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The Marked and the Magic in *Prospero's Daughter*: Contextualizing Postmodern Witchcraft Accusations Using the Early Modern

Despite *Prospero's Daughter* having won Elizabeth Nunez a handful of awards and having been received positively by critics, little aside from reviews about the novel exists in the literary sphere. Several articles discuss her memoir or two of her novels, namely *Boundaries*, *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, and *When Rocks Dance*, but it is challenging to find literary criticism about *Prospero's Daughter*, let alone in reference to witchcraft and magic. This essay provides that literary criticism, placing it in context with historical research on early modern witchcraft theory. Although Nunez's novel is a postmodern Shakespeare adaptation centered in 1960s Trinidad, it contains depictions of witchery and magic consistent with those of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witch trial records, demonology, Christian teachings of the time, and cultural anthropological and historical research. My analysis of *Prospero's Daughter*, in featuring a reframing of witchcraft-related issues like sexuality, poisoning, and witch's marks, bridges the scholarly gap between early modern historical past and postcolonial literary present. This paper explores how the aforementioned issues appear in main characters like Sylvia, Gardner, and Carlos, and was written to provide an updated perspective on witchcraft in literary scholarship for others who are intrigued by Nunez's depictions.

Among other things, *Prospero's Daughter* by Elizabeth Nunez provides something the Shakespeare play she adapted does not: detailed description and dimension for Caliban's mother. While Nunez's novel offers much to examine—including but not limited to issues of sexual abuse, racism, social hierarchies, colonization, love, and representation of gender—what intrigues me most is the language about magic in it. However, significantly less scholarship exists on *Prospero's Daughter* compared to *The Tempest*, let alone writing on how witchcraft appears in this Nunez novel (as far as I found from searches on five literary databases). The analysis I present exists to fill the gap in scholarship not only about Nunez's work, but also about its connections to research done by witchcraft historians like Michael D. Bailey, Edward Bever, and Julia M. Garrett. Although Nunez's novel is a postmodern Shakespeare adaptation centered in 1960s Trinidad, it contains depictions of witchery and magic consistent with those of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witch trial records, demonology, Christian teachings of the time, and cultural anthropological and historical research. These images and language appear in different ways than they did four and five centuries ago, but they are undoubtedly present in *Prospero's Daughter*. Because of the resurfacing of these elements, I suggest that Nunez's novel provides an at first subtle yet increasingly powerful link between early modern historical past and postcolonial literary present. My analysis examines witchcraft in relation to sexuality, poisoning, and witch's marks, and I explore how each of these elements of Early Modern European witch trials and anti-demonic teachings appear in interactions between and memories of Sylvia, Gardner, Carlos, Ariana, and Virginia (not necessarily in that order). In writing these connections, I contribute a more modern literary perspective to witchcraft studies for others who wish to examine it within the context of Nunez's novel.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although it may at first seem irrelevant or beside the point to review the history of witchcraft beginning seven centuries or so ago, I argue the contrary. We must go back to medieval trends in lore and law, tracing them alongside developments in Christian thought. Doing this not only helps us understand how and why accusations of witchcraft and trials peaked in the Early Modern Period, but also why our friends and neighbors don't try to publicly accuse us of being penetrated by the devil. Modern-day society lacks magic because of the following timeline.

*Contextualizing the Early Modern Period.* Let's start not at the beginning but at the point where witchcraft as we know it began to take shape. In his article "The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature," witchcraft historian Michael D. Bailey chronicles how meanings of magic and acceptable forms of it developed and conflicted before the Reformation (a cultural shift historians and cultural anthropologists have consistently used as a reference point). He explains that one key dilemma among witchcraft theorists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was how to differentiate between spells and rituals performed by common people and *maleficium*, or magic intended to cause harm. Bailey says that by the early 1400s, though, it had been decided that witches got all power from demons by "surrendering themselves entirely to [them], entering into pacts with them, and worshipping them as members of diabolical sects that gathered secretly to devour babies, desecrate sacraments, partake in sexual orgies, and perform terrible rites" (Bailey 386). In doing this, authorities denied the accused witches themselves of any agency, and later handed over whatever power they had to God, the force who granted divine (as opposed to demonic) agency (386). As Bailey puts it, "Prayers and approved blessings drew on divine power, while magic spells relied on demons (394). Because witches' powers originated in the demonic, their actions were interpreted as innately evil, despite their abilities to cure illnesses and heal people

(390). Additionally, many rituals and rites that may or may not have been witchcraft involved Latin phrases used in religious ceremonies. This produced a fear of demonic invocation by accidentally butchering the language; any mistake could be perceived as a desire to summon a demon (395-99). Lastly, the methods for identifying witches were also inconsistent in the centuries before the Early Modern Period, which contributed to further disagreement over what actually constituted witchcraft (389).

*Early Modern Witchcraft and Beyond.* Edward Bever, in his article “Witchcraft Prosecutions and the Decline of Magic,” differentiates between the classes in his summary of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Commoners, he says, were more concerned with *maleficium*, while the wealthy concerned themselves with diabolism. By the end of the seventeenth century, the beliefs of elites across Europe shifted to presenting both the existence of magic and the devil as fictitious. But this shift, Bever says, was not just about a belief in witchcraft. Rather, what he calls the “crisis of confidence” in witch persecutions was part of a greater “crisis of authority” that began in the mid-1600s (Bever 263-5). The first half of the sixteenth century saw simultaneously a strengthening in witch demonology and theory and increasing skepticism about witches’ supernatural powers, explanations for them, and the legal processes followed in their persecution. Despite theorists’ skepticism, their questioning functioned to *increase* concerns about witchcraft in Early Modern Europe (267). One factor that contributed to the easing of those concerns and signified doubt in the dangers posed by witchcraft was a move toward a more equitable (as we might call it today) court system. For example, there was an increase in lawyers defending the accused (275). After decades of these types of judicial changes, the rise of philosophers and physicists, and a general Christian regret for having performed violent witch

hunts, “Witchcraft had gone from being a live issue in a learned discourse to a disreputable relic of the past” (Bever 277-80).

#### *PROSPERO'S DAUGHTER* AND WITCHCRAFT

Now that I have established the historical context of witchcraft trials, accusations, and theory, we can respond to the following question: Why is this history relevant to *Prospero's Daughter*? It is vital for me to note here that I will not be addressing what other scholars have done, which is focus on the Prospero in Nunez's novel. I will be analyzing him in relation to other characters, but Gardner is not the source of witchery I wish to discuss because he exemplifies conventional notions of magic. With his star-splattered red cape, sinister centaur-topped staff, and mysterious book, he is the stereotypical magician. It is these descriptors that make me uninterested in him as a character who is or performs magic. This analysis will also not be exploring obeah, despite the setting of Nunez's novel, because the practices are separate from the characteristics of early modern witch trials, accusations, and witchcraft theory I elaborate on below. In the following pages, I aim to identify the parallels between actions, knowledge, and appearances associated with early modern witchcraft theory and *Prospero's Daughter*. In other words, each character I include does, knows, or is something that would get him or her accused of witchcraft in the early seventeenth century.

*Sexual Knowledge and Deviance.* Sex in *Prospero's Daughter* is complicated. It is fitting, then, that the sexual historical implications of early modern witch trials also generated confusion. As Julia M. Garrett asserts in her article “Witchcraft and Sexual Knowledge in Early Modern England,” religious authorities spent much of their time worrying about how the body--more specifically, the female body--was susceptible to becoming a site of demonic penetration. In the greater scheme of things, Garrett says, the emphasis on sexuality in witch trials can be “understood as a conflicted expression of male authorities' own sexual longings, which could be

conveniently projected onto witch figures,” and represent the general confusion and even fear around the female body (Garrett 34-39). This is where Sylvia, Carlos, Gardner, Virginia, Mumsford, and Ariana come in. When Mumsford first questions Gardner about his daughter’s relationship with Carlos, he refers to “fire i’ th’ blood,” “sexual passion,” and “carnal lust” (Nunez 65). He uses language that enforces his sexual knowledge, mirroring the kind of exploration of sexuality and desire that would appear in questioning of an early modern witch trial victim. Later, when Ariana is questioned, she reveals sexual knowledge of her own: She tells Mumsford that her encounters with Gardner got more intense when Virginia “turn woman.” Nunez writes that Mumsford moves his chair, tries to hide his discomfort by shuffling papers, and “[can] feel sweat oozing from his pores” (112). This image is remarkably consistent with early modern cultural trends, the first being that female bodies were thought to hold secrets, especially where reproductive organs or processes were concerned, and the second that such things were not supposed to be discussed anyway (Garrett 39). Mumsford wanting to understand the chronology of events on Chacachacare but not really being able to discuss graphic (or mundane, depending on whose view) of womanhood mirrors these two trends. Although Ariana’s frankness makes him uncomfortable, her responses provide him with more knowledge of the female body in question.

But witchcraft discourse, both historically and in Nunez’s novel, does more than highlight a desire for sexual and anatomical knowledge; it also provides the language for discussing those who are sexually deviant (Garrett 34-5). The line that inspired me to explore witchcraft (and was the original title for this paper) reads: “My father thought my mother bewitching; Gardner called her a witch” (Nunez 141). But why is this? Why does Gardner turn to this word to justify his contempt for Carlos? Notably, this line contains some of the most explicit

language around witchcraft in Nunez's novel. There are references to how Gardner may be or use magic, but here is the only place “witch” appears; everywhere else, Sylvia gets “blue-eyed hag” from Gardner. I offer that this is because for him, Sylvia represents a form of sexual deviance. As a wealthy English woman who not only fell in love with a poor black fisherman but also bore his child, Sylvia is a model for what Gardner believes should not be done. One could even argue that Sylvia willingly having sex with Carlos Sr. is exactly the submission of a woman’s body to the devil I described above. Either way, when examining Sylvia’s relationship with Carlos’ father through a witchcraft theory lens, the “witch” moniker makes sense for Gardner’s beliefs.

*Poisoning, Contamination, and Positions of Power.* The parallels between Early Modern witchcraft accusations involving poisoning and *Prospero’s Daughter* center around food, specifically how coming in contact with disease-carrying ingredients could function to poison the body. One of Gardner’s first acts of takeover at the late Sylvia’s house is cutting down all of the fruit trees around it. He enlists the assistance of a local fisherman to saw at the trunks of coconut, mango, avocado trees and more, until “not a single one of the trees [Carlos’s] father had planted” remains (Nunez 128-9). Whether Gardner knows who planted these trees is uncertain, but Nunez makes it clear that his desire to eliminate them is rooted (pun intended) in his fear of disease. Like how Carlos’s presence serves as a constant reminder of Sylvia’s interracial marriage, the trees tease him with their potential to bring contaminated material (fruit) into the house. In Edward Bever’s article “Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community,” the witchcraft historian emphasizes that while witchcraft accusers were of either gender, the trend of the accused being mostly female made it so the “trials served to diminish women’s power and strengthen men’s” (Bever 975). This uneven power distribution gets reflected in Nunez’s novel. Carlos recalls that in the midst of Gardner trying to establish

dominance in the house, he distances himself and Virginia from the Trinidadians by not eating in the same room as them (Nunez 129). Gardner separates his body and plate from the people who may be motivated to poison him, simultaneously highlighting his fear and attempting to demonstrate his power by taking meals in another place.

Gardner's apprehension toward and fear of foreign substances becomes even more apparent when he orders Ariana to keep removing spices from her cooking. Carlos remembers that his mother learned to cook like Caribbean women when she lived in Algiers, and Ariana had learned similar techniques from Lucinda before she died (Nunez 145-8). At first, Gardner appears satisfied with his diet, until he begins removing all Trinidadian flavor and produce from it: "Little by little our food changed. Our only seasonings were salt and black pepper ... No tropical fruits were allowed in the house, and the fruits we were permitted to have could not be eaten raw" (149-50). His justification, like it was for cutting down the trees around the house, is preventing everyone (specifically Virginia) from poisoning their bodies with disease. Since, according to Carlos, Gardner begins making changes to the household diet even before Lucinda has died, they act as further evidence for how he uses notions of contaminated food to gain power. Bever paraphrases arguments made by historian Ingrid Ahrendt-Schulte, who says witchcraft was more than fantasy and served practical revenge purposes: "poisons could be used to kill an abusive husband or, in one specific case she discusses, a powerful male relative involved in a property dispute" (Bever "Witchcraft, Female Aggression" 959). We can apply this line of thinking to Gardner and suggest that by removing the "poison" (native produce and spices in this case) from a home he wants to be his, Gardner confirms how he feels threatened. Bever also notes the abundance of poisoning in witchcraft accusations, which makes Gardner's wariness and fear consistent with early modern thought. This postmodern fictitious version of a



witchcraft accusation provides him with a means of getting power or at least removing it from Sylvia by forbidding anything resembling her cooking.

*Witch's and Devil's Marks.* Another cause for witchcraft accusations in Early Modern England was the presence of a witch's mark. Many scholars over the centuries have engaged in what I call the "blue-eyed hag" debate, in which they try to determine the meaning of Sycorax having "blue eyes" using the connotations available to Shakespeare and his audience (one of them being Leah Marcus in the introduction to her book *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton*). Sylvia's blue eyes do serve as a racial marker in Nunez's novel, but they are not cause for debate, as the language Nunez uses allows for only one interpretation of "blue eyes," the color of the iris. So, this section focuses on Carlos, whose scars, penis, and freckles prompt reactions from others that mirror those of five centuries ago. In her article on witchcraft and sexual knowledge, Garrett distinguishes between "witch's marks" and "devil's marks." The former can be thought of as a third nipple from which demons could suck, and the latter a brand on the trial victim. In early modern discourse and witchcraft theory, though, these two marks were not always clarified or separated (Garrett 37). Using clarification provided by Garrett, I will explore Carlos' scars from mosquito bites and his penis as witch's marks and his freckles as Devil's marks, the references to which occur in reverse chronological order.

I begin by considering the mosquito bites Carlos receives from being caged by Gardner toward the end of Nunez's novel. The key here is a firm understanding of the difference between witch's and Devil's marks and the connotations of them. Garrett includes explanation from scholar Jeffrey Russell, who says: "The Devil's mark is sometimes confused with the witch's mark, a protuberance on the skin thought to be a small teat used for suckling familiars, and which is not mentioned before 1480" (Jeffrey Russell, qtd. in Garrett 50). Key terms here are

“protuberance,” “teat,” and “suckling” when talking about Carlos’ mosquito bites. When Virginia is reunited with Carlos after being tormented by Gardner and her being questioned by Mumsford, she sees the “red, raw bumps around his ears, his nose, climbing up his neck” (Nunez 299). Readers know from this line that the bites are raised and in visible places on Carlos’ body. Virginia also notes how they appear “on every inch of his skin” (300). To compare them to teats and adapt them for the male body, we have to get a little more creative, but the parallel still exists in some form. In this iteration of witch’s marks, the mosquitos are the demons and their bites are the teats that act as evidence of demonic suckling. If we follow the logic that more contact with the diabolic makes one more firmly a witch, then Carlos’ demon-mosquito teats would increase his likelihood of a witchcraft accusation tenfold.

In addition to mosquito bites, Carlos has a second witch’s mark: his penis. Based on the language used to discuss it and how Ariana treats Carlos for his “teeny, weeny little thing,” the boy’s penis becomes further justification for a potential witchcraft accusation. Garrett explains how in many of the accounts she analyzed, “the incriminating mark turns out to be a small protrusion near the woman’s ‘fundament’ or ‘privy place,’ suggesting that in many of these cases, the exposure of a woman’s genitalia may have served as evidence sufficient to send her to death” (Garrett 37). Ariana definitely does not go so far as to suggest Carlos should be put to death for his penis; she just associates the size of it with maleness and attractiveness here, later emphasizing how girls will not like him because it is too small (Nunez 143). Carlos’ self-talk about his penis shifts over two pages from not recognizing it as any different from a vagina to seeing it as “a knob lying limp next to my scrotum” (143). The way he describes it, his sex organ could visually represent a seventeenth-century witch’s mark. While Carlos is not a woman, which means his penis does not generate the mystery, fear, or suspicion a vagina would, we can

apply a different element of Garrett's argument to his situation. The exposure of Carlos' penis generates curiosity and inspires conversation (more ridicule in Ariana's case), which correlates with the historian's assertion that witchcraft discourse inspired both sexes to question sexuality and aided in the acquisition of sexual knowledge (Garrett 37). It causes Carlos to question and explore his own genitalia, whereas before he had never thought of his body as different. His penis is not the only naturally occurring mark he has, however.

Carlos' freckles provide a bodily parallel to Devil's marks. Jeffrey Russell provides the following definition: "The Devil's mark was a small scar, birthmark, or other discoloration presumed to have been left upon the body by his talon" (Jeffrey Russell, qtd. in Garrett 50). Carlos recalls how Virginia and Gardner presented his freckles in opposing ways, the former as marks he has and the latter as what make him. Identifying notions of being "freckled" versus having "freckles" first becomes a way for Carlos to figure out who cares for him, but also provides a space for witchcraft discourse. The boy is born with them, so that satisfies the birthmark component of Russell's definition of Devil's marks. Equally important is that they be established as different from the witch's marks Russell also defines. Virginia distinguishes between witch's and Devil's marks when she and Carlos are reunited. She notes that the mosquito bites on Carlos reach "up his neck and in between the brown freckles that I loved" (Nunez 299). While both are marks present on his face, the difference lies in that one type is visibly dark and the other is visibly raised. This parallels the descriptions of each mark as detailed above, and cements Carlos as a target for witchcraft accusations.

## CONCLUSION

I have explored the history behind the rise and fall of witchcraft accusations in Europe and connected that timeline to Elizabeth Nunez's *Prospero's Daughter*. I explained that while Gardner is the only character in the novel we see doing magic (or at least attempting to), several

other characters act in ways or have knowledge of things that would justify a witchcraft accusation in the Early Modern Period. The treatment of sexuality, “poisons,” and witch’s marks in *Prospero’s Daughter* parallel witchcraft theory that circulated among religious authorities and the elite. In pointing out the similarities between these two types of literature, I suggest that not only is witchcraft theory an important historical element to study in the context of postmodern fiction, but also that witchcraft accusations still exist five centuries after their decline, just in a different form. Nunez’s work is simultaneously a mirror of and a contemporary response to Shakespeare’s original play. Her Prospero/Gardner wears a cape and carries a mysterious book, making him an obvious source of magic that has carried over from *The Tempest*. Where Nunez situates her new magic, dispersed more evenly across multiple characters, indicates a positioning of witchcraft unique to what theorists discussed centuries ago.

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