

Eating men like air: telling the "truth" on shakespeare's island

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



Like a sculpture etched in bas-relief, the intrigue of *The Tempest* is depicted on raised stone, but the story's substance depends entirely on a realm of negative space. To grasp the gender discourse present in Shakespeare's drama, one must appreciate the space that exists between surface and substrata in both the plot and the characters. In sunken, shadowy and overlooked regions of the text, audiences can find the moments that contour the discussion of gender — namely female — identity. In their subtleties, Miranda's interactions with the other men on the island help expose Shakespeare's vision of the "proper relationship" between men and women. Careful examination of both Miranda's silence and her speech reveals a woman whose inner content often escapes casual readers. The essential landscape of her character is two-fold in nature: now submissive, now dynamic, at once obedient and rebellious. At first blush, she embodies the vision of Goethe's "Eternal Feminine," a Cypher whose dull, empty purity has "nothing to do with explosions" or "significant action." Soon, though, the cautious reader recognizes that Miranda's essentially isolated (and untouched by female authority) upbringing, to some extent uninfluenced by the thrust of 17th century standards and customs, has allowed her to gather a certain "generative power" capable of subverting the traditional male design, and male expectations of femininity. There are, for careful readers, powerful moments in the text when Miranda is as unabashedly assertive as her male counterparts — and those instances stand in stark relief to the more docile, tamed behavior that satisfies the early perception of her as a "good wife-child." During those powerful moments, it is almost as if she's forgotten her agenda, for the effectiveness of her subversion depends upon

its cautious, reserved flavor. In her careful, calculated compliance with Prospero, we see that Miranda is a woman who threatens institutional norms by telling Emily Dickinson's "truth": what she says has unseen connotations, "slant" meanings that hold real, active and unexpected power. In her surprisingly egalitarian romantic dealings with Ferdinand, we see how Shakespeare's vision renders that "truthful" technique unnecessary. Our first encounter with Miranda is in Act I, scene two: she is the first to speak, upset by the idea of drowning travelers at the hand of her scheming father. She declares that had she "been any god of power," she would have "sunk the sea" so as to save the men on King Alonso's ship (I. ii. 9-11). It is here that we first detect Miranda's "active" imagination. She envisions having a power comparable to her father's, but knows it is impractical. She has come to believe these faculties are beyond her, yet hints of a wish for clout dwell in her lofty dream of sinking the very sea itself. When Prospero orders that she should "be collected" (I. ii. 14), be quiet, we are made aware of her subordinate status, and discover when he says "thou art ignorant of what thou art" (I. ii. 17) that this status is reliant upon that the fact that she is ignorant of her past and of the female presence in her early life. Despite daydreams of action and influence, Miranda knows her "place," and in the very next line we learn her method for at once fulfilling and transcending that role. When she claims: "More to know did never meddle with my thoughts," we must note the passive tone and submissive attitude that serve merely as disguise for less than passive and submissive intentions. You have often begun to tell me what I am, but stopped, And left me to a bootless inquisition, Concluding, 'Stay, not yet" (I. ii. 33-36) The passive tone with

which she promises, " More to know did never meddle with my thoughts," almost paradoxically, belongs to the same active, curious voice that a moment later complains of " bootless inquisitions." Even in trying to learn herself and her history, Miranda is subject to her father's choice of telling her or leaving her in the dark. As articulated in Richard Stoddard's " A Woman's Poem," the male actors shape and mold the female world, framing for Woman reality itself, placing her within the confines of " four blank walls" that calculate their worth and determine their potential. Despite this captivity (or maybe because of it), Miranda knows she has a responsibility to " act [her part]" (Gilbert and Gubar, 813) and placate her father. In their essay " The Madwoman in the Attic," Gilbert and Gubar expand on the " angel/monster" argument, theorizing that " even the positive images of women in literature express negative energies and desires on the part of male writers" (Rivkin and Ryan, 812). Miranda is at once " angel" and " monster," possessing supposedly " unhealthy energies, and powerful, dangerous arts," skills that allow her to play a part. To act. To be sure, she does so quite masterfully: when Prospero is explaining how they came to live on the island, he repeatedly, belligerently, and unnecessarily asks if she is listening, shouting " thou attend'st not!" (I. ii. 82). She responds coolly with lines like, " Your tale, sir, would cure deafness" (I. ii. 106), refuting his claim while at the same time complimenting his gravitas. She is desperate to know herself and her sexuality, and is prepared to appease and to mollify in order to achieve those ends. As the King in Shakespeare's King Lear claims of his daughters, women appear to be good above the waist (" to the girdle"), but beyond that point, their sex, their very femaleness and genitalia make them

" all the fiend's." Using female expectations to their advantage, these women play upon the " masculine gaze." Hence, they gain an agency men would have never willingly granted them. Through a kind of subversive subordination, Miranda can be what is expected of her, satisfying Prospero's expectations of a maid and daughter, while at the same time granting herself room to ask questions and assert her opinions. As Shakespeare suggests in his writing of the play, women who are smart circumvent the oppression put before them. After all, it is in " Cirrcuit" that " Success" lies. One particularly clear articulation of Miranda's doubleness can be found in William Hogarth's scene from *The Tempest*. More importantly, though, this image helps to delineate the landscape of Miranda's sexuality. Surrounded on all sides by male figures, Miranda sits on a throne-like structure that is draped in a blood-red cloth as Prospero, Caliban, and Ferdinand gaze upon her. Miranda herself is cloaked in blue-and-white garb traditionally symbolic of the Virgin Mary's purity, chastity, and innocence. Upon closer inspection, though, the painting holds a certain delicate sensuality: Miranda's presence exudes an air of eroticism that is made manifest in details like the subtle display of her breast. Interestingly, as Ferdinand approaches from the left hand corner, she looks in his direction, dropping a cup of milk intended for her pet lamb — another obvious symbol of innocence and virginity.

Distracted by the presence of an attractive male, it is almost as if she forgets to tend to that innocence. This painting is interesting because it, like Shakespeare's play, alludes to Miranda's two-fold spirit and sexuality. At the same time that her robes are painted blue and white, her flesh — namely her nipple — is partially unconcealed, and while we know she once cared for her

"pet lamb," it seems the sexual energy aroused by Ferdinand steals her attention. Miranda's sexuality can go easily undetected in *The Tempest*. Our first encounter with this force is in the latter half of Act I, scene two, when the audience is first introduced to Caliban. Prospero is reprimanding his monster-slave for seeking to "violate the honour" (I. ii. 349) of his daughter, when Caliban responds indignantly, saying that had the rape occurred, he could have "peopled else [the] isle with Calibans." The next moment has been a point of contention in 19th and 20th century theatres, because the fury with which Miranda interjects has often been considered uncharacteristic to those who imagine her character an insubstantial maid-child. As Judith Halberstam writes in her essay, "Female Masculinity," female strength, action, and assertiveness are "generally received by hetero and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach." It is for this reason that this speech has historically been reassigned to Prospero; though Shakespeare must have intended for Miranda to make this speech, critics have thought its conviction and resolve too much for a female to bear. Abhorred slave...I pitied thee, Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour One this or other. When thou didst not, savage, Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes With words that made them known (I. ii. 350-57, emphasis added). This passage is fascinating because Shakespeare makes reference to Miranda's role as educator on the island. She teaches Caliban language before he knows his "own meaning," a phrase reminiscent of Prospero's earlier line: "Thou art ignorant of what thou art." In the social

hierarchy on Shakespeare's island, a female has more power and influence than a quasi-male slave like Caliban. She pities him, teaches him, and therefore feels comfortable asserting without pause her anger and resentment over being forced to engage in sexual activity against her will. Because she is more linguistically knowledgeable than Caliban, she is able to "endow" his "purposes with words that made them known" (I. ii. 356-57); Miranda gives Caliban, his "masculine gaze" and his sexual urges meaning. The one hindrance to Miranda's "power" is Prospero's ability to perform magic. In Act I, scene two, he uses his powers to put her to sleep, limiting her agency with "a good dullness" (I. ii. 86) that renders her incapable of decision in the situation that arises next: Ferdinand, who is also, quite importantly, under a spell, enters the play, and both he and Miranda are enraptured by one another. Because both characters are spellbound, unable to channel their organic motivations, the relationship that develops between them must be a reflection of what Shakespeare imagined to be the ideal man and woman in love. Miranda and Ferdinand's affair belongs to Prospero, but more specifically to Shakespeare; he is the scriptor-sorcerer that dictates the nature of their bond. The arranged marriage between the two lovers differs greatly from Gayle Rubin's "Traffic in Women," a "systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products." While historically Prospero's machination would be a prime example of male-imposed female commerce, this relationship is surprisingly but undeniably egalitarian. When Prospero declares to Ferdinand, "she is thine own" (IV. i. 33), it must be recognized that Ferdinand belongs to Miranda, also. Being that there is no difference

between “ exchanger” (Ferdinand) and “ exchanged” (Miranda), neither Ferdinand nor Miranda’s sexuality is constrained; both have been freed from the “ straitjacket of gender.” MIRANDA- Do you love me? FERDINAND- O heaven, O earth, bear witness to this sound, And crown what I profess with this kind eventIf I speak true; if hollowly, invertWhat is best boded me to mischief: I, Beyond all limit of what else i’ th’ world, Do love, prize, honour you (III. i. 67-73). In these lines, Ferdinand is able to assert how he perceives and plans to behave toward Miranda, as well as what he expects from her. Miranda, ignorant of the “ proper relationship” between men and women (save for that between she and her father), proceeds to “ bear” Ferdinand’s logs, and then proposes to him, declaring: “ I am your wife if you will marry me; If not I’ll die your maid...You may deny me, but I’ll be your servant whether you will or no” (III. i. 83-86). Again threatening the traditional ebb and flow of society, Miranda breaks the rules by asking to be his wife, and Ferdinand again confirms their equal status by stating that “ a heart as will as bondage e’er of freedom” he will give her his hand. Miranda’s language is initially of the same subversive-submissive tone she has learned to use, but here, Shakespeare muddles that “ socially imposed division of the sexes.” FERDINAND-Wherefore weep you? MIRANDA-At mine unworthiness, that dare not offer what I desire to give, and much less takeWhat I shall die to want... FERDINAND-My mistress, dearest, And I thus humble ever (III. i. 79-88). Every time that Miranda tries to masquerade submission with action, Ferdinand confronts the subversive subordination with a willingness to match her. Both are equally willing to sacrifice for one another, thus striking from the equation gender’s asymmetry — superiority versus inferiority,

submission versus domination. Works Cited Dickinson, Emily. "Tell The Truth But Tell It Slant" Gilbert, Sandra. Gubar, Susan. "The Madwoman in the Attic." Literary Theory: An Anthology. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 812-825. Halberstam, Judith. "Female Masculinity." Literary Theory: An Anthology. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 935-955. Hogarth, William. Scene from The Tempest. Nostell Priory, Wakefield, West Yorkshire. c 1730 Plath, Sylvia. "Lady Lazarus." Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women." Literary Theory: An Anthology. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 935-955. Shakespeare, William. The Tempest. ed Stephen Orgel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.