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A NEW VOICE FOR SYCORAX: ULTIMA IN RUDOLFO  
ANAYA'S *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*

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# A NEW VOICE FOR SYCORAX: ULTIMA IN RUDOLFO ANAYA'S *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*

## ABSTRACT

The embodiment of Sycorax in other female characters from novels that offer an alternative view to the hegemonic is essential for the disarticulation of patriarchal discourses and practices. For that, feminist postcolonial criticism is the most useful framework to bring to light texts which reproduce Western visions of the world, especially those which undercut racialised women. The present study looks closely at witchcraft in *The Tempest* and *Bless Me, Ultima* and explores how the author's cultural and social context determines discourse and plays an essential role in the representation of female characters, events, and practices, in order to give the word *bruja* a new meaning.

**KEY WORDS:** Decolonial feminism; Sycorax; bruja; curandera; Rudolfo Anaya

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*"I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio. Always have the strength to live. Love life, and if despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills, I shall be with you—" (Anaya, 247)*

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation and outline

I first came across the postcolonial readings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) in the course *Ejes de la Literatura Medieval y Renacentista*. At the time, I thought them very necessary, as I myself had found the play rather unsettling from a feminist and anticolonial point of view. Seeing as Shakespeare is probably one of the most read authors in the world in English courses throughout secondary and higher education, I wondered whether most of them would present or encourage an alternative reading to its students.

The influence Shakespeare continues to have is indisputable, as it is also indisputable that literature written from or in countries with a history of colonialism has many difficulties making it in the reading lists of courses other than specifically feminist or postcolonial. To my view, this needs to change, as one of the consequences of focusing English courses on English canonical texts is that it continues to reproduce a Eurocentric vision of the world, which puts white heterosexual males at the top of the pyramid, therefore leaving on the side-lines all other literature and in turn perpetuating a patriarchal society. *The Tempest* (1611) is a good example of such dynamic, for it marginalises a black witch and a slave, and that is why it is important to continue singling out these characters and give them a voice of their own for they embody different struggles.

Of course, this has been an object of study for quite some time now. Nevertheless, most of the postcolonial readings of *The Tempest* have centred on the character of Caliban, as Irene Lara points out in *Beyond Caliban's Curses: The Decolonial Feminist Literacy of Sycorax* (80).<sup>1</sup> In this essay, she calls for a 'literacy of Sycorax' which looks to research 'the voices and experiences of women who are similar to the fictional Sycorax' (81):

Absolute accuracy of representation may not be possible, nor is it necessarily the goal. My humble aim is to encourage us, at the very least, to imagine the possibilities of "her" missing or distorted subjectivity in the

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a problem particular to this play, but rather a general tendency within postcolonial criticism to relegate gender to a marginal position as MacLeod explains in *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000) (ch. 6).

modern-colonial imaginary and the ways that making “her” present may help us to better understand the unjust legacies of similar underrepresented and misrepresented subjects. (81)

In this essay, I plan to answer Lara’s call for a re-narration of Sycorax embodied in the character of Ultima, from Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). This study will start with a historical examination of the witch and witchcraft in Europe and Las Américas in order to subsequently analyse the role it plays in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611) and Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972).

It will then explore the differences between black and white magic throughout the works, comparing the dichotomy established between its characters. On the one hand, it shall look at the opposition between Sycorax and Prospero and how the play’s Eurocentrism *others* the female witch. On the other hand, it will review the binarism between brujas (witches) and curanderas (healers) from a historical perspective, and the consequences it has for the characters in Anaya’s novel.

Finally, it will show how Ultima’s story is an appropriate reimagination of Sycorax’s ‘as the story of the spiritually knowledgeable, racialized and sexualized healer who has been subjugated in the western colonial-modern imagination’ (Lara, *Beyond Caliban ’s Curses* 92), in order to reappropriate the figure of the witch/bruja as an empowering representation of a woman of wisdom.

## **1.2 General objectives and methodology**

Irene Lara’s call for a re-narration of Sycorax is key for many reasons. The first one is the need to continue putting gender on the agenda of postcolonial studies, for as Elleke Boehmer (qtd. in MacLeod) indicates: ‘Gender is still conventionally treated in a tokenistic way, or as a subsidiary to the category of race’ (MacLeod ch. 6). In response to the effect reading can have on feminism as a goal, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (qtd. in MacLeod) indicate that feminist readers conceive reading ‘as one of the sites in the struggle for change’ (MacLeod ch. 6), and that such readership might look in a text for things such as

'how [it] represents women, what it says about gender relations, [and] how it defines sexual difference'.

In that sense, feminist postcolonial criticism is the most useful framework to bring to light texts which reproduce Western visions of the world, especially those which undercut racialised women. On this point, this essay aims to explore how the author's cultural and social context determines discourse and plays an essential role in the representation of characters – particularly female –, events, and practices.

In her appeal for other experiences akin to Sycorax, Irene Lara is effectively embracing comparative studies as a valuable device to give voice to other literatures which speak from non-Western perspectives, and which often find it difficult to be heard. In relation to this, there are several works which have taken Sycorax's story and rewritten it from a gender perspective, and a lot has been written about it too. This is not, however, the case of *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). In spite of this, both stories share common elements such as magic realism, witchcraft or child-parent relationships – some portrayed similarly and others differently. In order to expose them, a comparative analysis will be used in all stages of this essay.

The second key reason is that the embodiment of Sycorax in other female characters from novels that offer an alternative view to the hegemonic is essential for the disarticulation of patriarchal discourses and practices. Reading itself can constitute a revolutionary act, especially when stories include inspirational characters which can become role models for female readers around the world, and in particular for those in/from countries with a history of colonialism.

The main purpose of this essay is to show that Sycorax *can* indeed speak through *Ultima* and be made present, as Rudolfo Anaya's novel enables us to see a similar character – a woman with powers – through much kinder eyes, yet still unveiling the injustice. By looking closely at witchcraft, we will see how the mere dichotomy of black and white magic continues to be problematic for its demonisation of women, which will lead us to the ultimate aim of reappropriating the figure of 'la bruja' (the witch) as an empowered, powerful woman.

## 2 A historical review of witchcraft in Europe and Las Américas

### 2.1 A feminist vindication

Folklore and literature around the world – particularly in Western societies and those with a history of European colonialism – is full of examples of witches depicted as malignant old women surrounded by slimy and often repulsive animals who either serve as ingredients for terrible spells or are their only known company in the solace of their home. They are capable of the most evil deeds - which might even include eating children – and their role within the story is always that of the antagonist: they exist to threaten and prevent a happy ending between a prince and a princess, two lovers, or the reunion of a family (always within heteronormativity).

Far from fiction, witches *have* existed in very similar terms to those described. Thousands of real women have been accused, prosecuted and executed for the most outrageous crimes which were often indeed associated with using animals, eating children, and preventing marriages. But if we look closely at the characterisation of the witch, what it stands for, and what it is described to fight against, it is easy to understand why it has become an icon of feminist movements worldwide – the witch engenders the fight against patriarchy. Strong, old, wise, sexual, accepting of her body, independent, rebellious, untameable – everything that a princess is not. Thanks to feminism, things have finally started to change for the witches and *brujas* everywhere.

In her book, *Caliban and the Witch. Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), Silvia Federici explains how ‘feminists came to the realisation that hundreds of thousands of women could only have been massacred and cruelly tortured because they presented a challenge to the power structure’ (221)<sup>2</sup>. In line with this, Federici cites the example of W.I.T.C.H (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), an organised network of autonomous feminist groups which was key in the beginning of the women’s liberation movement in the US in the late 1960s. One of the leaflets written by the

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<sup>2</sup> All translations to Silvia Federici’s work are mine.



New York group describes how witches were the first practitioners of birth control and abortions (idem):

‘They were women who dared to be courageous, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformist, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary [...] WITCH lives and laughs in every woman. She is the free part in each one of us [...] You are a witch because you are a woman, indomitable, livid, bright and immortal’ (Morgan qtd. in Federici).

Although it is impossible to know the exact number of people that were killed during witch hunts, studies show that the number of males killed represented only a minority. Therefore, it is undeniable to say that rather than witchcraft per se, women were the real target. Federici argues that in the 16th and 17th centuries, women lost power in all areas of social life and were socially degraded by means of establishing their inferiority to men. They were portrayed as unstable, lustful, and dependent, and the image of the nagging, dreadful wife, along with the ‘witch’ and the ‘whore’ became very popular among literature (idem 155). Coinciding with the end of the witch-hunts in Europe, we start to find women in literature defined in quite opposite terms: the perfect wife and woman, passive, obedient, and non-intrusive in male affairs (idem 157).

Yet this process of otherisation of women in Europe is parallel to that suffered by the peoples of newly colonised territories around the world, both in reality and in literature. European colonisers used the same strategy of demonisation in order to justify enslavement as well as the invasion of territories and the appropriation of land and resources. The first texts of North American literature are excellent examples of this, with John Smith, William Bradford or Mary Rowlandson offering – despite their differences – a similar portrayal of natives as ruthless savages. Of course, this is also the case of one of the works which this study focuses on, *The Tempest*, where we find the vilification of both a witch and a slave.

Although witch-hunts were a worldwide phenomenon – precisely because of colonisation – there are some differences in the definition, practices, and persecution of witchcraft in Europe and Las Américas.

## 2.2 Witchcraft in Europe

In their famous work *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (1973) Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English indicate that witch-hunting lasted from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (7). So, as Federici wisely points out, contrary to popular belief witchcraft was in fact not persecuted during the superstitious Dark Ages but rather at the beginning of the Modern Age. The first witch trials actually began in the middle of the 15th century in a time of social revolts (225), and according to Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon accusations 'probably stemmed from the need to explain the economic, political or religious upheavals which occurred with increasing intensity from the fifteenth century onwards' (175) such as the start of capitalism, mass peasant revolts, and the ascension of Protestantism (Ehrenreich and English 8).

The belief and discussion of magic, heretics, and evil spirits was present long before the beginning of the witch-craze, but it was during the 15th century that a total of twenty-eight witchcraft treaties were written (Monter qtd. in Federici 225), the most famous of which is the *Malleus Maleficarum* or Hammer of Witches, written in 1486 by Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer 'Institoris', two inquisitors who made of witch-hunts their life project, and who received the support of Pope Innocent VIII, who issued the Papal Bull 'Summis desiderantes affectibus' (1484) by which the Church recognised the need to fight witchcraft (Schuyler 20). Here follows a short description of a witch's power:

'They raise hailstorms and hurtful tempests and lightnings; cause sterility in men and animals; offer to devils, or otherwise kill, the children whom they do not devour. They make horses go mad under their riders; they can transport themselves from place to place through the air, either in body or in imagination; they can affect Judges and Magistrates so that they cannot hurt them; they can cause themselves and others to keep silence under torture; they can turn the minds of men to inordinate love or hatred; they can at times strike whom they will with lightning, and even kill some men and animals; they can make of no effect the generative desires, and even the power of copulation, cause abortion, kill infants in the mother's womb by a mere exterior touch; they can at times bewitch men and animals with

a mere look without touching them, and cause death; they dedicate their own children to devils.' (Kramer and Sprenger qtd. in Schuyler 25).

In *The Malleus Maleficarum and the construction of witchcraft. Theology and popular belief* (2003), Hans Peter Broedel explains how this book played a key role in the definition of the European witch and its link with evil, and explains the different parts included in it: the need to demonstrate the existence of witchcraft and its consequent threat, a broad range of remedies against it, and a guide for authorities – both civil and within the Church – to successfully detect and prosecute witches (3-4).

Something extremely important to take into consideration when talking about witch-hunts in Europe, is the involvement of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches alike. Despite the opposition of Protestantism to the Inquisition, they took the aforementioned book as their guidebook against witchcraft. According to Anderson and Gordon, Protestantism did not seem to break with the earlier Church in their assumptions about the position of women and continued to consider them innately inferior, besides they 'too exhibited a marked tendency to see women as especially amenable to the allures of Satan' (174). All the credit to the view that women – because of their inferiority and evilness – were instruments of the devil, was then due to the Church (Power qtd. in Anderson and Gordon 173).

The conception of the devil itself changed, as in earlier centuries he had been represented as a powerless creature under magicians' orders, but during the witch-hunts, the devil came to be in control with the witch now being her slave and servant (Federici 257). The sexual politics behind witch-hunting was so obvious that even when women were conducting evil, they were not active independent subjects but objects to a male superior.

Needless to say, the scapegoating of women was only possible due to the low position in society that women held at the time as a result of 'a powerful framework of denigrating beliefs relating to women which those who constructed the stereotype witch and initiated the moral panics could draw upon in a credible way' (Anderson and Gordon 174).

Over the period of witch-hunting, witchcraft as a crime involved a great variety of sins, but it was indisputable to the writers of the *Malleus* that 'a greater multitude of witches is found among the weaker sex of women than among men' (Kramer and Sprenger qtd. in Broedel 167). The majority of witches were old women who did not have many resources and lived alone, and as Ehrenreich and English point out, three types of accusations are seen repeatedly: female sexuality, organisation, and healing (10).

As for the first accusation, according to the Church it was through sexuality how they got their power. Their initiation ritual consisted in engaging in a sexual relationship with the devil himself during the witches' Sabbath. This was presided by him – usually in the shape of a goat – and after intercourse took place, witches agreed to serve him and got their powers in return (idem 11-12). Besides this ceremony, sexuality was also crucial evidence in the prosecution of witches. All the women who enjoyed their sexuality outside marriage and/or did not abide by the established rules imposed by society or by the Church, were effectively seen and persecuted for witchcraft (Federici 254). In addition, women were accused of arousing excessive passion in men, and so if these happened to be involved in adultery, they could justify their actions by saying it was the result of a curse (idem 262).

The second type of accusation involved being organised in any way, whether in peasant organisations, local festivals, or at the witches' Sabbaths. An organised witch was much more dangerous than one who acted alone (Ehrenreich and English 12). Seeing as witchcraft was a crime mostly committed by the lower classes, it would make sense that those at the opposite end of society would be afraid of any revolts, so criminalisation proved the best way to keep them tamed – a very familiar strategy to colonisers as well.

The last accusation concerns midwives and healers. Ehrenreich and English cite in their text an important English witch-hunter:

'For this must always be remembered, as a conclusion, that by witches we understand not only those which kill and torment, but all Diviners Charmers, Jugglers, all Wizards, commonly called wise men and wise women...and in the same number we reckon all good Witches, which do

no hurt but good, which do not spoil and destroy, but save and deliver... It were a thousand times better for the land if all Witches, but especially the blessing Witch, might suffer death' (qtd. in Ehrenreich and English 12-13).

Midwives and healers were the doctors of the lower classes of the time, and they presented a threat to the establishment, for the people relied on them in time of sickness, instead of on the Church. In their eyes, all magic cures carried out by these witches were the work of the devil (idem 13-14).

All in all, it is unarguable that witch-hunting was without a doubt a campaign orchestrated against lower class women by both the Church and the State in order to annihilate any sort of power women had at the time, either by ostracising women's sexuality, crashing peasant revolts, or retaking authority over medicine and birth control. The main prosecutors were the State and lower forms of civil government, but without the Church's ideological apparatus it hardly would have prospered the way it did. It must not be forgotten that even at a time of religious conflict, witch-hunting was prosecuted in Europe by Catholic and Protestant nations alike, reinforcing the idea that women were the real target. Finally, the characterisation of European witchcraft defined at the time lasted for centuries – it is still present today – and was transported to colonised territories with fewer casualties but with the dismemberment and extermination of native cultures.

### **2.3 Witchcraft in Las Américas**

When the Spaniards colonised the Americas, they imposed their form of government, customs, and religion, amongst other things. Within these, they also brought their ideas of witchcraft, as well as their superstitions and practices. On the one hand, the Inquisition took to the American continent the Eurocentric vision of the witch and its alliance with the devil which they had manufactured for so long. In addition, they labelled devilish everything that was not Christian and ostracised pre-Hispanic deities (Martínez González 2). On the other hand, Spanish settlers carried with them different sorts of witching practices and beliefs.

But before the arrival of the colonisers, the Americas already had ancestral magical traditions, which would of course suffer from a similar process of

criminalisation as that of the witches in Europe, with the most tragic part being that these were scrutinised and censored from a Eurocentric vision thus modifying and even annihilating certain figures and cultural practices almost completely. This is the case of the *nahualli*. According to Roberto Martínez, in Mesoamerica, a *nahualli* represents a double figure: on the one hand, normally an animal that is linked to a person's character and destiny – and whose death implies the death of the person – and on the other, someone who is capable of becoming that same creature (1). However, during the colonial process the witch and the *nahualli* came to signify the same: '[these] are two constructs which originally belonged to two completely different conceptual universes, and yet, they ended up converging under one same image' (idem 1). Following a similar procedure as that in Europe, the association of the *nahualli* with the witch would have been the result of the demonisation of everything which did not fit into the Christian imaginary. What is more, Christian evangelisation had fatal consequences for indigenous thought, since this connection as well as many other Eurocentric concepts permeated into it to the point of associating the *nahualli* with the devil (idem 7).

The kind of witchcraft found in Mexico and in the rest of the Americas was fairly similar to that found in Spain, and it was mostly love-oriented (Blázquez Miguel 12). As in Europe, the people – mostly women – who were accused of witchcraft and activities with the devil were part of the lower classes of society at the time. These included 'mestizos' – those with Indian and Spanish ancestors – 'blacks, mulattoes [...], Indians, and mixes of these groups' (Behar 35). The type of charges was usually related with love magic regarding sexuality and marriage, such as casting spells on lovers so they would not abandon them or cursing men who had been unfaithful. In most cases, the Inquisition treated this problem as something which could be dealt with through Church procedures (idem 34).

As stated in Ramón A. Gutiérrez's *Women on Top: The Love Magic of the Indian Witches of New Mexico*, the persecution of witchcraft in New Mexico responded to the needs of the Spanish New Mexicans and its authorities to control *mestizaje* amongst Spanish men and Indian women. In this work, Gutiérrez explains how Indian women being on top during the sexual act constituted one of the major accusations of witchcraft (377). Indian women were

thus prosecuted for reverting the established social order, and their crimes involved being sexually active, morally corrupt, violent, practicing black magic and making pacts with the devil (*idem* 378). All these accusations bear obvious resemblance to those made against women in the European witch craze. Another point in common with the European case is how in many cases the denouncers were men adulterers who blamed women witches and the devil himself for their sinful behaviour (*idem* 384).

Alike in Europe, the other main target of the Inquisition in the Americas were the healers/*curanderos*. Following a similar pattern as in the old continent, the existence of *curanderos* was necessary in order to supply medical care for the lower classes. The Spaniards had access to a legal medical system provided by the Spanish Crown, but mestizos, blacks, and Indians were visited and assisted by *curanderos*, although Spaniards often used them too (Quezada 37). Despite having an essential role at the time, *curanderos* were accused and prosecuted by the Inquisition for their use of magic – the use of herbs and hallucinogens – in treatments. In an identical case as in Europe, ecclesiastical and royal authorities looked to ensure that the only recognised faith and health systems were those represented by the official authorities (*idem* 38). However, the society of New Spain included several types of *curanderos*. Those from Spanish origin claimed to cure people with the help of God through revelations and possessions of deities and saints found in Catholicism, while Indians, mestizos, blacks and mulattoes followed their own ancestral and/or cultural practices, and although they could invoke Catholic divinities, pre-Hispanic ones were those that aided and guided *curanderos* in the process (*idem* 52).

In the case of *curanderos*, denunciation often came from either previous patients who were not happy with the results, or people who had been refused a cure. In other cases, the denouncers were patients who felt they had disobeyed the Catholic Church by recurring to the services of *curanderos* and looked for redemption (*idem* 46). This was also common with people who had sought the help of *brujas* or said to have witnessed acts of witchcraft done by other women. Overall, the fact that a lot of the accusations came from repentant people willing to confess their sins, speaks a lot of the overwhelming influence that the Inquisition exercised in the Americas throughout colonisation (Behar 36).

### 3 Witchcraft in *The Tempest* (1611) and *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972)

#### 3.1 White versus black magic: A Eurocentric binarism

In her essay *BRUJA POSITIONALITIES: Toward a Chicana/Latina Spiritual Activism* (2005) Irene Lara writes that the distinction between a bruja mala (bad witch) and a bruja buena (good witch) is a binarism that has been created by patriarchal dominant discourses, which are adamant on making us 'believe that [they] do not actually live in the borderlands, in the same interstitial spaces, quite possibly in the same bodies' (31). However, the focus of her essay, as well as of the present one, is to embrace the figure of la bruja as an assimilation of both elements in order to put an end to the dichotomy between 'darkness' and 'lightness' which is part of colonial discourse (idem 27). Through the present work, and in answer to another of her essays, I plan to give voice to Sycorax – a dark/bad witch – through *Ultima*, a bruja buena/curandera which I believe is an example of how both good and evil resides in every person. Lara cites Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa as she gives new meanings to 'dark' and 'light':

'Soy un *amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings (1987, 81).' (Anzaldúa qtd. in Lara, *BRUJA POSITIONALITIES* 27)

This determination on the division between good/bad, light/dark, white/black is inherent to colonialist discourse, and it is one of the key elements in the theory of Orientalism proposed by Edward Said. According to this theorisation, the world is divided between the Orient and the Occident, two opposites which, however, are not on equal terms since the West is superiorly positioned and constructs itself by positively comparing itself to the Orient, which is ostracised in all categories. The Orient is then a place of ignorance, violence, dirt, lust, sin, etc. – 'everything that the West is not' (MacLeod chapter 2). As we have seen earlier on, it is precisely by following this strategy of constructing binary oppositions that the Church and Imperialist powers were able to impose their ruling and doctrine in the Américas: everything that was not Catholic had an association with the devil.



In the case of witchcraft, this dichotomy evolves around white versus black magic. Following the dominant discourse that white/light is good, while black/dark is bad, *The Tempest* offers a strong example: Prospero – a white European wizard – represents white magic, while black magic is embodied by Sycorax – a black African witch. Yet even by just describing one of the characters as a *wizard* and the other one as a *witch* one naturally comes to the conclusion of which represents righteousness and which evil. In the case of *Bless Me, Ultima* the white/black magic dichotomy is (apparently) also present, with on the one hand Ultima representing white magic as a curandera – or even a bruja buena, following Irene Lara’s previous description – and the Trementina sisters embodying black magic on the other. Oddly enough, from a Eurocentric perspective this may sound contradictory, since as we have previously seen in the historical examination, both brujas and curanderas were historically persecuted by the Church and the State. Yet the existence of a bruja buena/mala dichotomy in las Américas can be seen as an example of how colonial discourse has permeated colonised societies in the construction and reinforcement of binary oppositions. This seems to prove Althusser’s theory on how ideologies are spread and internalised by human beings, integrating dominant discourses unconsciously and later reproducing them as theirs (Loomba qtd. in MacLeod Chapter 2). With regards to this, MacLeod writes how ideology assigns roles and identities which subjects internalise as truthful, despite its disempowering effects (Chapter 2), and for that reason it is vital that we challenge these dichotomies and encourage the reappropriation of terms and figures which are doomed, as is the case of the witch/bruja. One of the ways of doing that is through colonial discourse analysis. On this method, MacLeod points out how this type of analysis profoundly refuses the idea that literature exists beyond its historical context, and:

‘It situates texts in history by exposing how their ideological and historical contexts influence the production of meaning within literary texts, and how literary representations themselves have the power to influence their historical moment.’ (Chapter 2)

I believe this point is of utmost importance in the analysis of the works explored in the present study, and their treatment of witchcraft. While *The Tempest* is an example of the representation and perpetuation of Eurocentric or

Western values regarding witchcraft, femininity, and slavery, and can be analysed from a theory of Orientalism, *Bless Me, Ultima* cannot. This may seem like an obvious conclusion, simply because Rudolfo Anaya writes from a country with a history of colonialism, but it is a mistake to think that all writers who come from colonised societies systematically position themselves on the side of the oppressed. The reason behind my assertion lies in that although Anaya's novel – on the surface – seems to portray a clear fight between brujas and curanderas, Ultima displays traits from both types which makes her an intersitial character, an *amasamiento* in Anzaldúa's words, and therefore is an excellent example of simply *a bruja*. As a writer from a colonised land – from the Borderlands, in Anzaldúa's terms – Anaya is capable of situating characters in the liminality and breaking established dichotomies of good versus evil, because as a Chicano, the author himself belongs to this in-between space. That is why literature from the Borderlands is essential to deconstruct binary oppositions. However, before developing this point any further, let us analyse both works in detail.

### **3.2 *The Tempest*: Prospero versus Sycorax**

Magic in *The Tempest* is controlled by two characters, Prospero and Sycorax, who are described in opposite terms one representing good and the other evil. Prospero has a leading role in the play, as the story is told from his perspective, and represents a magician who has been unjustly wronged. Sycorax, on the contrary, is described as a 'foul witch' (Shakespeare 1.2.258), mother to Caliban. Yet her role in the play is relegated to the background as she is presented as dead, and we only hear from her through Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban. In light of this depiction, Ahmet Süner writes how Prospero's story mostly awakes feelings of sympathy towards him, making him 'a man more sinned against than sinning', while in the play the real evil force is Sycorax (187).

In order to demonstrate that *The Tempest* is an example of Orientalism, we will focus on three different categories: sex, place of birth, and the origin and use of their magic in order to prove that alike the West with the Orient, Prospero 'is presented as superior by positively comparing itself to'<sup>3</sup> Sycorax.

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<sup>3</sup> As cited on page 16 (MacLeod chapter 2).

The first dichotomy is that of sex, which is detrimental in the construction of the story because it foregrounds one of patriarchy's tenets: the male as strong, powerful and godly, and the female as weak, powerless and malicious. In the play, Prospero 'punishes, forgives, and restores to joy his former enemies. [...] [and] takes the place of the divine powers' (F. D. Hoeniger 33) while Sycorax is characterized in terms of foulness. According to Lara:

'Representing Sycorax as "foul" powerfully evokes a sense of her as "grossly offensive to the senses," "physically loathsome," "dirty-coloured, discoloured," "morally or spiritually polluted," "detestable," "wicked," "filthy, obscene," and "unclean" ("foul")' (Lara, *Beyond Caliban's Curses* 83).

In terms of sexuality and parenthood, Prospero is presented as a responsible single parent. Although Miranda's mother is not present in the play, she is described by Prospero as 'a piece of virtue' (Shakespeare 1.2.57). Besides, Miranda has been honoured with an excellent education:

'Here in this island we arrived, and here / Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit / Than other princesses can that have more time / For vainer hours and tutors not so careful' (1.2.171-174).

Sycorax, on the other hand, is described as having been left pregnant on the island by sailors, after having copulated with the devil himself in order to engender Caliban (1.2.319). Age is another distinctive element which is attached to the category of sex. Prospero is not only 'a benevolent intriguing magician, but markedly it is [...] an old man' (F.D. Hoeniger 34). Sycorax, on the other hand is described as 'a blue-eyed hag' (Shakespeare 1.2.269), reinforcing the stereotype of the wise old man versus the evil old woman.

The place of birth is another relevant category in their characterisation. Prospero, as the Duke of Milan, has royal blood and all the story revolves around the restoration of his position as such. Unlike other information – which is left to the reader's imagination – Sycorax's place of birth is deemed relevant to the story and her characterisation. 'Shakespeare integrates knowledge about Sycorax's origins in North Africa into this dialogue, associating her evil-doing with her racialized cultural alterity' (Lara, *Beyond Caliban's Curses* 84). Her African origin is then inherent and contributes to her wickedness.

Lastly, the origin of their powers and the use they make of them also differentiates both characters. Prospero is a man of learning who thrives around books and knowledge (Shakespeare 1.2.90, 1.2.165), a feeling so deep that makes him neglect royal duties and constitutes the reason why his dukedom is taken from him. Prospero's use of magic is justified as a means to an end: it is necessary to restore the injustice committed against him and his daughter. Yet:

'Prospero is willing to become reconciled only after the punishment and humiliation of his enemies: they must be worthy of the happy future he has in store for them. [...] in the play, the idea of a happy misfortune, a blessed wrong, or suffering for the sake of joy is given expression' (F. D. Hoeniger 35).

This, along with his enslavement and maltreatment of both Caliban and Ariel, make Prospero a tyrannic type of character whose methods of control and denigration of his subservient slaves are justified by his own misfortune. But then again, this justification is what absolves him of all sins and still allows him to embody good in the play.

The origin of Sycorax's magic lies in her 'earthly' powers (Shakespeare 1.2.273). According to Prospero, she is 'a witch, and one so strong / That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs, / And deal in her command without her power' (5.1.269-71). In relation to this, Lara writes how by giving Sycorax 'healer-witch' powers he is revealing his own fears against female knowledge, and thus connecting her wisdom to that of 'healers, midwives, sorceresses, and priestesses' (Lara, *Beyond Caliban's Curses* 84). And although these specialists might be seen from a feminist perspective as wise women, we know that – precisely because of their wisdom and power – in Europe they were the target of hundreds of accusations during the witch-craze. Not far from reality, in *The Tempest*, the link between female powers and evilness is implied by the same accusation of copulation with the devil, as well as by casting terrible spells – the majority of which remain unknown as she was deported from Algiers 'For mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible / To enter human hearing' (1.2.165). The only one we read of is that having put on Ariel by locking him in a tree for twelve years (1.2.278-279), which serves Prospero very well as an excuse to enslave

Ariel. All in all, it seems certain that Sycorax – as well as thousands of witches in Europe – is also a victim of gossip.

Having established how Prospero is everything that Sycorax is not – in allusion to Said's Orientalism – it is possible to agree with Lara when she says that 'Sycorax is a construction of the literary imagination reflecting the historical biases of the time' (*Beyond Caliban 's Curses*, 81).

### **3.3 Bless Me, Ultima: Ultima versus the Trementina sisters**

A simple analysis of the novel by Rudolfo Anaya may lead us to think that the novel presents a similar white/black magic dichotomy as that of the *Tempest*. On the one hand, Ultima engenders the 'good' curandera, whose magic can be described as 'white'. Although her powers derive from ancestral knowledge, she also shows some signs of Christian religiosity. On the other hand, the Trementina family – with Tenorio's three daughters up front – are the 'brujas', who make use of 'black' magic which derives from 'the relatively modern European beliefs exemplified by the Black Mass' (Bauder 44). In las Américas, this bruja buena/bruja mala dichotomy is an example of how colonial discourse has permeated colonised societies in the construction and reinforcement of binary oppositions. Lara cites Ana Castillo to explain how the socially extended dichotomies of virgin/whore and good curandera/bad bruja both respond to a will to 'regulate Latina sexuality along the axis of a Christian worldview' (*BRUJA POSITIONALITIES* 15).

Nevertheless, a close reading of the text reveals some ambiguities – particularly in the character of Ultima – which blur the lines between both categories. At first sight, the most outstanding is that:

'The binary split between "bad" brujas and "good" curanderas is precarious when one considers the force of western medicine and social science in delegitimizing both as non-scientific practices and the power of the institutional Church in sanctioning both as pagan practices' (idem 16).

This is exemplified several times throughout the novel when the people in town – particularly those indoctrinated – also conceive Ultima as a witch, bruja, and/or hechicera (sorcerer) (Anaya 8, 33, 104, 130-134, 145-156). This constitutes an

example of colonial legacy that originated in the European witch-hunts which was later transported to the Américas.

Having shed some light on the book's most apparent contradiction, I will delve into the analysis of the good/evil dichotomy present in the novel using exclusively the third category of those used in the previous section (3.2)<sup>4</sup>– the origin and use of their magic. The reason behind this is that the categories of sex and place of birth are irrelevant in the work of Rudolfo Anaya because Ultima's character is not constructed in binary opposition to the Trementina sisters the same way Prospero is to Sycorax. In *Bless Me, Ultima* it is not possible to say that Ultima is everything that the Trementinas are not, because the novel stays away of Western dichotomous thought which otherizes and discredits women of colour. Thus, the enactment of male superiority by othering a female character is not possible to establish because both sides of good and evil are represented by female characters. There is, however, a difference in terms of age, as Ultima is an old woman and the Trementina sisters are said to be young. Hence, the stereotype of the evil old witch which we saw in Sycorax cannot be applied to the Trementina sisters – although that does not mean it is not constructed in the minds of some of the characters:

'Well, you know Lucas. He could see the evil one himself and not be convinced. He thought the three witches were three old dirty women who deserved a Christian lashing, tongue or otherwise [...]' (Anaya 87-88).

In the present comparison, however, the wise old man/evil old woman dichotomy is not given, and age equals wisdom, no matter the sex. The second category – place of birth – is also irrelevant in the current analysis because all the characters are New Mexicans. Let us then look at the good/evil dichotomy by focusing on the origin and use of their magic.

As a curandera, Ultima is 'a woman of learning' (Anaya 8); a healer: 'a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick' (idem 4); and a midwife: 'not even the blizzards of the llano could keep her from the appointed place where a baby was to be delivered—' (idem 3). According to Bauder, her magic emanates from Nahuatl tradition, and

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<sup>4</sup> Sex, place of birth, and the origin and use of their magic.

'she can marshal the forces of the ancient gods as well as the strength of Christian healing to help her combat evil' (44). Her powers come from the learnings she acquired 'from the greatest healer of all time, the flying man from Las Pasturas' (85) whom we assume is a learned curandero of the Nahuatl universe. But as we read deeper into the novel, we also see how Ultima is depicted as a religious woman. She is not necessarily a fervent Catholic but rather someone with a 'uniquely Chicano syncretic world view' that is 'the result [...] of Roman Catholic Christianity and Nahuatl-Aztec myth' (idem 42). Although she attends mass and accompanies Antonio's mother in her praying to the Virgen of Guadalupe, we also learn from Antonio that unlike everyone else except his father, she breaks her fast before communion (Anaya 30) and her scapular contains 'a small pouch of helpful herbs' instead of the Virgin or St. Joseph (idem 124).

Ultima uses her wisdom on different occasions throughout the novel. As a midwife, we learn from Antonio's mother that she tended her at the birth of all her sons (idem 3) and helped many mothers deliver their babies. As a healer, we read how she provides Antonio different drinks and ointments made from plants she has carefully gathered in the llano in order to help him recover from distressing events and sickness (idem 24-25). Nonetheless, her most remarkable experience as a healer is when she performs Lucas Luna's exorcism with the help of Antonio. As she confronts the curse that has been laid upon Antonio's uncle by the Trementina sisters, this event constitutes the novel's most notorious exemplification of good versus evil which will have fatal consequences for Ultima – although that, she already knows:

'You must understand that when anybody, bruja or curandera, priest or sinner, tampers with the fate of a man that sometimes a chain of events is set into motion over which no one will have ultimate control. You must be willing to accept this responsibility' (idem 85).

On the other hand, the Trementina sisters have got their wisdom from their mother, who was also a bruja, and 'was known to make clay dolls and prick them with needles' to make people sick (89). The images that are associated with them seem to fit perfectly with the accusations made against witches during European

medieval hunts: an enchanted forest, Black Mass, the devil, animal sacrifices, sulphur, dancing and incantations, a big fire with devilish flames, and the ability to take the shape of owls or coyotes (idem 86-87). With regards to the fight against witchcraft, the legacy of European medieval laws through Spanish colonial ruling is present in the legal system – ‘Under the old law there was no penalty for killing a witch’ (idem 87) – as well as in religion, where the cross – in all its shapes – stands for the sign that wards anyone holy against evil. In addition, we also see how the Trementina sisters – as women suspected of practicing witchcraft – are not allowed to be buried on holy grounds.

Having reviewed some of the elements that the novel attributes to both forms of magic, it is possible to say that the good/evil dichotomy is characterized in terms of holiness versus impiety; of God versus the devil (although not necessarily those under Christianity); of Nahuatl tradition versus European practices brought by colonisers; even in terms of ancestralism versus colonialism. Notwithstanding, the mere existence of good and evil is not something that belongs exclusively to Christianity or Western thought. In fact, what does belong to this doctrine is the dichotomous thought that one excludes the other; that one exists in straight opposition to the other, yet also exists only because of the other, as we have seen in Said’s theory of Orientalism. As we shall see now, Anaya succeeds in breaking this dualism showing how in Ultima’s ancestral beliefs, good and evil reside together.

Despite the differences established between the ‘good curandera’ and the ‘bad brujas’, some of the elements which the novel attributes to witchcraft practices can also be seen ascribed to Ultima. These are: Ultima’s owl, the use of voodoo practices (the clay dolls), and the witch test in chapter twelve.

Owls are mentioned at different points in the novel to refer to animals which are associated to witches, as these take their shape in order to fly: ‘In many cuentos I had heard the owl was one of the disguises a bruja took, and so it struck a chord of fear in the heart to hear them hooting at night’ (idem 13) and ‘Ay, and there were many other forms the witches took. Sometimes they traveled as coyotes or owls!’ (idem 87). While the Trementina sisters take the shape of coyotes, Ultima takes the shape of an owl. This one accompanies and guards



Antonio in his journey by warning him of possible dangers, and also by guiding him in difficult moments. The owl is Ultima's *nahualli*<sup>5</sup> and as such, both die when Tenorio shoots it at the end of the book. Anaya himself explains the importance of these animals in the introduction to the book:

'New Mexico folklore, our cuentos, contains many stories about people who can take the form of owls or coyotes, people who can fly. These witches (I prefer the term shaman) are people of power whose work may be viewed as good or evil, depending on the needs of those who ask for their assistance. Ultima is a shaman who uses her positive power to do good' (idem x).

The second element is Ultima's use of voodoo on the Trementina girls as part of Lucas Luna's exorcism. We first read about this practice precisely in reference to Tenorio's wife, who is described as a witch. In her exorcism ritual, she moulds three dolls with fresh clay, covers them in wax, and later pins a needle on each of them (idem 101). At the beginning of chapter twelve, we see how Antonio remarks on one of the dolls: 'I looked closely at one doll that sagged and bent over. The clay face seemed to be twisted with pain' (idem 123). It is only a few pages later that we learn of the first death, and in chapter twenty-two of the second.

The last element is one of the most ambiguous moments in the novel regarding Ultima's character. This is the 'test for a bruja' that Ultima must take in the same chapter when she is accused of being a witch by Tenorio and some of the townsmen, after the first death of one of his daughters. The test consists in taking holy needles and pinning them to the door, so they are crossed making the sign of Christ. According to them, no bruja can walk through a door marked with a holy cross (idem 134). Right before Ultima is about to cross the door, her owl attacks Tenorio and gouges one eye out of him. As this happens, she crosses the door, and the men recognise that she cannot be a witch. However, Antonio himself is puzzled when he sees the needles on the floor: 'Whether someone had broken the cross they made, or whether they had fallen, I would never know' (idem 135).

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<sup>5</sup> See page 14.

These aspects point towards Ultima's ambiguity and help to break the dichotomy between the 'good curandera' and 'bruja mala'. They provide evidence that Ultima is an '*amasamiento*, a creature of darkness and a creature of light' in Anzaldúa's words, someone who holds both good and evil powers within herself, but who chooses to do good, as Anaya points out in the book's introduction (x). In words of Tey Diana Rebolledo quoted in Lara's *BRUJA POSITIONALITIES* when discussing the 'curandera-bruja "archetypal heroine"':

some of these healing practices intersect in one healer, blurring the distinction between the two. As she argues, "the curandera is always also the witch; that is, she has the power to become one, but she may never choose to do so" (1995, 83). The attribution of negative characteristics to la Bruja, such as her ability to destroy, seek revenge and justice, and "control the other, nebulous world," emerges from a western cultural worldview' (15).

In *Bless Me, Ultima* magic is only another one of the novel's many dichotomies which are all resolved in the in-betweenness that is part of Chicano identity, and hence, the novel constitutes an excellent example of how postcolonial literature can challenge established stereotypes which otherize women, and women of colour in particular.

#### **4 Sycorax lives in Ultima**

In *Caliban and the Witch. Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004) Federici points out one of the biggest problems of the witch-hunts in Europe:

'We do not have the victims' point of view, because everything that is left of their voices are the confessions written by the inquisitors, generally obtained under torture [...] and we do not have a way to establish their authenticity' (232).

Ramón A. Guitérrez points to the same problem in las Américas:

'What we know about Indian women, particularly those accused of witchcraft, comes to us through the eyes of Spanish colonial priests and secular officials. These images are often perverse stereotypes. They are racist caricatures that tell us more about Spanish fears and anxieties than

they tell us about the Indians. The thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of Pueblo Indian women, of course, would have been very different. But, since they were a largely illiterate and dominated group, we have few if any records that preserve the integrity and complexity of their thought in the eighteenth century' (388).

Of course, the silencing of women has not been a problem of historians only, but also one of Western writers whose works have become canonical in world literature. As we have explored in this study, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is an example. In light of this, Lara's call for a re-narration of Sycorax seemed like an absolutely necessary exercise. In her essay *Beyond Caliban's Curses* she encourages 'those committed to decolonial feminist social transformation' (92) to make Sycorax visible, as well as to listen to her, and learn to speak her 'language of healing' in order to improve the relationships with ourselves and others by 'challenging colonialism, sexism, and other oppressions without replicating the same problematic structures of power' (88).

In my opinion, this is what *Bless Me, Ultima* precisely does throughout the novel, and particularly with Ultima's character. It challenges colonialism by foregrounding ancestral knowledge and it defies sexism by eliminating a good male/bad female dichotomy, thus demonstrating that it is possible to write about magic without falling into Western stereotypes of the wise wizard and the evil old witch.

As a character, Ultima helps to embrace a 'bruja positionality', because she allows 'to embrace our whole being and the whole beings of other women of color, in fact of all "others" who have been similarly other-ized and fragmented' (Lara, BRUJA POSITIONALITIES 30). Ultima gives the word bruja a new non-Orientalist meaning, she makes the word bruja equal a pure, wise, noble, spiritual, virtuous, socially-conscientious woman who is proud of her ancestry, and for that reason she represents a good embodiment of Sycorax. It is possible to imagine Sycorax as a Chicana healer-midwife-bruja who has been raped and left pregnant on an island, but most importantly it is possible to imagine Sycorax as a Chicana healer-midwife-bruja who dedicates her life to others and is magically connected to the land through her wisdom and spirituality.

## 5 Conclusions

The embodiment of Sycorax in other female characters from novels that offer an alternative view to the hegemonic is essential for the disarticulation of patriarchal discourses and practices. The present study has focused on the portrayal of witchcraft, and the dichotomy of good versus evil in *The Tempest* and *Bless Me, Ultima* in order to establish that Ultima represents a good embodiment of Sycorax because her character gives a new positive meaning to the word bruja.

In order to do that, we have looked at the historical role of the witch and witchcraft in Europe and las Américas so as to understand the origins of its vilification, and how this definition has impacted on popular culture and literature in particular. This historical overview has revealed that the witch-hunts which originated in Europe were essentially targeted at women in order to disempower them socially, sexually and spiritually. We have also been able to see that the association between the witch and the devil originated from inquisitorial ideas and was later transported to the colonies by Imperialist powers which used it in their subjugation and enslavement of colonised peoples.

This has allowed us to demonstrate that the author's cultural and social context determines discourse and plays an essential role in the representation of characters – particularly female –, events, and practices, in this case related to witchcraft. Following from Said's theory of Orientalism, we have ascertained how *The Tempest* is an example of this theory in that it constructs binary oppositions which otherise women of colour. We have used the categories of sex, place of birth, and use and origin of their magic to determine how in all of them, the author presents the European male character as superior by positively comparing itself to the African female. We have also proved how an analysis based on the same categories did not lead us to the same conclusion in the case of Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* because as a writer from a colonised land he is capable of breaking established dichotomies and situating characters in the liminality, as he himself is situated in an in-between space. By looking at the ambiguities presented in his text with regards to the 'good curandera'/'bad bruja' binarism present in Latino culture, it has been possible to determine that Ultima has traits and practices which belong to both and so for that she is an excellent example of simply a bruja which has within her both good and evil but chooses to do good.

By giving the word bruja a new decolonised meaning, one which steers away from the Western portrayal of the evil old witch, or the 'foul' black witch, Sycorax is able to speak through Ultima and to finally be heard. With her, it is possible to heal her wounds – and those from all women who have been otherised – and embrace the figure of la bruja as a powerful, spiritual, virtuous, knowledgeable and caring woman. Sycorax has been re-narrated.

This leads us to a final conclusion which is the necessity to include literature written in countries with a history of colonialism – and particularly that written from or within female perspectives – in the reading lists of courses other than specifically feminist or postcolonial. Reading is a political act and can help subvert constructed categories and disarticulate patriarchal and colonial discourses and practices.

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