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**GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA,
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**THE ISLAND, THE ATTIC AND THE FEMALE DISSENT:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN SYCORAX AND
BERTHA MASON**

GRAZIANA MONNO

gmonno1@alumno.unes.es

TUTOR ACADÉMICO: Marta Cerezo Moreno

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Abstract

A comparative analysis between the characters of Sycorax from *The Tempest* and Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* shows that the female stereotypes during the Renaissance and the Victorian period have numerous aspects in common that reveal the general social attitude towards the women (in these cases racialized) who disobeyed the rules imposed by the patriarchal system. A close textual reading and a deconstruction of the binary oppositions present in these texts unveil the incipient racism and the misogyny that existed within the society during those periods marked by relevant social, political and economic changes.

Keywords: Sycorax, Bertha Mason, female stereotypes, female dissent, misogyny.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The origin of the project

This project is the result of the acquirement of several skills learned throughout the Degree of English Studies whose syllabus provides the students with a solid basis of necessary competences in analysis and synthesis, critic and creative reasoning and practical application of knowledge. I would like to show what I have learned throughout these years from the early period of the English literary production to the latest theories of post colonialism criticism. The analysis of discourse applied to the texts will play an important role in this comparative analysis that aims at examining in depth the mechanisms of domination within certain historical contexts.

There are several reasons behind the choice of the subject of my Final Degree Project, both personal and academic. On the personal side, there are my lifelong passion for literature that has pushed me to study this Degree and my growing feminist consciousness that makes me analyse and interpret the everyday life with a different lens. Then, on the academic side, there is the will to demonstrate to what extent literature is a reflection of the dominant discourse of power and how, at the same time, it can shelter the seeds of an inherent dissent.

I have chosen to analyse and compare two representative literary works written by a male and a female author in two different periods of the English literary production with the objective of investigating on the condition of women in these different contexts. These two works are the play *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare and the bildungsroman *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë.

On the one hand, everybody knows that Shakespeare, the great Bard, is not only one of the leading figures of the English Renaissance literature but also a unique author celebrated worldwide for his capability to capture in his works the essence of timeless human feelings such as love, jealousy, power, ambition, hatred and fear. The universality and greatness of his work still fascinate the contemporary readers and can always offer new points of views on which to debate and investigate. Four hundred years after his death, Shakespeare's

work remains relevant because, at each reading, it reveals something new. As Ben Jonson, with very good reason, said once about him, he was “not of an age, but for all time.”¹

On the other hand, there is Charlotte Brontë, the eldest of the three Brontë’s sisters whose novels written during the Victorian period became classics of English literature. The novelty of the narration of her heroines consisted in their struggle with complex psychological and ethical questions which reflected to a great extent the author’s inner world. During a time, the three sisters chose to write under a neutral *nom de plume* to avoid any prejudice because, in that period, female authors were not considered seriously as male. Charlotte Brontë was thus one of the first relevant writer who gave voice to the concerns of the modern women struggling to prove her worth in a patriarchal society.

To this end, I have decided to analyse and compare two female characters of these two famous works, namely Sycorax, the wicked witch of *The Tempest* and Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre*. There are several features in common between both characters that have called my attention: they are alien, Other, lustful, wild, and powerful women. They are depicted as not even human beings; they embody a negative stereotype and cross the limits imposed to women by society in those times. They represent men’s fears, thus they are silenced, banished from their lands and oppressed by patriarchy.

1.2 Introduction to the concept of female stereotypes

Many scholars have analysed in detail these two characters and their literary representation, especially Feminist and Postcolonial critics who have focused mainly on gender and politics issues.

¹ “To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare,” published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare’s death.

Perhaps the figure of the witch is one of the most ancient stereotypes regarding women. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the word 'witch' comes from Old English and means "female magician, sorceress" - and in later use especially - "a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and to be able by their cooperation to perform supernatural acts." Sycorax shows all these characteristics and, although she dies long before the action starts, she is present in the scene through her bestial son Caliban and in the other characters' words. She does not have a voice and we know only what Prospero, the protagonist, tells us about her: she practiced black magic, was banished from her native land, had a sexual encounter with the devil and gave birth to a half monster. She is presented like the evil and powerful sorceress against which Prospero constructs his foil character projecting the image of a wise and educated man, a widower and a protective father, a victim of usurpation and a white magician.

Bertha Mason represents another ancient stereotype about women: the lunatic. She is the madwoman in the attic that inspired the famous book of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar²: a woman that does not fit into the stereotype of the 'angel in the house'³ which was the Victorian model who pushed women to be totally submitted to their husbands and devoted to the housekeeping and to the care of children. She appears only on few occasions to show her unruly personality but, like Sycorax, does not have a voice. She only expresses herself through a demoniac laugh that perturbs and troubles the quiet and perfect life in Thornfield. She is often seen as a foil to the protagonist Jane Eyre who is described as a plain English girl with a simple look and a strong Christian moral.

² *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, published in 1979.

³ "The Angel in the House" is a narrative poem by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854.

2. Research questions and methodology

2.1 General objectives, key questions and starting hypothesis

The general objective of this investigation is to shed light on women's social position during the Jacobean and Victorian period in order to discover if some relevant change or progress has occurred within this span of time of more than two hundred years. For this purpose, the analysis will focus on the literary representation of these two female characters depicted as conflicting and discordant. This essay will attempt to demonstrate that the negative stereotype conferred to these fictional personae could reveal signs of a certain apprehension for a possible incipient rising against patriarchal social order. Moreover, I will also try to draw a connection with the current situation of women and their representation in the collective imagination.

The starting hypothesis is that patriarchy has always tried to repress the nature of women since ancient times through the stereotyping and sometimes demonization of those personalities that represented a menace to its power. Literature and, in general, language reflect the culture and reality of its users, therefore they constitute a powerful weapon for perpetrating this kind of repressive discourse. Consequently, it is crucial to analyse the different kinds of depictions of female characters in literature, since they can reveal the social attitude towards this collective during a specific period. In this special case, it will be even more significant to analyse a work written by a male author and another written by a female author in order to detect whether there are any dissimilarities between their two different gender standpoints.

The questions that have triggered this analysis are the following:

- Where do female stereotypes come from?
- How does patriarchy use stereotypes as a weapon of female repression?
- What consequences does the stereotype have on the life of women?
- What do men fear about women?

- When is female personality considered a threat to social order?
- What difference is there between the literary representation of nonconformist women in the Jacobean and Victorian period?
- Do stereotypes evolve across times?

2.2 General approach and methodology

The Tempest was written in 1611 and *Jane Eyre* in 1847 and, despite the more than two hundred years that separate these works, there is a remarkable parallelism between Sycorax and Bertha Mason, as symbols of female dissent that challenges the patriarchal social system. For this reason, I have decided to concentrate on the comparison of their characterization and stereotyping, particularly on what they represent.

The main methodology of this analysis will employ a close reading of the text, a positioning of the literary work in its historical context and, finally an analysis of the most salient sociological and political aspects of the periods when they have been produced. The study will mainly follow the Cultural Materialism theories that include feminist and Marxist perspectives and it will cover as well some aspects of the theories of Feminist and Postcolonial Criticism.

Cultural materialism is a literary critical practice emerged in Britain in the early 1980s that can be defined as “a politicised form of historiography” (Barry 121). This approach focuses on historical context, theoretical method, political commitment, and close textual analysis; its main objective is to emphasise the political dimension of art in order to recreate the general outlook of a particular moment in history. It is a useful starting point of this analysis for two reasons. Firstly, this theory rejects the separation between text and context since it affirms that art is part of the social processes and contributes to shape them. Secondly, it looks for the internal tensions and contradictions that have been suppressed or silenced by the dominant ideologies (Concha and Cerezo Moreno 205-206). In particular, Cultural Materialism focuses on the methods that dominant social order employs to legitimise itself through the construction

of socially marginalised groups of Other. For the purposes of this study, it is particularly interesting to pay attention as well to Louis Althusser's concept of Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. According to Althusser's definition, "Ideology is a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with a historical existence and role at the heart of a given society" (Montag 107). The phrase 'Ideological State Apparatuses' indicates those institutions such as school, church and family that serve to transmit the values of the state and to maintain the social order.

Another crucial perspective is offered by the Feminist criticism that has emerged in the 1960s contributing to widen enormously the horizons of interpretations on literary studies. The starting point of this approach is the analysis of the so-called androcentric perspective, namely the examination of canonical texts through a new lens, the analysis of the representation of women in literature and the exposition of mechanisms of patriarchy that perpetuate sexual inequality and classify women into the category of Other (Concha and Cerezo Moreno 207). Feminist critics reject the separation between text and author since they believe that the prevailing literary critic approaches always imply a masculine point of view that do not take into consideration other perspectives. Regarding this issue, it is also essential to mention the theory of the French philosopher Michel Foucault according to which the author grants a status to the narrative discourse that becomes a fundamental part of a given society and culture (Concha and Cerezo Moreno 210).

Finally, Postcolonial criticism offers another interesting angle for the objective of this study. This critical theory has emerged in the late 1970s and concentrates on the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. The objectives of this approach are, among others, the analysis of the literature produced by the colonial countries and the study of the function of power, politics and culture as tools of the colonial hegemony. The main starting point of this approach is the assumption that colonial rulers are unreliable narrators. According to Postcolonialism criticism, colonisers have constructed a discourse based on binary oppositions that serves to justify their racial and cultural oppression over the non-Western depicting them as inferior and savage people.

This theory analyses the use of language as a tool of power and the perpetration of negative stereotype of the Other as a tactic to support the dominant ideology (Cerezo Moreno 172).

All these approaches will be the basis of this study since they share many concepts that are pivotal to better understand these literary works, the mindset of both particular periods when they were written and the motives behind certain types of narrations.

2.3 State of art

The theme of the female stereotype in general and both characters of Sycorax and Bertha Mason in particular have been extensively investigated by numerous scholars under different points of view, from the political, religious, psychological and sociological perspectives. In this essay, I will try to find a common denominator to link the dissenting femininity of these two literary characters to an embryonic form of resistance against the unjust rules that impeded the emancipation of women in those periods.

In *The Tempest*, the only woman on stage is Miranda, Prospero's daughter, who is the obedient, virginal, submissive woman that patriarchy admires and appreciates. Miranda's mother is only mentioned once, she does not even have a name and her daughter does not remember her at all. On the opposite side there is Sycorax who is described as a foul witch banished from her land who, after arriving to the island where later Prospero and Miranda will come ashore, gives birth to a bestial son conceived with the devil; she dies long before Prospero's arrival so, he does not get to know her personally.

For centuries, numerous academics, intellectuals and feminists have studied Sycorax's mysterious character and, the interest that she still awakens nowadays is quite significant, given the fact that she is voiceless and absent from the stage. It is generally agreed that she is a foil to Prospero: she is a non-white female black sorceress who deals with the devil, while he is a white male benevolent magician with apparent noble intentions. These characters are

positioned on the extremes of the scale of gender and power and, in the scheme of binary oppositions, she represents the Other, the evil, the primitive one. She clearly symbolises a threat to authority and social order, and her depiction reveals the general attitude towards witches and, in general, towards women during the Shakespearean period.

The witchcraft criminalization started already in the antiquity and continued for centuries. During the Renaissance, the authorities condemned sorcery as a crime of heresy and persecuted firmly and brutally “the devil-worshipping, cannibalistic, evil-doing witch” (Monter and Scarre 18). In England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland several Witchcraft Acts were passed within the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in order to restrain witchcraft and its practice. According to Geoffrey Scarre, “prosecutions for witchcraft were an endemic feature of life in large parts of Europe for many years, from time to time certain areas experienced witch-hunts of greatly increased intensity” (19). He also explains that persecution was an early modern phenomenon that reached its peak around the years 1590, 1630 and 1660 (19-20).

Stephen Orgel underlines the almost total absence of female characters on stage and questions Prospero’s attitude towards women. He observes that, “she [Sycorax] is insistently present in his [Prospero’s] memory –far more present than his own wife– and she embodies to an extreme degree all the negative assumptions about women” (54). Orgel asks himself if it is true that Caliban is Sycorax’s bastard by Satan or it is rather Prospero’s fabrication to justify his opinions about women. Then, he concludes that Prospero seems to insinuate that “all women at the heart are whores” (55).

Rachana Sachdev links Sycorax’s character to the fear of the Other and suggests that in the early European nations the concept of ‘otherness’ was crucial for the construction of national identity. The geographical discoveries of the seventeenth century had a great impact on many aspects of life and, ultimately, contributed to shape the discourse of Englishness based on issues of gender and race. Sycorax is an evident example of what represented the Other in that period and the localization within the North African landscape is a quite meaningful fact that contributes to the construction of her character (226-227).

Sachdev believes that Sycorax could have a connection with the English discovery of Africa and its customs and traditions, especially with the female circumcision that established a clear difference between English and non-English female bodies.

Francis Barker and Peter Hulme propose a historical-political critique concentrating on the concept of discourse and on questions of instrumentality and function of it, namely on the performative meaning of the text. They remark the fact that, for long time, critics have accepted Prospero's account as a neutral and impartial version of the story, ignoring other possible perspectives. They point at the authoritative discourse of the protagonist and affirm that Prospero imposes his construction of events on the other characters. The critics especially focus on the theme of the usurpation of authority that conventional criticism had only taken into consideration from Prospero's point of view, disregarding the fact that he himself is a usurper (201-202).

All these studies reveal several aspects of the subtext of this Shakespearean play that evidence the general Jacobean mindset on issues of power, gender and race. The dread and persecution of the witches, the erasing of female characters and the indoctrination of a young woman, the fear of the female Other and the repressive discourse of the patriarch are the main points to examine in order to answer the initial questions.

In the novel *Jane Eyre*, another silent character embodies the rebellion against the patriarchal social order. Bertha Mason, like Sycorax, is a minor character with no voice nor apparent major agency rather than to serve as a foil to the protagonist of the novel, Jane Eyre, a plain and fragile young English woman.

Bertha Mason is a ravishing Creole whom Edward Rochester marries for her astonishing beauty and, not less important, to consolidate his wealth. After his marriage with Bertha in Jamaica, he realizes that she could possibly suffer from a mental disorder and, upon returning to England, he decides to confine her in the attic of his mansion. Rochester, the master of Thornfield Hall, is depicted as a Byronic hero, a passionate man living a wild and dissolute life.

When he meets Jane, he plans to change his lifestyle and marry her trying to hide his union with Bertha. However, Jane finds out his machination and rejects his proposal. Eventually, Jane will marry him only after Bertha's suicide.

The history of Bertha reveals several aspects on the position of women during the Victorian period: the arranged marriage for economic interests, the husband appropriation of the woman's patrimony and body, the arbitrary accusations of being out of control and the violent imposition of the confinement that leads to her dehumanization and derangement.

Victorian society was based on the rigid doctrine of 'separate spheres' that established a clear distinction between men and women. Men were independent, belonged to the public sphere, were meant to participate in politics and in paid work and could freely enjoy the pleasures of sex. Women, on the other hand, were dependent, belonged to the private sphere, were meant to take care of the house and family, were more religious and morally finer than men, and sex was for them just one of the several chores to do in order please their husbands. Women had to follow the model of the so-called 'angel in the house' that, according to Virginia Woolf, "never had a mind but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all...she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty" (3).

Regarding the issue of mental insanity, a radical change occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century. The Lunatic Acts established a clear difference between the insane and criminals and, thereafter, medicine started to look for treatment that aimed at the recuperation of mental insanity. However, social conformity and the acceptance of the established general roles became the main indicators of sanity and, on the contrary, lunacy was believed to be the result of a failure to conform to the Victorian moral prescriptions. According to Sally Shuttleworth:

The emergence of theories of moral insanity is symptomatic of the tightening networks of social control in the Victorian era as the inner self becomes the target of ideological surveillance. The

instability thus engendered in the heart of the self is suggested in *Jane Eyre* where the seeming outward conformity of Jane is counterpointed by the eruptions of 'moral madness' from Bertha.

(49)

The neglected character of Bertha Mason was first recovered by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who titled after her their famous book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They describe Bertha in psychological terms as “Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead” (360). This interpretation has been for long time the most accepted and canonical one; however, since the publication of this book in 1979, numerous feminist scholars have analysed Bertha’s character from other angles, paying special attention to postcolonial concerns. Thereafter, *Jane Eyre* has become a pivotal text for the analysis of issues of race, gender and empire in the context of Victorian culture.

During the nineteenth century, the British Empire dominated the globe. The continuous traffic of people and goods between Britain and its colonies contributed to the rapid growth of its economy turning the country in a world political power. The Empire exerted control over an enormous number of nonwhite people not only by means of military force but also through its rhetoric, its oppressive discourse and the negative stereotyping of the Other.

According to Gayatri Spivak, Bertha is “a figure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism” (247). She argues that Jane reproduces the ideology of imperialism based on a typical series of dichotomies such as human/animal, madness/ reason, England/not-England. In fact, despite having several traits in common with Bertha, Jane considers her the Other, the one that she has to confront and eliminate to fulfil her goals and occupy her place.

Madeleine K. Davies maintains that in *Jane Eyre* “the fairytale heroine triumphs at the expense of every other woman in the novel” (182). She underlines two important aspects: the first is the representation of Rochester as the typical fairytale prince with his lovely castle referring to the male history of

property and class right; the second is Jane's lack of sympathy and pitiless behaviour towards Bertha referring to the fact that Jane never questions her supposed insanity nor the honesty of Rochester's account of the events (190).

These aspects that emerge in Brontë's novel are crucial to better understand the background of the author and her work, especially the construction of Bertha's character who embodies the antithesis of the Victorian woman model: she is the primitive, uncivilised, wild and sensual female Other that have to be governed in order to achieve the peace and happiness of a paradigmatic life aligned with the dominant moral discourse.

3. Analysis of *The Tempest*

3.1 Historical context and main sources

In this section, I will analyse the principal aspects of the play that are linked to the main hypothesis of this investigation, namely the witchcraft theme and the first steps of the British Empire. Moreover, I will cover some historical facts that will help me to corroborate the starting premises and to show how relevant is the role of a rebellious woman as Sycorax for the construction of the dominant discourse.

Soon after his coronation in 1603, King James I became the sponsor and master of Shakespeare's theatre. The Bard wrote *The Tempest* in 1611 leaving behind the philosophic reflections of his great tragedies and addressing more trivial topics in a story where harmony and reconciliation prevail. Critics classified this work as 'last play' or 'romance' because it deals with a romantic story of love that ends happily after the protagonists overcome several difficulties as the loss of status, the separation of families and the exile. However, underneath the apparently superficial theme of the play, it is possible to identify several issues that reveal important aspects of the mindset of that period regarding the prevailing idea of social order.

When *The Tempest* was presented in 1613 in honour of the sumptuous celebration of James I's daughter's marriage, Shakespeare added several

elements with the intention to please the monarch's likings, namely the message of moral indoctrination, the masquerade, the successful conclusion of the political complots and above all the witchcraft theme. James I became particularly interested in sorcery after he convinced himself that a group of witches was plotting a political conspiracy against him. The monarch even wrote a philosophical dissertation on necromancy and black magic titled *Daemonologie* that was first published in Scotland in 1596 and then republished in England when he ascended to the throne in 1603. According to James' thesis, all kinds of calamities, natural disasters and any event that could not be reasonably explained were caused by witchcraft. This political and theological text aimed at educating the population on the black magic subject in order to defend the prosecution of these practices.

The so-called witch-hunt was a phenomenon that spread throughout Europe in the fifteenth century and reached its peak in the second half of the sixteenth, greatly varying in intensity from place to place. According to Alvin Kernan, between 1500 and 1700, in Europe over fifty thousand people, mostly women, were accused of witchcraft practice and sentenced to death (83-84). In Scotland, the birthplace of James I, the repression was particularly violent and the executions outnumbered by five times the total in England. The Witchcraft Act passed in 1604, one year after James' coronation, established that witchcraft had to be condemned as a heresy and punished with the penalty of death, generally by hanging and, in the most serious cases, by burning at stake. Torture was the main instrument to obtain confessions which, on numerous occasions, revealed to be unfounded and, too often, hid personal or political interests. After all, the creation of this type of crime linked to social subversion and deviance was a mechanism that allowed the dominant groups to define the moral boundaries within the society.

Another relevant theme entailed in this play concerns the history of British colonies. At the end of the sixteenth century, Sir Walter Raleigh, a soldier and an adventurer who enjoyed the great favour of Queen Elizabeth, started to explore the American continent in search of land to colonise and, after several failed attempts, he succeeded in establishing the first permanent colony in Virginia with the settlement of Jamestown in 1607. Travel narratives became

very popular in this period and gave place to the construction of the colonial discourse based upon the British civilizing mission and higher values. Most likely, Shakespeare had read several travelogues of the first Virginia colonisers that reported the details of the expeditions. In fact, the geographical setting of the play reveals the connection to the first explorations and discoveries of new lands; moreover, the author includes several references to the New Continent like the rich descriptions of the tropical environment, the name of the protagonist Caliban that was the name of the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands and a reference to a Patagonian god called Setebos.

As usual, Shakespeare manages to mingle real events, allusions to classics, contemporary political circumstances and elements of fantasy in order to connect with his sponsors and the public. Overall, he offers a general outlook on the English Renaissance mentality regarding certain topics such as sorcery, colonization and the New World that are crucial for this study. In the next two sections, I will show how the author assigns to Sycorax the role of Other turning her into a symbol of all the negative features that patriarchy and colonialism utilize to construct their oppressive discourse based on binary oppositions. In particular, the stereotyped image of the witch, her African provenience and, in general, her otherness contribute to create a perfect target for the misogynist and racist propaganda of that period.

3.2 Literary analysis of Sycorax

Sycorax is dead when Prospero and Miranda arrive to the island, thus she never appears physically in the play and all the reader knows about her is what other characters report. She is mentioned only seven times, three by Prospero and four by Caliban. In this section, I will analyse her characterisation in detail and, in order to fully understand her role in the story, I will contrast her character with Prospero and Miranda.

The origin of Sycorax's name entails a negative meaning, since it seems to derive from a combination of the Greek words for 'sow' (sys) and 'raven' (korax). Prospero mentions her for the first time in the middle of a discussion

with Ariel, an airy spirit at his service. The reader immediately becomes aware of the unflattering features that the magician assigns her. Ariel demands to Prospero to fulfil his promise and free him but, instead, the magician reacts bitterly to the spirit's claim. He shows his irritation by calling him a malignant liar and asks him "Dost thou forgot / From what a torment I did free thee?" (1.2.250-51), reminding his servant that he rescued him from the tree in which Sycorax held him imprisoned. Afterwards, Prospero tries to manipulate Ariel's memories and invokes the name of Sycorax to justify prolonging Ariel's servitude. He asks him "Hast thou forgot the foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy / Was grown into a hoop?" (1.2.257-59). In these lines, Prospero gives a first description of Sycorax that unveils his hostile attitude towards her: he uses the adjective 'foul' which means disgusting, filthy, obscene; the noun 'envy' that refers to a feeling of jealousy and the noun 'hoop' probably referring to the deformity of the witch's physical aspect or to the typical bended back of an old person.

Prospero's threatening tone succeeds in instilling fear into the spirit; thus, he takes advantage of his superiority and starts interrogating him, "Where was she born? Speak, tell me" (1.2.261); Ariel answers him that she was born in "Argiers." Ariel probably refers to the city of Algiers settled in the northern strip of African coast that, at that time, was contended by Spain in the West and the Ottoman Empire in the East due to its great strategical value. However, apart from the political interest of those days in that part of the world, this detail reveals another important feature that characterises the witch, that is, the colour of her skin: she probably is a black or a non-white person.

Prospero continues rebuking Ariel with his paternalism treating him as an inferior being on which he knows he can exert his influence: his power relies in his discourse and he seems to be a master of manipulation. He threatens him "I must / Once in a month recount what thou hast been" (1.2.262-63), showing his necessity to convince the spirit of the truthfulness of his version of the story. Then, he delivers him a lecture manifesting his narcissistic nature: he portrays himself as the saviour of the spirit that had been victimised by the damned witch. Another interesting element is the half-truth on the banishment of Sycorax from her native land. Prospero affirms "Thou know'st was banish'd. / For one

thing she did" (1.2.267) but he never specifies the reason for her deportation, adding more secrecy to the figure of the witch and insinuating that the crime she had committed is so terrible that it cannot be mentioned.

Afterwards, Prospero provides some additional information on the physical aspect of the sorceress and describes her as a "blue-eyed hag" (1.2.270), using the adjective 'blue-eyed' probably referred to her pregnancy and an unflattering term such as 'hag' to underline once more her vicious nature and her old age. According to Prospero, Sycorax tormented the spirit with her "abhorred commands" (1.2.274) and imprisoned him into a clove pine with the help of her "potent ministers" (1.2.276). He reminds him that he was held in captivity during a dozen years of great suffering until the witch died; then Prospero arrived at the island and set him free.

Ariel is the one who really knows the truth about Sycorax but he does not dare to contradict his master. Even if Prospero has never met her in person, he has constructed a precise image that serves to justify his occupation of the land and the consequent subjugation of Caliban and Ariel. He portrays himself as a fair ruler, a magician who uses his powers to help others and a bearer of values such as culture, civility and refinement. He puts great effort in indoctrinating his daughter Miranda and instructs her carefully on his patriarchal rules. He tells her that once he was the Duke of Milan and that his brother Antonio usurped him of his dukedom, taking advantage of the fact that Prospero started to neglect politics to devote himself to his studies. Eventually, he recounts that he was forced to escape from death with his three-year-old daughter in a boat that brought them to the island. After this first version of the facts, the reader feels sympathy for Prospero who appears to be a caring father and a victim of an unfair conspiracy plotted by his own brother. Hence, when later on, Prospero speaks about Sycorax, the evident binary opposition between them emerges immediately.

Therefore, Sycorax becomes naturally a Prospero's foil, his opposed Other: she is a cruel and despotic witch who mistreats the gentle spirit with the help of some evil accomplices. Moreover, when Prospero refers to Sycorax's son, he chooses words which allude to the barbaric nature of the witch and her

lad. When he says “the son, that she did litter here, / A freckled whelp, hag-born not honored with / A human shape” (1.2.282-84), he chooses the verb ‘litter’ to mean the animals’ act of giving birth and the noun ‘whelp’ to mean a young mammal as the dog or the wolf. In a moment of anger, Prospero even insinuates that Caliban was “got by the Devil himself” (1.2.320-21), implying a suspicious and promiscuous sexual behaviour of his rival.

Caliban evokes her mother’s name to claim his right to rule over the island or to curse Prospero for his unjust takeover. When Caliban states fiercely “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak’st from me” (1.2.332-334), he shows his disillusionment with Prospero whose initial amiable behaviour misled the native, making him believe that he was an honest person. Prospero gave Caliban “water with berries in it” (1.2.335) and taught him his language and, in return, Caliban showed to the newcomer “all the qualities of the isle” (1.2.338). Nevertheless, when Prospero became familiar with the environment, he took advantage of it seizing the land and enslaving its inhabitants. Caliban expresses his fury and regret for having trusted the stranger and cries, “Cursed be I that did so! All the charms / Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!” (1.2.340-41). Prospero, of course, has an excellent reason for enslaving Caliban and affirms that his bondage is the consequence of the indigenous attempt to violate the honour of his daughter Miranda. As it is evident, Miranda’s character is fundamental to reinforce the negative aspects of Sycorax; in fact, the two female characters are completely opposed to each other and represent two different stereotypes of femininity: the virginal and obedient Miranda versus the promiscuous and mischievous Sycorax.

3.3 Analysis of Sycorax’ dissenting message

Sycorax fulfils the majority of the features attributed to the witches by the typical Renaissance stereotype. Geoffrey Scarre affirms that witches, like heretics before them, were accused of meeting together at night in secret places, having sexual encounters with demons and worshipping Satan. However, while

heretics could be of either sex and of any age, witches were in the majority of cases women and, generally, elderly ones (15-16).

Although it will never be possible to determine how many women were tried and executed during the numerous witch-hunts that took place in Europe for over two centuries, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of them were massacred and subjected to the cruelest tortures under this accusation. According to the feminist and Marxist scholar Silvia Federici, the witch-hunts had a “political mission with the objective of the construction of a new patriarchal order” (68). She observes that the European political structure started changing in the beginning of the fifteenth century and continued to evolve throughout the sixteenth due to the reforms that took place after the end of feudalism. Then, the capitalist system that followed the Protestant Reformation initiated a series of economic changes that destroyed the web of cooperative relations that was at the base of the rural system and upon which many women depended. Thus, in this period of transition, the economic organization of certain groups of women became a serious threat for the upcoming power structure and social order (72).

The themes of legitimacy, usurpation, domination and resistance are central in *The Tempest*. Prospero is eager for power and fears Sycorax’s strength, even if she is dead. He is obsessed by the wish to control every creature on the island, from the body and thoughts of his own daughter to his slaves. For this purpose, he constructs and repeats his discourse until it becomes true; he tries to convince himself and everybody else that his actions are benevolent when, in fact, it is evident that he uses his powers only for his own benefits.

The struggle for power is an anthropological issue as old as the world history and men’s greater endeavour has always been that of dominating women. According to Betty Blystone, “the patriarchy that Prospero enforces is not an independent or coherent system; rather, it reacts to its opposite, which Sycorax symbolises” (73). Prospero turns Sycorax into a symbol that threatens his authority, especially if we think of the possibility of a maternal succession that would overturn the island’s hierarchy. At a certain point, Prospero even

alleges that his magic is more powerful than Sycorax's when he boasts "it was a torment / To lay upon the damned, which Sycorax / Could not again undo. It was mine art...that...let thee out" (1.2.289-93). The magician does not admit neither contradiction nor rivalry; however, no matter how often he reiterates his discourse, in the anxious repetition of his supposed moral superiority, Prospero shows the most fragile side of his masculinity and the desperate need for the recognition of his abilities.

If gender is one of the most decisive factors to determine the degree of one's power, this text reveals another crucial element that contributes to the struggle for control, that is, race. Prospero is not only a despotic patriarch but, moreover, he reveals himself to be an aggressive coloniser. In fact, he seizes the land that was Caliban's and enslaves him under the accusation of the attempt of Miranda's rape. As Ania Loomba remarks, the stereotype of the 'black rapist' was very common among colonisers who believed that sexual violence was part of the black man's inferior nature (390). Even if Caliban does not deny his attraction for Miranda, a founded suspicion arises on the truthfulness of Prospero's accusation. In fact, despite the magician's discourse is constructed masterfully, his yearning for power betrays him. Just like a tyrant, he wants to hold all the power and, for this purpose, he uses whatever it takes in order to succeed: his main weapon is the vilification and belittling of the Other that makes him emerge as a sort of hero. Nevertheless, as Blystone points out, "in demonizing Sycorax and projecting his panic onto her, Prospero only creates her into something powerful enough to incite fear. Prospero endows Sycorax with his greatest anxiety: losing his patriarchal power" (77).

In conclusion, it seems that the ambivalence in this play shows that Shakespeare was raising a critique rather than just perpetuating the dominant discourse of the time. In this work, as in many others, the writer plays with ambiguity and always leaves a space for doubts. He never depicts a world that is totally black or totally white transmitting the idea of the inherent uncertainty of life and inviting the reader/spectator to reflect upon the deepest conflicts and desires common to every human being. At the end of the story, Prospero does not come out as a great hero but rather as a frail person who asks for the indulgence of the public. His words "my ending is despair, /Unless I be relieved

by prayer” (Epilogue 15-16) show a sense of nostalgia and loneliness that contrasts with the strong confidence he has tried to show throughout the play. Therefore, after the binary oppositions have been deconstructed, Sycorax’s spirit has the chance to rise through the patriarchal oppression. She is able to sneak into the space that exists between those oppositions and to exert her resistance in order to undermine gradually the monolithic system that struggles to maintain its power and privileges.

4. Analysis of *Jane Eyre*

4.1 Historical context and main sources

In this section, I will analyse the principal aspects of the novel that are linked to the main hypothesis of this investigation, namely the rigid Victorian moral standards and the position of the British Empire. I will briefly cover the historical context and some aspects of the author’s personal circumstances to corroborate the starting premises and to show how crucial is the character of Bertha Mason to uphold the dominant discourse of social order.

Jane Eyre was published in 1847 during the Victorian Era that corresponds roughly to the long period of Queen Victoria’s reign, from 1837 to 1901. Queen Victoria occupied the throne longer than any of her predecessors did and redefined the British monarchy becoming a national icon and a symbol of the strict standards of morality that characterised this epoch. The Victorian society was organized in a rigid hierarchical system that depended on gender, class, religion and race. Gender and class were the main factors that defined the individuals’ condition, while religion was socially and politically omnipresent to an extent that each single detail of everyday life depended on it, especially sexual issues. A very important phenomenon of this epoch was the rise of the middle class that grew rapidly and became the main symbol of the exemplary Victorian moral standards.

The slow but significant political and economic changes triggered by the Industrial Revolution initiated a transition from a rural to an industrial economy

turning Britain into a powerful nation with a solid government and a large empire with colonies all over the world. The expansion of British Empire depended fundamentally on the traffic of goods and people among Britain and its colonies. The free trade imperialism and the consequent slavery gave rise to several matters regarding race and pushed the society to become more and more involved with the fears of miscegenation and degeneration of the pure English race. The racist imperial ideology depicted the inhabitants of the colonies as inferior and uncivilised Others opposed to the Western superior and civilised population, defending their subjugation and their lack of rights. Nevertheless, behind the image of solid and great world power that Britain strove to show off, the Empire was continuously changing due to the movements of resistance against its oppressive rule.

Besides the historical context, the personal circumstances of the author are also fundamental to better understand her work and her relation with the Victorian mentality. Charlotte Brontë started to write at a very young age but, due to her poor family's finances, she had only few options to gain economic independence, that is working as either schoolmistress or governess. Charlotte earned her living working in several families and she was also briefly employed as a teacher in Belgium but her real aspiration was to write professionally. According to a general belief of this epoch, literature was not a business for women and Charlotte had to face numerous obstacles before having the chance to publish her work. Eventually, when she managed to do it, her first novel *Jane Eyre* became soon a best seller, even if some critics judged it immoral. Charlotte's personal struggles and intimate reflections deeply influenced this work which deals with the female condition during this period treating issues such as education, marriage, women's employment and female oppressive conditions of nineteenth century Victorian society.

As I will show in the next two sections, the character of Bertha Mason plays a fundamental role in the construction of the binary opposition scheme that serves to uphold the dominant patriarchal and colonial discourses of this period. The stereotype of the lunatic and sexual depraved female Other allows Jane to emerge as a modern heroine who validates the prevailing Victorian

moral principles; without the contrast of Bertha, Jane would not achieve her ideal position within the patriarchal society where she lived in.

4.2 Literary analysis of Bertha Mason

Bertha Mason is a character with no voice and little agency in the novel. Her name is pronounced ten times in total and, on numerous occasions, Rochester and Jane refer to her only through animal imagery. In this section, I will analyse Bertha's characterisation and the way in which the other protagonists perceive her nature and relate to her.

The first time that Jane feels Bertha's presence is just after her arrival to Thornfield. She has had an excellent impression of the mansion and of the housekeeper but, during a visit to the attic, she notices something strange. Jane describes Bertha's presence with these words: "a laugh, struck my ear. It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless...the laugh was as tragic, as preternatural a laugh as any I ever heard" (91). The choice of adjectives such as 'mirthless', 'tragic' and 'preternatural' entails the unflattering features that will be assigned to Bertha throughout the novel: she is associated to something unnatural and dreadful. In the following chapters, Jane meets Mr. Rochester, the master of Thornfield; she finds him "changeful and abrupt" (108) and, when Jane comments her impressions to one of the domestic servants, she explains her that his behaviour is due to a difficult personal history leading Jane and the reader to deduce that he is probably a victim of some kind of wrong.

The next time that Jane hears the "vague murmur, peculiar and lugubrious" (126), she starts to feel anguished. She describes a gothic and sinister atmosphere: a "drearly dark" (126) night, the sound of the clock that struck the hour, the scratching fingers on her room's door, the fear rising and again a "demoniac laugh—low, suppressed, and deep" (126). The unnatural 'voice' is then associated to a wicked and threatening "goblin-laughter" (126). The creature behind the voice is depicted as 'something' that gurgles and moans. Once more, the sounds and actions that Jane witnesses are connected to evil powers and mischievous creatures. After this scene, Jane finds out that

Rochester's room has been set ablaze and she saves her master from an imminent death.

When Mr. Mason arrives to Thornfield, the Jamaican setting is mentioned for the first time; Jane focuses on Mason's unusual appearance and behaviour and, afterwards, on Rochester's negative comments on the Jamaican environment. He relates "the burning heats, the hurricanes and rainy seasons of that region" (163) and these details are essentials to construct the image of hostility of the remote and mysterious country that determines the character of its savage inhabitants.

The following dreadful accident occurs in the attic of the mansion during a full moon night. Jane associates again the terrible sounds to animal imagery. The peaceful night is interrupted "by a savage, a sharp, a shrilly sound" that "not the widest winged condor on the Andes could...send out...from the cloud shrouding his eyrie" (175). Next, another comparison with an enraged animal: "a snarling, snatching sound, almost like a dog quarrelling" (178). Jane spends all night hearing once and again "a step creak, a momentary renewal of the snarling, canine noise, and a deep human groan," and compares the voice to "a mocking demon and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey" (179). The comparison with wild animals is a constant in the characterisation of Bertha's voicing and actions and alludes to her beastly and savage nature. After another eerie accident, Jane finds out that Mr. Mason has been stabbed in the arm and she hears him saying "she sucked the blood: she said she'd drain my heart" (181). Bertha's terrible outbursts coincide significantly with a full and red moon, following the Victorian belief that women became hysterical during their menstrual period to the point to behave like vicious creatures.

The bond between Rochester and Jane grows stronger with each mysterious and shocking event and they eventually get engaged. However, the night before the wedding, Jane finally meets Bertha for the first time. She depicts her "discoloured savage face" (206) with red eyes, inflated lineaments, dark swelled lips and black eyebrows over the bloodshot eyes and then, the "fearful and ghastly" (242) figure takes Jane's veil and tears it in two. Jane is terrified by the disturbing encounter and compares that sinister woman to a

vampire. When she recounts to Rochester what she has seen, he promises to explain her everything after their marriage. Nevertheless, his plan fails and he is forced to admit the truth: Bertha is his wife. Bertha's full name is pronounced for the first time is in the church where Rochester and Jane are about to get married. Mr. Mason, Bertha's brother, stops the wedding adducing the proof of the previous union and Rochester, eventually, tells his version of the story and leads all the people present in the church to the attic where he keeps his wife confined. The second appearance of Bertha reveals the deplorable conditions in which she lives like an animal in its cage:

What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (250)

Rochester recounts how his father arranged his marriage with Bertha, the beautiful daughter of a wealthy family; he admits to have married without knowing her at all and that her beauty and wealth were reasons good enough to convince him. However, after four years living in Jamaica with her, he found out that she was a lunatic and a drunkard and started to feel disgust and repulsion for her. Rochester does not need any evidence to accuse Bertha of being mad, his word is sufficient. He depicts himself as a victim of the machination of his greedy father first and of his insane spouse later but Bertha never has the chance to offer her version of the facts; she is dismissed as wife, as woman and even as human being. She is robbed of her patrimony, brought to another country and locked up in a windowless attic during ten years under the surveillance of a guard who just provides for her basic needs; nobody around her doubts about her supposed lunacy, not even her brother defends her from her abuser. When Jane decides to leave Thornfield, she does it because her moral principles do not allow her to become Rochester's mistress, not because she judges him for his lies or the way he treats his wife. Eventually, Jane will

return to Rochester and marry him when she realises that Bertha has set ablaze Thornfield and, afterwards, has killed herself jumping off the roof.

4.3 Analysis of Bertha Mason's dissenting message

Bertha Mason represents the typical Victorian stereotype of the female madness and, in general, of the women who did not conform to the strict role assigned to them in that epoch and that, for this reason, were considered insane.

After the passage of the Lunatics Act in 1845, the percentages of women in Victorian asylums increased exponentially. According to Elaine Showalter, some doctors believed that women were more likely to be exposed to poverty and, consequently, to dependency and illness that generally led them to insanity. However, the prevailing thesis among psychiatrists was that "the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control" (55), linking indissolubly insanity with the female biology. Brontë explains Bertha's madness following the discourse of Victorian psychiatry. Since the female reproductive system was the source of mental illness, women were most likely to transmit madness; in fact, as Rochester affirms, Bertha inherits her insanity from her mother. Moreover, her unusual sexual appetite and her outbursts during the menstrual cycle constituted additional proofs for the doctors to declare her definitely insane.

Brontë juxtaposes two opposed forms of womanhood in her novel: Jane, the measured and obedient woman versus Bertha, the uncontrollable and treacherous one. Both embody a female stereotype that patriarchy has constructed for them; in fact, Rochester perceives clearly the difference: Jane is his "good angel" and Bertha his "hideous demon" (269). As Sally Shuttleworth remarks "the incipient parallel which runs throughout the novel between Jane and the 'mad' Bertha turns on the issue of the flow of energy: at what point does productive forcefulness turn into self-destructive anarchy?" (151). Jane struggles throughout the novel to transgress the social boundaries of class and gender but remains always within an accepted framework. She follows the

Victorian doctrine of self-improvement, manages to develop her strengths and to control her weaknesses. Hence, she succeeds in transforming her energy at times rebellious and, eventually, she improves her social status by marrying Rochester and forming an ideal Victorian family. On the contrary, Bertha embodies the worst stereotype of womanhood in the contemporary social and scientific discourse. Besides her inadequacy in the private sphere, she is accused by Rochester of sexual depravity, which was a capital sin in an epoch that glorified female purity. Throughout the novel, the uncontrollable Bertha is described with innumerable references to the most varied animal imagery, thus everything she represents is demonized: her lustful desire, her disobedience to the patriarchal rules and, eventually, her indomitable nature. In fact, she does not accept her imprisonment and, each time that she has a chance, she escapes from the attic or fights back against Rochester, against her brother and, in general, against the system that has imprisoned her.

From a postcolonial perspective, it is important to underline that in this period there was a common assumption that people born of parents from different 'race' were degenerate beings, closer to animals than to humans. Bertha is neither white nor black and her origins remain vague: she is described as a Creole, term created by the colonisers in order to establish a hierarchy among European settlers and their descendants, and the natives. Therefore, she exists in a liminal place in between European and non-European blood and culture: she can marry a white Englishman but she is not equal to him in social terms, for both being a woman and a non-white non-European person. Bertha is always connected to Jane as Other and she never achieves any identity of her own. Jane's journey towards self-fulfillment and a happy marriage are achieved at the cost of Bertha's human selfhood and, ultimately, her life. However, far from being only Jane's Other, Bertha shows to have her own personality and voice. In fact, her incendiary acts recall the slave revolts occurred in Jamaica in 1831-32. The burning of the plantations was an important part of the slaves' resistance and fire was often a warning sign to advise that an uprising had begun. Although the colonial discourse deprives Bertha of her voice, there is a place for her agency against both patriarchy and colonialism. She challenges the dominant discourse through the continuous escapes from her confinement,

her threatening laughter and her attempts to destroy her abuser's possessions; every time she can, she reacts against the systems that have repressed her identity, judging her as defective and improper. As Firdous Azim argues:

The figure of Bertha Mason is significant, as she represents the failure of the pedagogical, colonising enterprise. Recalcitrant and uneducable, she escapes the dominating and hegemonising imperialist and educational processes. As a Creole, she is differentiated from the 'authentic' native, and represents multiple points of dislocation that the colonising venture had brought in its wake. (182)

In conclusion, Brontë's novel offers food for thought. The author had suffered at first-hand the heavy restraints that patriarchal system imposed on women during the Victorian period and her heroine Jane embodies the distress of a woman who struggles for her independence: she is constantly tormented by the feeling of being trapped in her low social class and her inferior condition of woman and, on several occasions, claims passionately her right to be considered equal to men. At one point, she says:

Women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making pudding and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering. (93)

Jane Eyre brilliantly questions the meaning of madness in Victorian women's daily lives and the depiction of Bertha strongly influenced medical accounts of female insanity of that period. Nevertheless, despite the numerous aspects in common between Jane and Bertha, the former needs to eliminate

the latter to achieve her goals. In order to obtain the public recognition, Brontë reproduces the same mechanisms that the dominant patriarchal ideology imposed on the female representations. Although her heroine struggles to demonstrate her worth, she fails to create a bond with Bertha who is fighting a similar battle. Even so, despite the fact that Bertha is voiceless and has a marginal position, she manages to communicate her dissenting message from the minimal space where she is relegated, expressing eventually her powerful agency. In the ultimate blaze and leap into the void, she vindicates her identity.

5. Comparative analysis between Sycorax and Bertha Mason

5.1 Comparing the literary characters

As we have seen throughout this essay, Sycorax and Bertha Mason are continually depicted as Others in opposition to somebody else.

The concept of Otherness is the product of the groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* by the socialist feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. She believed that the groups that hold the power control the representation of the groups that do not. Following this thesis, de Beauvoir argues that men construct the female identity as the 'other sex' in order to serve their own interests. She sums up her point in these extremely precise and accurate words: "he is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other" (26). In brief, de Beauvoir upholds the idea that the patriarchy uses the concept of otherness to inhibit the female emancipation, imposing limitations upon women and making them believe that they are inferior.

The most evident feature that links Sycorax and Bertha Mason is their gender, which represents the primary obstacle that impedes them to express freely. Since they do not fit in the roles that have been established for them, the society classifies them as mischievous and dangerous women who must be marginalized and punished for their rebellion. In fact, Sycorax is completely cancelled from the story, while Bertha is imprisoned and forced to express herself through violent acts. They both represent a stereotyped negative female

model and their stories become a kind of moral parable that demonstrate that the wayward women end up tragically. The patriarchs, Prospero and Rochester, spend great energy in depicting them as sinful and evil persons in order to justify their oppression but, eventually, they both reveal to be great master manipulators.

Another crucial feature that dooms Sycorax and Bertha to repression is their indefinite race that, together with their gender, condemns them to be relegated to the borders of society entitling their oppressors to perpetrate their abuse. Both are completely 'othered' in order to emphasise the supposed Western higher values in the binary opposition scheme on which the colonial discourse is based. Hence, the racialization of these characters constitutes another main justification to place them in the lower step of the social scale and to deny them the right to have any voice of their own.

Sycorax and Bertha represent a threat to the social order and, ultimately, embody men's fear of female power. It is widely demonstrated that women's body has always been the ideal battleground for misogynistic attacks and that female sexuality has repeatedly been used to measure the value of women's worth. In fact, both Sycorax and Bertha are judged for this aspect. From one side, Sycorax is an independent and powerful woman but Prospero does not acknowledge her value and, instead, alludes to her possible relationship with the devil in order to denigrate her. Moreover, on several occasions, he reminds to his daughter the importance of chastity. From the other side, Rochester accuses Bertha to be an "intemperate and unchaste" woman with "a nature the most gross, impure, depraved" (263); he even says that she speaks like a "harlot" (262) and dismisses her as a "filthy burden" (263). For a moment, he thinks about suiciding but instead he prefers to exert his power of white male coloniser and to erase her identity. Yet, when Jane asks him what he did upon returning to England from Jamaica, he candidly admits having engaged in several affairs with few mistresses. His sexual behaviour is just a mistake that can be rectified while Bertha's is judged as a capital sin that leads to her final condemnation. Rochester's words "Hiring a mistress is the next worst thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to

live familiarly with inferiors is degrading” (266) sum up perfectly the racist and misogynistic attitude of the Victorian mentality.

It seems that Sycorax’s and Bertha’s major fault is the vindication of their identities, right that was reserved only to men. As de Beauvoir once more masterfully explains:

Man represents the positive and the neuter—that is, the male and the human being— while woman represents the negative, the female. Every time she behaves like a human being, she is declared to be identifying with the male. (482)

The only aspect that differentiates Sycorax and Bertha is that the former is dead and the latter is alive. While Shakespeare ‘kills’ Sycorax before the play starts, depriving her from any possibility to act or speak, Brontë grants Bertha a small agency that, in the end, will allow her to express her dissent through her last extreme act. Eventually, none of them has the possibility to speak and tell their version of the story but, at least, Bertha has a minimal opportunity to show her resistance to the dominant discourse.

5.2 Answering key questions and initial hypothesis

As we have observed so far, the concept of femininity is classified into stereotypes that are created according to simplistic representations derived from the Manichean view imposed by the patriarchal system.

It is impossible to know exactly how stereotypes were originated but psychology can help us to understand better the functioning of human mind in this respect. In particular, the Jungian theory on archetypes could provide us a suitable explanation to this phenomenon. In his work *Psychological Types*, the psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung explains that archetypes are forms of innate human knowledge transmitted from our ancestors which are stored in our collective unconscious. Jung distinguishes four main archetypes; however, the

concept that is most relevant for this analysis is the one that he defines *anima* or *animus*. According to Jung, the *anima* is a feminine image in the male psyche and the *animus* is a male image in the female psyche. In brief, Jung believes that the collective unconscious contains notions about sex roles.

Archetypes can easily overlap with stereotypes that, in social psychology, are considered the conventional and reductive assumptions about a particular group of people. The most common stereotypes concern gender, race, culture, group of individuals and sex behaviour and, even if they are not essentially negative, they can often degenerate into prejudices and, in some occasions, they can become an actual weapon in the hands of the dominant groups. In fact, the most common consequence of this kind of discourse is the so-called 'stereotype threat' that refers to the situation in which people conform to the stereotypes assigned to them, thus accepting the prejudice as true. The most dangerous aspect of stereotypes is that the domination of one group generally entails the use of some kind of violence and the lack of rights of the dominated.

For a long time, the traditions upon which our civilizations are constructed have depicted women as physically and intellectually inferior than men and, consequently, have shaped our vision of the world. Hence, the patriarchal system has become so deeply rooted in our unconscious that it is already normative in most cultures. The French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu explains that the masculine domination is a prime example of symbolic violence, meaning the invisible and pervasive violence exercised through the everyday practices of social life that becomes part of one's way of thinking. Besides the symbolic violence, there is as well a structural violence implemented through institutions like school, justice or the political system. These two different types of violence reinforce each other and are central to patriarchy, which uses them as its main weapons in order to construct and spread its doctrine.

A complete overview on this type of discourse should also include the economic and historical aspects that influence it; in fact, in times of major social and political transition, the status of women is usually negatively affected. To remain in the periods relevant to this investigation, I will concentrate only on two particular transition phases. The first one started in the fifteenth century and

continued throughout the sixteenth century, when the end of feudalism and the emergence of the capitalist system established a clear separation between enterprises as production places and families as reproduction places, relegating women to domestic activities. The second one occurred during the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, when the middle class emerged establishing a new model of ideal family where men constituted the productive part and women the unproductive one. Afterwards, industrial capitalism has crystallized this model because the unpaid work of women has been fundamental to ensure the development of its system.

Therefore, it is evident that patriarchy has constructed its discourse following always the same type of narration that contemplates only two possible outcomes: women who accepted the rules were classified into the positive stereotypes and received their recompense, generally in the form of the marriage with a beautiful and wealthy hero (see *Miranda* and *Jane Eyre*); while, those women who did not conform were punished and condemned to abandonment and oblivion (see *Sycorax* and *Bertha Mason*). The main weapon of the patriarchal order has been misogyny used to control, police, punish and exile those women who challenged male dominance (Manne 13). In this way, this system has ensured its own power eliminating any possible rivalry and impeding women from developing their capacities because, fundamentally, men fear that women could use their power to overturn their social order. As Kate Millet wrote in her pioneer work *Sexual Politics*: “If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women” (42). The feminist criticism has demonstrated over and over again that literature has been used as a tool to perpetrate the symbolic violence of the dominant discourse and to make invisible the female oppression. One of the most common strategies has been the representation of an unreal image of ‘eternal feminine’ that denies the female difference and resistance (de la Concha 12).

In this essay, I have verified that there are few slight differences between the representations of nonconformist women during the Jacobean period and the Victorian era. The stigmatization of both *Sycorax* and *Bertha Mason* is based upon misogyny and a general negative stereotype used in each

corresponding period to condemn the rebellious women. Thus, at the end, it seems that literature can serve as one of the numerous tools of the social system to spread its ideology. However, the ambivalence and the contradictions that emerge from these texts, also reveal the social tensions present in the society of both epochs and the fact that behind the patriarchal, colonial and dominant discourses there is always a space, even if it is minimal, for the expression of a dissenting message against it.

6. Conclusions

The close reading and analysis of *The Tempest* and *Jane Eyre* focused on the characters of Sycorax and Bertha Mason has been a very enriching and satisfying experience to me. It has been necessary to study in depth not only literary criticism, but also psychology, history, philosophy and sociology theories in order to have a complete vision on the theme of female stereotypes and its literary representation. In particular, it has been very interesting to examine the mechanisms behind the dominant discourses and the intersectionality of power, gender and race.

I will like to conclude with a final reflection on the current situation on the condition of women in our society. In the era of social media, it is still common to detect environments in which women are bullied and harassed and online aggressions towards women in our days still reinforce traditional feminine norms and stereotypes. Indeed, the most common slurs against women include those insulting their appearance, intellect, sexual experience, mental stability and age. There is a lot of work to be done to eliminate the misogyny in our society and, in general, all kind of inequalities derived from gender, race or both.

In 1978, the great African American writer Maya Angelou wrote the poem "And Still I rise." This poem transmits a powerful message of hope and survival that continues nowadays to reach readers cutting across racial lines and national boundaries. These puissant words give voice to all the Sycoraxes and Bertha Masons that are still struggling against the stereotypes of a misogynistic system that wants them to be obedient, silenced and meek. The celebration of

the femininity in all its different aspects and angles should be the answer to the millenary oppression that tries once and again to erase the dignity, diversity and resilience of the marginalised half of the world.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

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