false” female forms in order to lure men into relationships that no supposedly normal man would actually choose. This cisnormative way of thinking lies behind the “trans panic” defense which allows cisgender men to be acquitted of murdering trans women, a defense still permitted in most US states.

Regarding this idea of deception, there is an extraordinarily poignant moment in Taymor’s film. Having successfully “lured” Ferdinand, Ariel watches wistfully, peeking out from behind a tree, as the two young lovers come together (figure 4). I see in Ariel’s face a longing which reminds me of the fear many trans women experience—a fear that we are barred from this kind of happiness

because the people who we want to love us, and who we want to be in relationship with, are never going to love us back. For straight trans women, this scene between Ferdinand, Ariel, and Miranda might be particularly devastating because experience has taught us that a cisgender man may be temporarily interested in a trans woman but will eventually, in almost every case, choose a cisgender woman over one of us.

AAJ: Thank you for revealing how the film repeats familiar trans scenarios in uncanny ways.

MAS: Thank *you*. I’ve found the extent to which Taymor’s Ariel offers a point of identification both surprising and moving. To me, this Ariel looks not like a monstrous, non-human “other,” but like someone whose struggles and pains are very familiar. Her othering looks like my othering, and that of many trans folx, allowing for a connection that I find both beautiful and bittersweet.

AAJ: I appreciate your demonstration of the trans lens at work in film analysis, and your urgent call to recognize how damaging and thoughtless cis-sexist assumptions about embodiment may underpin Ariel’s and our society’s experiences.

MAS: Thank you. Collectively we must stop using the denigration of trans and gender non-conforming lives and bodies as a tool for building our feminist analyses and movements.

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