

The Tempest in the Trivium

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To the delight of his audiences, both past and present, Shakespeare rarely created names of stubbornly obscure origin. In his last play, however, it seems he did just that. I refer, namely, to Sycorax—witch-mother of Caliban and, though absent, arch enemy of Prospero in *The Tempest*. Minor and unseen as she is, she is mentioned by name seven times and is a major topic of dispute between Caliban, her son, and Prospero, her rival. Over one hundred and twenty lines are devoted to Prospero's wrangling, first with Ariel then with Caliban, about the nature and effect of "this damned witch Sycorax."¹ She represents nothing less important than the island's other magician to whom Prospero is implicitly compared.

In naming his characters, Shakespeare typically either found a well-known historical and/or mythological precedent, used a clearly allegorical name, or coined a name from recognizable parts or sources. Such audience-friendly habits, however, seem to have been ignored when it came to the name "Sycorax." Far from common-knowledge, we are told it is Classical Greek for sow (*sys*) and raven/crow (*corax*),² heartbreaker (*psychorrhax*),³ fig (*sukon*) and spider (*rax*),⁴ "Go to Hell" (*es kórakas*),⁵ Arabic for "deceiver" (*shokoreth*),⁶ a thematically significant misspelling of Scythian⁷—and the list of recondite improbabilities goes on.

There is, however, a simpler, funnier, and more thematically pertinent solution and one that fits what Shakespeare was wont to do so often in his preceding plays: poke fun at pedants and pedantry. The target of his scorn this time is no less than the first 'trial lawyer' and the commonly acknowledged progenitor of the art of rhetoric. This

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magician of language, this witch of rhetorical exercise, was the fifth century Greek, Corax of Syracuse. Snip a syllable from one word, snap it on another and, quick and home, Corax of Syracuse becomes Sycorax, a portmanteau of significant jest.

Because Shakespeare got at least most, if not all, of a grammar school education, he would have studied the famous and inescapable Trivium (logic, grammar, and rhetoric all taught in Latin), the three subjects most basic to the “liberal arts”—subjects in which Prospero claims to have excelled “without a parallel.”⁸

The *Ad Herennium*, and the works of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian were the principle sources for grammar school rhetoric and the latter three mention Corax, the Sicilian, as the sole founder, or, with his student Tisias, co-founder of the first ‘systematic’ rhetoric.⁹ He is also obliquely mentioned by Plato who, along with Aristotle, questions the logical soundness of the rhetorical ‘reasoning’ (the doctrine of εἰκός)¹⁰ Corax supposedly taught to various citizens of Syracuse who hoped to persuade the courts of their property rights after the fall of the Tyrants, circa 467 BCE. Not only would Shakespeare likely have known much, if not all of this, but much of his all-important audience would have known this, too. The name Corax of Syracuse, or anything significantly like it, reverberated with all sorts of recollections, and not all of them pleasant.

Such a reference, as well, enhances certain thematic concerns, especially in Act 1, scene 2. This entire scene is either exposition or verbal jockeying for position. When it becomes the latter, when, that is, Ariel asks for his liberty and Caliban asks for his land, it becomes a forum for Prospero’s oratorical wizardry. And this is precisely the moment of Sycorax’s ‘nominal’ entrance.

Much of the important business at the end of *The Tempest*’s long second scene deals with establishing who has the better claim to the island in a dispute over property rights, AND who can present that claim most persuasively. It is because of Prospero’s superior skill at rhetorical manipulation that he wins the argument. Clearly, his claim is based on his superior “nature”—he is the civilized one and brings

to the island superior qualities. And although it is not the possible cacophony of Sycorax's speeches ("terrible/To enter human hearing"¹¹) that bothers but the vile nature of her sorceries that is most offensive, it is, nonetheless, clear that some of the threads Shakespeare braids into his web of motifs explore the use and abuse of rhetoric and the magical/poetical art of language. The "nature" of good and evil may be the most important aspect, but its fundamental, inextricable relationship to the art of persuasion cannot be ignored.

Prospero reaches the pinnacle of rhetorical skill, and such skill is truly magical. He—and by extension, Shakespeare—bests the best, the very founder of one of the three liberal arts of the Trivium. In *The Tempest*, Corax of Syracuse, the 'inventor of rhetoric,' is unseated by the "upstart crow" on the Jacobean stage.

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NOTES

¹Stephen Orgel, ed., *The Tempest* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 1.2.264.

²J. Madison Davis, and A. Daniel Frankforter, *The Shakespeare Name Dictionary* (New York: Garland, 1995) 472.

³Davis and Frankforter 472.

⁴Davis and Frankforter 472. This and the two preceding suggestions rest on assumptions that Shakespeare had to have been conversant in, or at least quite familiar with, Classical Greek, assumptions refuted by, among others, T. W. Baldwin in his two volume study, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1944).

⁵Katherine Callen King, "Go to Hell, Sycorax," *English Language Notes* 27.4 (1990): 1-3.

⁶Davis and Frankforter 472.

⁷Stephen Orgel, "Introduction," *The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 1-87, 19. It should be noted that this, as well as some of the previous suggestions, rest, at least partially, on the supposed connection between Shakespeare's Sycorax and Ovid's Medea. There is, indeed, ample evidence in *The Tempest* that Shakespeare refers to passages of Ovid's *Medea* 7, particularly in Act 5. However,

there is no philological evidence to support such a connection between these two very different “witches.” Ovid uses the word *cornicis*, not *korax* or *corax*. *Cornicis* is the genitive form of *cornix*, meaning “crow,” which connects rather poorly with the name Sycorax. Or, had Shakespeare taken the 1567 Golding translation for his inspiration, as numerous scholars suggest, he would have read the word “crowe,” not “raven”—clearly no nominative connection here, either.

⁸*The Tempest* 1.2.73-74.

⁹Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a; Cicero, *Brutus* 46; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 3.1.8.

¹⁰D. A. G. Hinks, “Tisias and Corax and the Invention of Rhetoric,” *Classical Quarterly* 34 (1940): 61-69. Hinks goes to great lengths to point out the rough reviews both Plato in the *Phaedrus* (272D and 261B) and Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (1354b and 1402a) give Corax and Tisias’ “eristic” approach to argumentation and truth. Numerous less damaging references to Corax can be found in the *Prolegomena*, ready-made introductions (*prolegomena*) to the study of rhetoric written by thirty-four different authors between the third and thirteenth century. See Stanley Wilcox, “Corax and the *Prolegomena*,” *American Journal of Philology* 64.1 (1943): 1-23 for a discussion of just how extensive references to Corax were in these works. It should be noted, however, that these were Byzantine authors, not European, and hence, their work may not have been well-known, if known at all, in Renaissance England. Nonetheless, the Renaissance—a period Heinrich F. Plett calls “eine rhetorische Kulturepoche” (“Rhetorik der Renaissance—Renaissance der Rhetorik,” *Renaissance-Rhetorik/Renaissance-Rhetoric*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993] 1-20, 14)—occasioned a fascination with all things Greek and rhetorical such that these *prolegomena*, written in Greek about Classical Greek rhetoric, may very well have caught the attention of various European scholars and even trickled into the teaching of the Trivium. Given the importance Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian accord Corax, however, such Byzantine references would hardly need to have been known to have given Corax of Syracuse an important place in the teaching of rhetoric in 16th century England.

¹¹*The Tempest* 1.2.264-65.