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**Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Knight's Tale' and William Shakespeare's
The Tempest Read Through A Gendered Lens**

Parthivee Mukherji

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'Conquered al the regne of Femenye' (Chaucer)

In both Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, gender operates as the medium through which power, order, and virtue are determined and enacted. Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* inhabit radically different spheres – the chivalric city-state of Athens and the enchanted island beyond all civilisation respectively. Both, however, imagine and convey societies governed by masculine control and structured around the silencing or erasure of women. In Chaucer's romance, femininity functions as a territory to be conquered and enclosed, the silent ground upon which knightly and sovereign identities are enacted. In Shakespeare's play, patriarchal rule endures only by appropriating or obliterating the feminine altogether. This essay argues that both texts construct masculinity as a fragile performance that depends on the silencing, absence, or idealisation of women. In *The Knight's Tale*, masculine identity arises through conquest, homosocial rivalry, and what Patricia Ingham calls 'creative masculinity,' a power that fashions social order out of others' suffering (Ingham). In *The Tempest*, patriarchal authority is sustained through Prospero's control over the only women of the play—Miranda and the absent Sycorax—whose silence and absence make his mastery possible. Each text thus exposes the same paradox: that patriarchy must efface the feminine in order to imagine itself whole.

MASCULINE POWER AND FEMALE SILENCE IN CHAUCER'S *THE KNIGHT'S TALE*

From the outset Chaucer's poem inscribes gender within the vocabulary of domination.

Theseus, 'lord and governour of Atthenes' (ln 865), returns victorious, having 'conquered al the regne of Femenye' (ln 866). The phrase itself confines women to a territory – a "regne" that offers to view them as possessions rather than a polity to be respected. As Min Young

Kim observes, 'The Knight deliberately delineates [the Amazonians] in terms of territory rather than people,' (Kim 79) this translates female autonomy into male possession. Kim exemplifies the loss of female autonomy by saying, 'female characters in *The Knight's Tale* suffer from male invasion in three areas: their body, their voice, and their gender role' (Kim 79). The Amazonian queen Hippolyta is not a lover but a trophy of war; her body, like her sister Emilye's, becomes 'property won by conquest' (Kim 80). Emilye's first appearance is purely visual as 'fairer was to sene' (ln 1035), rendering her a spectacle in the gazes of Palamon and Arcite. Her visibility is substituted for her voice, emphasising Kim's critique. When Emilye prays to Diana, desiring to remain chaste – 'to ben a mayden al my lyf' (ln 2305) – her plea is ultimately overruled by the hierarchy of the gods, as Saturn decrees that she must marry regardless. This moment is especially cruel because it presents coercion as fate. Chaucer upholds a world where women's voices and pleas are not only denied but are treated as irrelevant. The gods' decision, portrayed to be generally impartial, replicates the very human structures of male dominance.

Yet, the tale also undercuts its own glorification of masculinity. In Patricia Ingham's (1998) reading, the tale's chivalric heroism conceals profound vulnerability of the '...the masculine warrior as a victim.' The knights Palamon and Arcite are imprisoned and inert, 'Nat fully quyke, ne fully dede they were,' (ln 1015), trapped in a system that neutralise their agency and vulnerability (Ingham). Their suffering becomes the very basis for Theseus' 'creative' role which is his capacity 'to move his populace from funerals to weddings, while himself remaining safely distant from the liabilities of suffering' (Ingham 24). Others' suffering somehow becomes material for Theseus, which he turns from personal tragedy into public ceremony. Ingham's reading changes the way knights are viewed – more vulnerable and decreasingly noble and heroic. They seem to be trapped in a system that rewards

suffering as a virtue. Their gaze upon Emilye seems obsessive, to the point where it cannot be viewed as romantic but has to be viewed as ritualistic, almost compulsive instead. It is less about loving her and more about proving their grit.

This transformative power of transmuting pain into civic order is predicated upon silencing women. Emilye's prayer to Diana takes place at her altar, surrounded by carvings of violated women – Callisto, Daphne – suggesting that even the divine feminine is subordinate to patriarchal will. As Kim notes, male invasion extends to the mythological realm too (Kim 2011). When Theseus concludes with his speech on 'The Firste Moevere of the cause above' (In 2987), his words of providence conceal acts of violence. Chaucer ends with marriage and harmony, but that harmony too, is not of one's choosing. This masking is chillingly effective as Chaucer does not only showcase the violence but portrays how it gets rebranded as 'natural justice.' Theseus, conversely, does not face any consequences or resistance; the whole cosmic system, from the gods to the mortals, is rigged to support him and his ideals. Chaucer's irony lies in his exposing of a chivalry predicated on the silencing and suppression of the feminine.

PATERNAL AUTHORITY AND FEMININE ABSENCE IN *THE TEMPEST*

This power structure, the patriarchal authority in regard to feminine absence, is relocated by Shakespeare from the battlefield to the island and from conquest to control. For Prospero, the island is the stage for his mastery, commenced by effacing the domination of a woman. The 'foul witch' Sycorax, who ruled the island prior to Prospero's domination, has been dismissed as evil and silenced in death (Act 1, Sc ii). Tania Duarte (2015) observes this as Prospero framing Sycorax's absence to be representative of his virtue, reapportioning her erasure to his

moral superiority. Sycorax may never appear on the stage, but her absence is arguably the most important in the play. Her erasure is deliberate – Prospero defines his virtue by contrasting his ‘order’ with her ‘chaos.’ Sycorax is condemned by Prospero for entrapping Ariel, but ironically his rule depends on this exact kind of domination and coercion. Brittney Blystone argues that though dead, Sycorax permeates the play and ‘shapes the characters’ perceptions of power and gender,’ (2014, 73). Caliban, her son, inherits her demonisation. The criminalisation of his rebellion is not only done because he resists Prospero, but because it draws upon and embodies the defiance and disobedience of the feminine voice his master worked to suppress.

Miranda, to be plainly defined, is obedience in flesh. Her introduction into the play – ‘O, I have suffered/ With those that I saw suffer’ (Act 1 Sc ii) – signals her emotional availability rather than her agency. When Prospero commands her, ‘Obey, and be attentive’ (Act 1 Sc ii), her role is made clear as a mere puppet. Later, he gives her over to Ferdinand – ‘Then as my gift, and thine own acquisition/Worthily purchased, take my daughter’ (Act 4 Sc i) – this language effectively reduced her to property. What makes Miranda’s role so unsettling is that this objectification of her character is framed, virtuously so, as purity. The play offers no room for her wants; she is defined as the reflection of the wants of others. Even her love story with Ferdinand is orchestrated and manipulated by her father. Much like Emily, Miranda also functions more as a reward and less as a person.

The contrast between Miranda’s and Sycorax’s characters is what Duarte calls the foundation of Prospero’s identity. Without this binary, his self-image as a ruler and as a father collapses at ‘the thought of a society where the man is neither the most relevant entity nor necessarily essential for women’ which is ‘unconceivable’ to a character ‘whose entire system is based on his own patriarchy,’ (Duarte 2015, 19). Duarte here observes that

Prospero's creation of Sycorax is less about her as a character and more about this fear of feminine power – '...she is not a villain but Prospero's foil' (Duarte 2015, 19). This construes Sycorax's absence as not a narrative failure but as an essential structure. What resonates deeply from Duarte commentary is that Sycorax's monstrosity is invented to validate Prospero's rule and virtue. It is not just about demonising and silencing women, but about portraying them in a negative light thus creating a shadow to stand in opposition to male control.

FROM PATRIARCHAL ORDER TO ANXIETY

Read in tandem, *The Knight's Tale* and *The Tempest* map a shift from patriarchal affirmation to patriarchal introspection. Both narratives centre on masculine figures who reframe chaos into order – Theseus through ceremony, and Prospero through forgiveness. Yet each depends on erasure and suppression of female voice and power.

Chaucer's Theseus invokes the Gods' divine design to justify gendered violence. His sermon on "The Firste Moevere" cloaks coercion in cosmic language. Shakespeare's Prospero, however, charts a different path; his final words are not declarations of assurance but are petitions. Shakespeare ends his tale in ambiguity by highlighting the fissures in the architecture of patriarchy. It is quite easy to gleam over how radical this ending is. While Theseus delivers a sermon on providence to justify his actions, Prospero's power dissolves not with a fight, but with a plea, almost a confession. It is acknowledged as a performance - he needs the audience. That alone is enough to challenge the self-sufficiency of patriarchal authority.

Still, both texts refuse to let femininity remain peripheral and make it central to the narrative. Emily's silence and Sycorax's absence are not narrative gaps but are narrative engines. They generate the conditions for male identity – marking its limits as well. In *The*

Knights Tale, the feminine stands for order achieved whereas, in *The Tempest*, it stands for order unravelling. What especially links both the texts together is not just their treatment of women but their similar deep discomfort in the feminine. Emilye and Sycorax are not merely victims but are necessary absences, primarily because they cannot be assimilated into the masculine order without disrupting it. Their silence is not a passive underscore but a hefty character, betraying an anxious awareness of the fact that the structures it depicts are already beginning to crack.

CONCLUSION

In both *The Knight's Tale* and *The Tempest*, masculinity is an identity built atop a paradox; it requires the erasure of the feminine but yet cannot exist without the feminine as its foundation. Chaucer's Theseus turns suffering into spectacle, masking violence as virtue. He codes this in the performance of Emilye, whose silence underpins a world of chivalry. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Sycorax's absence speaks louder and in volumes than her presence. Prospero inherits the structure of the erasure of women but exposes its illusions. As Duarte notes, Prospero's identity is constructed by the submissive nature of Miranda and the absence of Sycorax (2015, 19). Blystone also highlights that Sycorax, though absent, sets the play's logic of power. Thus, Duarte and Blystone both underscore the tension of the feminine remaining spectral or silenced but never irrelevant.

What these texts reveal, when read parallelly, is not just the logic of patriarchy but how much effort actually goes into sustaining it. On one hand, Chaucer builds a smooth system; Shakespeare, on the other hand, reveals the cracks within it. The structure of both the narratives affirm that the cost of masculine authority is feminine erasure. The difference lies

in the preparedness of the texts to let that shine through. Across the centuries, the curve arcs from patriarchal affirmation to patriarchal doubt. Chaucer closes with Theseus assuring the rhetoric of cosmic design, whereas Shakespeare relinquishes his authorship through Prospero's abandonment of his magical powers. Along that curved arc and within that shift lies literature's encounter with gendered power—a movement from mythology to consciousness, from providence to performance. At the heart of both the texts lies a truth that never fully escapes: the silence of the feminine is not the natural state, but a condition that the masculine imposes and requires. In Emily's silence and Sycorax's absence, we see not a weakness, but the echo of a force atop which the masculine power precariously rests.

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