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Shakespeare our contemporary in 2016: Margaret Atwood's rewriting of *The Tempest* in *Hag-Seed*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's novel *Hag-Seed* (2016) is a retelling of *The Tempest* that transfers the actions from the magic island of the original play to present-day Canada: the avant-garde artistic director of a Shakespearean Festival is ousted from his job by his more world-savvy deputy, lives in isolation for twelve years and plots his revenge, which will involve a staging of *The Tempest* at the local prison where he has been teaching for some time as Mr Duke. *Hag-Seed* is part of a larger project of fictional retellings of the Bard's plays conceived by Hogarth Press for the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of his death, a moment when Shakespeare's cultural capital seems to be circulating more energetically than ever. The present article analyses *Hag-Seed* as a neo-Shakespearean novel that is original in the double sense of the term that Atwood's teacher Northrop Frye so frequently remarked: imaginative, innovative, and inventive but also true to its fountain and origins.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *The Tempest*; Margaret Atwood; *Hag-Seed*; neo-Shakespearean novel; cultural capital.

**Shakespeare, contemporâneo
nuestro en 2016: Margaret Atwood
reescribe *The Tempest* en *Hag-
Seed***

RESUMEN: La novela *Hag-Seed* (2016) de Margaret Atwood reescribe la pieza teatral de William Shakespeare *La Tempestad* y traslada las acciones de la isla mágica del original a Canadá en nuestros días: un director de teatro experimental pierde su trabajo al frente de un importante festival Shakespeariano por las maquinaciones de su ambicioso subdirector, vive en soledad durante doce años y planifica su venganza, para la que usará una versión teatral de *La Tempestad* con los internos de una prisión local en la

**Shakespeare, nosso
contemporâneo em 2016: a
reescrita de *The Tempest* em *Hag-
Seed*, de Margaret Atwood***

RESUMO: O romance *Hag-Seed* (2016), de Margaret Atwood, é um reconto de *The Tempest* que transfere as ações que têm lugar na ilha mágica da peça original para o Canadá da atualidade: o vanguardista diretor artístico de um Festival de Shakespeare é expulso do seu trabalho pelo seu substituto, mais sabedor de como o mundo funciona, vive isolado durante doze anos e planeia a sua vingança, que irá envolver uma encenação de *The Tempest* na prisão local em que tem vindo a ensinar há algum tempo sob

* Translation into Portuguese by Miguel Ramalhete.

que lleva varios años trabajando como el profesor de literatura Mr Duke. *Hag-Seed* es parte de un proyecto de novelas encargadas por la editorial Hogarth Press que reescriben piezas teatrales del Bardo para la celebración del 400 aniversario de su muerte en 2016, un momento en el que el capital cultural de Shakespeare parece circular con particular intensidad. El artículo analiza *Hag-Seed* como una novela neo-Shakespeariana original en el doble sentido del término que con frecuencia resaltaba el profesor de Margaret Atwood, Northrop Frye: ingeniosa, imaginativa e innovadora pero también fiel a sus fuentes y orígenes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Shakespeare; *The Tempest*; Margaret Atwood; *Hag-Seed*; novela neo-Shakespeariana; capital cultural.

o nome de Mr Duke. *Hag-Seed* faz parte de um projeto maior de recontos ficcionais das peças do Bardo concebido pela Hogarth Press para comemorar os 400 anos da sua morte, um momento em que o capital cultural de Shakespeare parece estar a circular com mais energia do que nunca. Este artigo analisa *Hag-Seed* enquanto romance neo-shakespeariano que é original de acordo com o duplo sentido do termo tão frequentemente notado pelo professor de Atwood, Northrop Frye: imaginativo, inovador e inventivo, mas também fiel à sua fonte e às suas origens.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Shakespeare; *The Tempest*; Margaret Atwood; *Hag-Seed*; romance neo-shakespeariano; capital cultural.

“In this day and age Caliban is the favourite,
everyone cheers for him”

(*Hag-Seed*, 21)

Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed: The Tempest Retold* (2016) is a multi-layered novel that imaginatively transforms its ostensible source text. Critics may come that will regard it as a palimpsest of Shakespeare's and later works (including her own), an elegant example of latter-day sophisticated intertextuality or a post-postmodern take on a canonical play which retrieves humanist readings of the artist-magician Prospero after decades of distrusting him as a patriarchal tyrant and a proto-colonizer. Whatever critical metaphor we adopt to explain the intricate power of this novel, its multifaceted complexity and its wealth, the fact remains that Atwood's text is a tribute to Shakespeare in a year of countless world-wide tributes to the Bard. What her teacher Northrop Frye described, referring to the 1964 anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, as our “superstitious reverence for the decimal system of counting” (1965, 4) has acted again in 2016 as a catalyst for the celebration of his legacy. *Hag-Seed* retells Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for a twenty-first-century readership in the form of fiction, transferring the actions from the magic island of the original play to contemporary

Canada. For many critics, among them Atwood's fellow Canadian Frye, "the subject of this play is the producing of a play" (1986, 172), and this is the overall understanding of *The Tempest* that she uses in *Hag-Seed*, a novel that celebrates the potential and power of Shakespeare's drama.¹

The 2016 commemoration has been a momentous occasion for academic and cultural institutions in the UK and throughout the world to revisit the Bard's works and re-examine their position in contemporary society. Given that "the metaphor for literary and artistic value [...] as cultural capital is rapidly becoming commonplace" (Hedrick and Reynolds 2000, 6), we could say that in the anniversary year Shakespeare's cultural capital keeps on circulating more energetically than ever and with no signs of abatement. Each generation reads, performs and interprets Shakespeare in its own image, and the commemoration has generated a wide-spread urge to reconsider how his works can still talk to us and how Shakespeare can be, as Jan Kott famously phrased it in the sixties, our contemporary. *Hag-Seed* is Margaret Atwood's sixteenth novel and it was conceived and written as part of a larger project of fictional retellings of Shakespeare's plays devised by Hogarth Press for the celebration of the anniversary—with the publishing house undoubtedly hoping to ride the wave of greater Bard visibility and enhanced interest in his work this year: "The world's favourite playwright. Today's best-loved novelists. Timeless stories retold" ("Hogarth").

The collection celebrates the Bard's enduring power to inspire: it presents novels by respected contemporary authors that transport his characters and plots from their original locations and time to our own. The collection is premised on the idea that Shakespeare was a great reteller of stories, and it aims "to continue this tradition and celebrate his legacy, introducing his plays to a new generation of fans worldwide [...]. The books are true to the spirit of the original plays, while giving authors an exciting opportunity to do something new" ("Cover"). This is indeed a thrilling premise that obviates the conundrum of what constitutes "Shakespeare" and to what extent

¹ Atwood credits three studies of Shakespeare in the acknowledgments: Frye's chapter on the play in his 1986 volume, Stephen Orgel's introduction to the 1987 Oxford edition, and Andrew Dickson's popular volume on Shakespeare gone global, *Worlds Elsewhere* (2015).

we are sustaining, assimilating or dissolving his plays when we change his actions, his characters and, crucially, his language. The series began with the publication of Jeanette Winterson's update of *The Winter's Tale* in *The Gap of Time* in October 2015, followed by Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* (his take on *The Merchant of Venice*) in February 2016, Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (her version of *The Taming of the Shrew*) in June 2016, and Margaret Atwood's retelling of *The Tempest* in *Hag-Seed* in October 2016.²

The frame of the Hogarth collection forces the writers to never lose sight of Shakespeare's work and make sure that readers find enough elements that they can recognize from the plays. Given the specific conception of the series as both tribute to and modernizing of Shakespeare's plays, as a rewriting of *The Tempest* *Hag-Seed* occupies a peculiar position in relation to concepts such as adaptation, appropriation, intertextuality, revision, collaboration, interpellation and other varied attempts to charter engagements with Shakespeare's work. Adaptation and appropriation seem to be in recent years among the most frequently used concepts, although no discussion to date seems to establish a definitive distinction between them and, indeed, what Julie Sanders stated in 2001 is still true: "the terms in which this area of interest is articulated—adaptation, appropriation, reworking, revision—remain a site of contestation and debate" (2001, 1). The articulation of such a field is beyond the scope of the present analysis, but the awareness of its complexity provides some context for the difficulty of assigning a label to what Atwood does with *The Tempest* in *Hag-Seed*. Thomas Cartelli (1999), for instance, establishes differences between adaptation and appropriation in terms of the author's attitude towards the so-called original text, with appropriations pivoting more on the author's goals and adaptations more openly paying a tribute to it, while Sanders (2006) uses in her analysis of these two concepts the idea of closeness (adaptations) and distance (appropriations) from the earlier text. Sanders herself describes appropriation elsewhere as "the rendering apposite or appropriate, as it were, of Shakespearean drama in another context" (2001, 3). Whatever terminology they use, all contemporary discussions of engagements with pre-texts, from

² The other novels to be published in the series will be retellings of *Othello* by Tracy Chevalier, *Hamlet* by Gillian Flynn, *Macbeth* by Jo Nesbo and *King Lear* by Edward St Aubyn.

Linda Hutcheon's general *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) to Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin's very specific *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (2014), share the intellectual need to dignify the later texts not as derivative but as profoundly creative, their engagement with the so-called original not diminishing but enhancing their inventiveness and power.³

To the extent that *Hag-Seed* is a tribute to Shakespeare (and it clearly is), the novel would fit more easily into Cartelli's definition of adaptation, while in Sanders' terms of closeness, Atwood's transference from drama to fiction, with actions and characters in contemporary Canada and for the most part within a correctional center, would seem to suggest that her novel falls more clearly within Sanders' definition of appropriation. And yet, matters are far from clear-cut, since the resonances of *The Tempest* in the novel are at the same time obvious and discreet, blatant and nearly invisible. And, as to the agenda of the author, again, in the hall of mirrors that is the novel, the most evident intention is to pay tribute to Shakespeare and celebrate the power of his work to entertain, educate and make us human. And yet, again, Atwood the magician cannot resist the challenge to seize *The Tempest* and make it her own—or, as we will see, collaborate with Shakespeare to make something of *their* own. Her revisiting of the play has restrictions imposed by the Hogarth frame that were never in place for previous fictions related to *The Tempest*, from women's novels like Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), Rachel Ingalls's *Mrs Caliban* (1982), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992), or Canadian revisions of Miranda as the country such as Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1976), to Caribbean male engagements like Aimé Césaire's play *Une Tempête* (1969) or George Lamming's novel *Water with Berries* (1972), just to name a few.⁴

The feat of keeping a recognizable Shakespeare play while bringing it into the twenty-first century as a work of fiction is a tough balancing act, particularly in the case of this late romance.

³ For a recent summary of similarities and difference between adaptation and appropriation, see Desmet and Iyengar (2015).

⁴ Careful analysis of creative engagements with *The Tempest* is provided by Zabus (2002). For women's revisions of this and other Shakespearean plays see Novy (1999) and Sanders (2001). For the vitality of *The Tempest* as a source of inspiration and debate see Hulme and Sherman (2000).

After re-reading *The Tempest* several times, Atwood thought that it would be an impossible task:

What was the modern-day equivalent of a magician marooned on an island for 12 years with a now adolescent daughter? You couldn't write that straight. [...] And what about the flying air spirit? And the Caliban figure?

Calm, calm, I told myself. I read the play again, this time backwards. The last three words Prospero says are "Set me free." But free from what? In what has he been imprisoned?

I started counting up the prisons and imprisonments in the book. There are a lot of them. In fact, every one of the characters is constrained at some point in the play. This was suggestive. [...] So I decided to set my novel in a prison. (Atwood 2016b)

There are specific challenges in the project to turn *The Tempest* into a narrative work, essentially the fact that there is very little plot in it, but also that it mixes comedy, tragedy and romance. Atwood is a truly gifted mixer and re-maker of literary genres and here she constructs a light narrative which nevertheless includes tragic and elegiac elements. *The Tempest* is Shakespeare's "most neo-classical play" (Daniell 1989, 17) since, unlike the others, it follows the unities of time and place, with events unfolding over the course of a few hours in one single setting: the mysterious Mediterranean/New World/unlocated island where Prospero has been living for twelve years with his daughter Miranda and his two servants Ariel and Caliban. In *The Tempest* Shakespeare seems not so much interested in telling a story (Prospero does so in 1.2) as intent on exploring the very act of constructing and staging a performance, and criticism of the play has frequently highlighted its connections with the ceremonial form of the masque.⁵ *The Tempest* can thus be read as a metatheatrical text about an aged director who seems to believe in the nobleness of his enterprise as a means to an end, but also as an engrossing project in and of itself. This is the general interpretation of the play that Atwood has transferred to her novel *Hag-Seed*.

Margaret Atwood first encountered Shakespeare's plays in her Toronto high school in the fifties (she also saw there her first performances, by the Earle Grey Players), and then at Victoria

⁵ Significant analyses of the relation of *The Tempest* to Renaissance masque are provided among others by Gurr (2014), Lindley (1984) and Orgel (1987).

college, where Frye was her teacher.⁶ She has responded to Shakespeare's works in previous fiction, including her toying with the characters of Gertrude and Horatio to provide new perspectives on *Hamlet* in her short stories "Gertrude Talks Back" (*Good Bones*, 1992) and "Horatio's Version" (*The Tent*, 2007), the echoes of *King Lear* in *Cat's Eye* (1988), which incorporates an Earle Grey Players' performance of *Macbeth* turned comic by the change in one of the props, and the integration of a production of *Richard III* in the park in the opening of "Revenant" (*Stone Mattress*, 2014)—an inventive, outlandish take on the play in line with some of the Shakespearean productions mentioned in *Hag-Seed*. Atwood has explained that she has always been drawn to *The Tempest* because of the many questions it leaves unanswered and because of its generic complexity as "an early multimedia musical" (Blurb): "If Shakespeare were writing today, he'd be using every special effect technology now makes available" (Blurb). Her Prospero, the ill-fated theater director Felix Phillips (his name a tribute to Robin Phillips, who ran the Stratford Festival in Ontario in the late 1970s), lives for the theater and his obsession is "to create the lushest, the most beautiful, the most awe-inspiring, the most inventive, the most numinous theatrical experiences ever" (Atwood 2016a, 12). She chose to rewrite *The Tempest* because it has always been a favorite of hers for its focus on the theater: while others such as *Hamlet* include a play-within-the-play, this is "the closest Shakespeare gets to writing a play about putting on a play" ("The Next Chapter" 1:09).

Prospero can be seen as a metaphorical theater director who stages all the events on the island to create the result that he is looking for; as on the platform of a playhouse, he moves characters around, rearranges groups, creates special effects and even appears at the end to engage with the audience, who both are and are not the actual audience of the play. Unlike Puck, who fully steps out of character at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to request applause, Prospero's status as an actor outside the play is less clear in his epilogue, as he involves the audience in the play's actions

⁶ With his leanings towards comedy and romance and a temperament prone to focus on spiritual regeneration, Frye came naturally to have a special predilection for *The Tempest*, a play that he read as an embodiment of the values of forgiveness and restoration.

("Gentle breath of yours my sails | Must fill, or else my project fails" [Epilogue, 12–13]), thus blurring the distinction between on-stage illusion and off-stage reality. In *Hag-Seed* Atwood recreates Prospero as the artistic director of the imaginary Makeshiweg Shakespeare Festival—very much itself a fictional recreation of the Stratford Festival in Ontario that she has attended throughout her life—who, after being ousted from his post by his more world-savvy deputy, Tony Price, lives in solitude for twelve years and plots his revenge on those who betrayed him.⁷ Felix's agents of retribution are the inmates turned actors in a prison production of *The Tempest* that will be attended by his adversaries, now important leaders in the community that will be supervising first-hand its literacy program. Atwood has significantly named the prison, in a humorous nod to Renaissance theater lovers, the Fletcher Correctional Center (and Felix's troupe of actors The Fletcher Players)—its reference to Shakespeare's collaborator John Fletcher witty shorthand for the collaborative nature of the novel at hand: Atwood and Shakespeare, Shakespeare and Atwood.

The Tempest hinges upon the belief in magic, a premise that goes against our contemporary understanding of how the world works. Winterson's *The Gap of Time* resorts to video games to capture some of the unreal atmosphere of a play in which, among other things, Time enters with an hourglass. Magic in Atwood's novel gets transferred to forms that contemporary readers can relate to, such as the impact and possibilities of audio-visual and digital media, the internet or the hallucinatory effects of recreational drugs—although a pervading sense remains that a key magic strand in the universe created by Atwood is the power of the theater, of performance and art to fashion alternate worlds and shape realities that have the potential to produce, like director Felix's plays in the novel, "the collective indrawn breath, the collective sigh" (Atwood 2016a, 12), but also to allow us to know ourselves better. The original Prospero is absorbed in his magic books; Atwood's protagonist is obsessed with extreme staging angles that may deliver exceptional Shakespeare productions. As he himself admits, "he may on occasion have taken things too far. To be fair, more than *on occasion*;

⁷ The comic perspective on the Stratford Festival presented through Felix in *Hag-Seed* bears some resemblance to the Canadian television series, *Slings and Arrows* (2003–2006). I am grateful to one of the *SEDERI* readers for bringing this to my attention.

taking things too far had been his trademark" (Atwood 2016a, 33; emphasis in the original). When Felix is ousted from his post as the artistic director of the Makeshiweg Festival, he is preparing a cutting-edge version of *The Tempest* that could walk dangerously close to the precipice of farce:

His Ariel, he'd decided, would be played by a transvestite on stilts who'd transform into a giant firefly at significant moments. His Caliban would be a scabby street person—black or maybe Native—and a paraplegic as well, pushing himself around on an oversized skateboard. Stephano and Trinculo? He hadn't worked them out yet, but bowler hats and codpieces would be involved. And juggling: Trinculo could juggle some things that he might pick up on the beach of the magic island, such as squids. (Atwood 2016a, 16)

The Tempest is one of a few plays which seem to have been fully original creations of the Bard. Curiously, then, Atwood has chosen to rewrite as part of this series of novels that celebrate Shakespeare as a great reteller of stories one of the few in which the actions, characters and events were entirely his own. His use of previous sources is limited to very specific ideas or passages, the most significant being Prospero's speech renouncing his magic in 5.1, (related to Ovid's Medea), Ariel's removal of the banquet in 3.3 (related to Virgil's story of Phineus in the *Aeneid*), and Gonzalo's envisioning of an ideal future commonwealth on the island in 2.1 (inspired by Michel de Montaigne's essay "Of Cannibals").⁸ *The Tempest* is generally regarded as the Bard's last solo-authored play, and there is a long tradition of reading Prospero's final speech renouncing his magic as Shakespeare's farewell to the stage before retiring to live his final days in Stratford. In her collection of essays about writing, significantly entitled *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood discusses Prospero as an artist: "Without his art, Prospero would be unable to rule. It's this that gives him power [...] altogether, he is an ambiguous gentleman. Well, of course he is ambiguous—he is an artist, after all" (2002, 115). Ever since John Dryden and William Davenant adapted it to late seventeenth-century taste in *The Enchanted Island* (1667–1670)—which became a musical in Thomas Shadwell's operatic version in 1674—" *The Tempest* has been re-read

⁸ Detailed analyses of *The Tempest* in relation to these authors are provided by Bate (1993), Hamilton (1990) and Gurr (2014).

and rewritten more radically, perhaps, than any other play. Long a source of inspiration and provocation for writers and artists, it has also emerged as one of the most contested texts in the critical sphere" (Hulme and Sherman 2000, xi).

Given the possible symbolic nature of the actions on the island, critical analyses of the play have been extremely varied, but a clear tendency towards demystifying the benevolent nature of Prospero and his plots has been sensed in the last decades of the twentieth century, with the development of neo-historicist, cultural materialist, feminist and postcolonial approaches to the plays. Postcolonial readings have seen it as a paradigmatic example of the encounter between colonizer and colonized. Feminist critics like Ann Thompson have explored the ideology of femininity in a text which, as she observes, significantly seems to deny the importance (even the presence) of female characters yet does "attribute enormous power to female chastity and fertility" (1998, 239). Like feminist interpretations, neo-historicist, cultural materialist and postcolonial readings have focused on the dynamics of power and inequality in the play and considered how Prospero uses and abuses his magic superiority on the island to regain his previous position of power.⁹ Although many critics no longer read *The Tempest* as a story of forgiveness and reconciliation, in the world of the theater and in popular culture, however, "the view [...] of Prospero as an essentially benevolent surrogate of Shakespeare the dramatist [has] never disappeared entirely" (Vaughan 2014, 38).

The title of Margaret Atwood's rewriting of *The Tempest* plays with our expectations, since "hag seed" is one of the insults that Prospero hurls at Caliban (by way of his mother Sycorax). Readers may approach the novel expecting to find what Edward Said would call a contrapuntal reading, an interpretation that shows "awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (1993, 51). The obvious contrapuntal reading in a novel with this title would be to place Caliban's subjugation at its center, but the focus of *Hag-Seed* is not the subaltern voice of the monster servant but Prospero, the magician himself, who focalizes

⁹ Classic examples of these readings would be for instance Barker and Hulme (1985), Brown (1985), Cartelli (1999), and Greenblatt's chapter on *The Tempest* that gives the title to his 1990 volume.

the narrative. As we have seen, by the late twentieth century “it became *necessary* to wrest from the Shakespeare canon an emblem of postcoloniality and to rewrite *The Tempest* from Caliban’s perspective” (Zabus 2002, 9; emphasis in the original). Atwood’s novel runs against this trend, and even though its title points to Caliban, his voice finds its way in a more indirect way through the prison inmates that Felix teaches. He certainly does not take center stage, as the title may suggest, although he is heard in the inmates’ awareness that they all possess something of Caliban:

Now Hag-Seed’s black and Hag-Seed’s brown,
 Hag-Seed’s red, don’t care if you frown,
 Hag-Seed’s yellow and Hag-Seed’s trash white,
 He goes by a lotta names, he’s roaming in the night,
 You treated him bad, now he’s a sackful of fright. (Atwood 2016a,
 271)

Many of the *dramatis personae* in the play are metamorphosed into easily recognizable characters in the novel: Prospero’s brother Antonio becomes Tony Price, Felix’s ambitious colleague at the Makeshiweg Shakespeare Festival, “the evil-hearted, social-clambering, Machiavellian foot-licker” (Atwood 2016a, 11) who ousts him from his job and eventually becomes Heritage Minister. The honest old Gonzalo is the tender-hearted Lonnie Gordon, the chairman of the festival board who retrieves for him his annotated *Tempest* script when he is removed from his post. Felix’s scheme to avenge himself and regain his job will unfold when Tony and others visit his prison: Justice Minister Sal O’Nally (Alonso, King of Naples), his son Frederick O’Nally (Ferdinand) and Sebert Stanley (Sebastian, Alonso’s brother), a high-level politician who is rumored to be competing with O’Nally for party leadership. These are all supporting characters in the original play, in which the former Duke of Milan gets more than one quarter of the lines. The dissenting voice of Caliban is kept under control by magic, his obedient daughter Miranda has little to say and his other servant Ariel is fixated on regaining his liberty and is thus for the most part unwilling to contradict his master.

Atwood focuses her narration on Prospero, Miranda, Ariel and Caliban, even if only Prospero’s role exists as a well-defined double of the original. There is no easy summation of the intricate mappings

of the other three characters onto Atwood's multiple and multifaceted reincarnations. In the novel Felix's real daughter Miranda is dead, but she is resurrected several times in different forms (in Felix's mind, in theatrical performance and in a surrogate daughter figure that life brings his way). As in the play, Ariel has shifting shapes: his role is taken over in part by the ghost of Miranda, half vision of desire half hallucination, and for Felix, always, the beloved daughter that keeps him company; but Ariel's tasks are also performed by the inmates-actors who help him in his plans. The character of Caliban, the hag-seed of the title (or at least one of them), is disembodied and re-constituted as a multifarious collective, the group of inmates at the Fletcher Correctional Center that Felix instructs in the works of Shakespeare. In this way, the monster/savage/subjugated slave of the original play is transformed into a repository of the very human foibles and failures of a Canadian prison, with a multicultural population of colorful names (Leggs, PPod, Bent Pencil, Wonderboy, 8Handz) with personalities to match.

The five sections in *Hag-Seed* correspond to the conventional division of Shakespeare's plays into five acts and the novel adds a "Prologue" to the original play. It also includes an "Epilogue" which presents Felix, as Prospero in Shakespeare's text, after the performance of his play. The added prologue is really a recreation of 1.1: while Shakespeare begins with Prospero's foes fighting death by drowning in a tempest which is only Ariel's crafted illusion, the prologue in the novel is a prolepsis of chapter 34, entitled "Tempest," which shows the planned turmoil that sets in motion Felix's revenge. In the first example of the Chinese-boxes structure of this novel, *Hag-Seed* ingeniously opens like *The Tempest* with the sinking of the court characters into a sea of confusion. The Ghent University professor that supervises the prison literacy program, who regularly meets Felix to discuss teaching in a restaurant appropriately called Zenith, facilitates the visit of his former enemies: "He could scarcely believe his luck. His enemies, both of them! They'd be right there in Fletcher! The one place in the world where, with judicious timing, he might be able to wield more power than they could" (Atwood 2016a, 70). She is the fictional embodiment of Lady Fortune and Prospero's lucky star and is fittingly called Estella: "'You are such a star', he said" (71); "a true star, he tells her: his Lady Luck" (193).

The sense of immediacy that the unity of time creates in *The Tempest* is recreated in *Hag-Seed* by the use of the present tense throughout the narrative, which unfolds in early 2013, when Felix-Prospero is preparing his production of *The Tempest* at the Fletcher Correctional Center. When the novel starts after the prologue, Felix is looking at himself in the mirror one morning as he gets ready to begin his fourth year as a prison instructor. As in *The Tempest* with Prospero and his dukedom, it has been twelve years since he was ousted from his job. In this multi-layered novel, there are several versions of Prospero's island, mainly the hut where Felix lives as the retired schoolteacher Mr Duke, but also the correctional facility itself where he prepares his *Tempest*, particularly the rooms in the building used for rehearsals and recordings of performances: "This is the extent of it, Felix muses. My island domain. My place of exile. My penance. My theatre" (Atwood 2016a, 81)—and indeed the ever-present island of guilt where he has been marooned since the death of his daughter.

Section I of the novel, entitled "Dark Backward" after Prospero's description of Miranda's first memories as "the dark backward and abysm of time" (1.2.62), presents the backstory of Felix in the only chapters in the novel which use the past tense. Atwood creates here an ingenious mapping of Prospero's speech to Miranda about their past in 1.2. In the play this is a difficult moment to stage, as Felix is well aware: "He's right, thinks Felix. That scene's been a challenge for every actor who's ever played Prospero: how to get through the Act I, scene 2 narration of Prospero's doleful history while at the same time making it compelling. The thing is too static" (Atwood 2016a, 155). Prospero and Miranda were put on a boat and cast into the sea, and Felix's remembrance of how he left the Makesiweg Festival contains hints of his movement away as progress by water, since he "didn't have the sensation of driving. Instead he felt he was being driven, as if blown by a high wind" (Atwood 2016a, 29); he felt "adrift" (30), surrounded by "islands of trees" (30), and his lost daughter Miranda "dead in the water" (33). When he finds in his alter ego Mr Duke a new life that allows him to feel that he "may be washed up, but F. Duke may still have a chance" (37), he looks at his Prospero cloak, which appears to him as "the dead husk of his drowned self" (63). Thinking about his dead daughter in rehearsals Felix feels "lost at sea, drifting here, drifting there. In a rotten carcass the very rats have quit" (160). Later on, when the preparations for

the prison *Tempest* make him more hopeful, his thoughts are reminiscent of the metaphor of transformation by drowning in Ariel's song in 1.2: "No, not dead, but changed. In the gloom, in the gloaming, it's been transforming itself, slowing coming alive [...] Rich and strange. The many pearly eyes twinkle at him from the underwater darkness" (63–64).

When *Hag-Seed* opens in January 2013 Miranda has been dead for twelve years. This is the major change that Atwood introduces in Prospero's backstory: the recently widowed Felix lost his daughter, self-consciously named Miranda, when she was three years old while he was self-absorbed in a production. After losing her, he had used his obsession with the theater as a healing mechanism: "Right after the funeral with his pathetically small coffin he'd plunged himself into *The Tempest*. It was an evasion, he knew that much about himself even then, but it was also a kind of reincarnation [...]. Through her, his Miranda would come back to live" (Atwood 2016, 15–16). When he loses his job and removes himself from the world of the theater, his chance to bring back his daughter is lost too: "with the destruction of his *Tempest*, the new Miranda—the Miranda he'd been intending to create, or possibly to resurrect—was dead in the water" (32). In his isolation, Felix begins to feel that his daughter is "still with him, only invisible" (45). Like an actor that gets fully involved in a role, "a conceit, a whimsy, a piece of acting: he didn't really believe it, but he engaged in this non-reality as if it were real" (45), he starts to get children's books out of the local library, to help Miranda with her homework, and to teach her how to play chess: "She was a quick learner, and was soon beating him two times out of three" (45). Felix is both aware and not aware that his daughter is dead, so that we find moments of intimate conversation and interaction with Miranda about the minutest details of his daily life ("He needs a scarf [...] he's put it somewhere, but where? In the big old armoire in the bedroom, Miranda reminds him gently," 63); but he also reflects on her disappearance, as when he sees the school bus drive close to his hut: "Miranda might have been on a school bus once, if she'd ever reached that age" (63). On the whole, her presence is so powerful that he follows her growth in real time into

adolescence, and so by the time he performs his prison *Tempest* his Miranda is, like Prospero's, a beautiful fifteen-year-old girl.¹⁰

Some reviewers of the novel have pointed out that the tragic, elegiac tone of this section sits in uncomfortably with the mostly comic, bordering on romp, unfolding of the overall narrative. In an otherwise enthusiastic review that describes the text as a neo-Shakespearean novel and claims that "students will learn more about the deeper meanings of *The Tempest* from this singular novel than from dozens of academic studies" (Bate 2016), Jonathan Bate refers to this part as "the only element that maps awkwardly on to the original" and states that "[Felix and Miranda's] shadowy dialogues seem to come from another genre" (2016). Indeed, *The Tempest* mixes tragic, comic and romance elements and the case could be made that the tragic elements in the play have been transferred to Felix's relation with his daughter, so that Alonso's suffering for his dead child Ferdinand, which in the original turns out to be only a temporary illusion, is reassigned in Atwood's novel to the reality that Felix's mind tries to amend with illusion, since he lives in permanent guilt for not having been there for her as an infant: "They can't possibly know anything about him, him and his remorse, his self-castigation, his endless grief" (Atwood 2016a, 160).

Another possible reason for Atwood's intervention in the plot of the play may have to do with Miranda's status as obedient daughter in *The Tempest*. At points one gets the feeling that in a twenty-first-century recasting of the play only a dead Miranda whose ghost Felix conjures up at will could fulfil the role of docile daughter that we find in the original. Indeed, as we saw earlier, this has become a source of discomfort for feminist critics, who find little female agency in this play in which Miranda is the only woman on the island and the females that are mentioned are considered evil (Caliban's mother, the witch Sycorax) or mere marriage goods (Ferdinand's sister, Claribel). Miranda is a problematic character for many contemporary readers who see her as the submissive daughter who follows her father's orders and is given little space to maneuver into agency of any kind. In section I she can fulfil as a ghost the function she has in act I of the play: she is a reassuring presence that

¹⁰ Atwood mentions relevant sources on this topic in the acknowledgements section at the end: "And much about conversing with loved ones and other strange experiences can be learned in *The Third Man Factor*, by John Geiger" (Atwood 2016a, 293).

calms Prospero-Felix into the conviction that he is not to blame for what happened, that his vision of the past is the only true one: Miranda “nods because she knows that to be true [...] noble people [...] sprout benevolent acts the way trees sprout leaves. And Felix, in the eyes of Miranda, is noble. It helps him to know that” (Atwood 2016a, 61).

When he reencounters his enemies and revenge is possible, Felix has been working as the English instructor in the prison’s Literacy through Literature program for four years. He has brought into it his spirit of innovation and switched the students from reading novels like *The Catcher in the Rye* to performing plays by Shakespeare. Following the study routine that he has developed, the inmates carefully analyze his adapted version of the play under his guidance before attempting the performance. Prospero-Felix senses the beneficial influence his work has on the inmates when their performances are shown on the prison closed-circuit TV: “Watching the many faces watching their own faces as they pretended to be someone else—Felix found that strangely moving. For once in their lives, they loved themselves” (Atwood 2016a, 58). These are moments when Felix feels indeed like the original Prospero an agent of regeneration for his students and he sees himself as the vehicle for positive transformation, although he will have no qualms about using them for his own plan of revenge while presenting it as a move to defend their Literacy through Literature program, claiming like Prospero with his daughter that he has done nothing “but in care of thee” (1.2.19).

When Felix first introduces *The Tempest* to his Fletcher actors (he refuses to call them or think of them as inmates) he gets a more negative reaction than in previous years:

Using the blue marker he writes:

IT’S A MUSICAL: Has the most music + songs in Shkspr. Music used for what?

MAGIC: Used for what?

PRISONS: How many?

MONSTERS: Who is one?

REVENGE: Who wants it? Why?

Consulting their faces—Stony, frowning, or blankly bewildered—he thinks: they don't get it. Not like *Julius Caesar*, not like *Macbeth*. They saw the point of those right away. (Atwood 2016a, 86)

The Tempest is the fourth play he presents, after *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, which were texts about “power struggles, treacheries, crimes: these subjects were immediately grasped by his students, since in their own ways they were experts in them” (Atwood 2016a, 55). *The Tempest* has no battles and it involves magic but not witches (the ones in *Macbeth* had been a success), so he must use his imagination to create interest among his cast by describing its actions in terms that they can understand and creating a sense of magic that they can relate to.

Felix presents *The Tempest* to his actors as a story about prisons, prisoners and jailers, so that by bringing the play to the context of the readers, Shakespeare speaks to their specific situation and becomes relevant for them. Felix sees the play as full of prison images and in the acknowledgements section Atwood calls attention to the prison literature that has inspired and helped her in her retelling of *The Tempest*.¹¹ While inmates can easily relate to ideas of imprisonment and revenge in the play, other elements are remote from their experience, and this opens the way for Felix-Atwood's creativity: for instance, to sell the role of Ariel to his actors, who are reluctant to volunteer to play a fairy, he builds up the case for this character as a stranger, possibly an alien from outer space with special superpowers. As they come to perceive Ariel in these terms there is a lot more interest in the role, particularly when Felix presents him as the one who is in charge of magic, understood in a way that his actors can easily grasp: “If he were here with us now, he'd be called the special effects guy [...] he is like a digital expert. He's doing 3-D virtual reality” (Atwood 2016a, 104). His discussions are delightful explorations of various aspects of *The Tempest*, and seasoned teachers among readers will sympathize with his efforts to make the Bard meaningful for his students as he strives to convince them that “Shakespeare has something for everyone, because that's

¹¹ Atwood mentions her interest in books about “literature and drama being taught or being experienced within prisons” (2016a, 292) and she explicitly credits Laura Bate's 2012 memoirs *Shakespeare Saved My Life*, which she describes as “encouraging” (2016a, 292). The use of Shakespeare in the prison system has become the focus of serious study in recent years, as in Scott-Douglass (2007) or Lehman (2014).

who his audience was: everyone, from high to low and back again" (Atwood 2016a, 84). Or as Sanders states, "Shakespeare [...] appears to be about inclusion, about making space for everyone to have a voice" (2001, 188).

When Felix gives the inmates the choice of role they would like to play, fifteen out of twenty actors choose Caliban, mainly because they identify with his situation of oppression and his attempts to rebel against it:

"So why do you want to play him?"

"He is poxy awesome."

"We get him."

"Everyone kicks him around but he don't let it break him, he says what he thinks." This from Leggs.

"He's mean," says Shiv. "Wicked mean! Everyone who's dissing him, he wants to get them back!" (Atwood 2016a, 120)

Additionally, Felix provides multiple angles into Caliban for his class by arguing that he is musical and loves singing and dancing, he has local knowledge of the island, he has the most poetic speech in the play about his beautiful dreams, and he is searching for revenge since he feels that Prospero has stolen the island from him (Atwood 2016a, 121). In the play, Caliban appears at the end of Act I; likewise, in the novel the Literacy through Literature program at the Fletcher Correctional is introduced at the end of Section 1, thus bringing into the narrative the collective Caliban created by Atwood. Instead of imprisoning him/them, Felix contributes to a liberation of sorts through their travelling with Shakespeare and their escape into the theater: unlike the original Caliban, who wants to steal Prospero's magic books to strip him of his magic, Atwood's multiple Calibans appear to receive willingly the knowledge of Felix-Prospero's books—Shakespeare's plays. Felix shares with them the language of art and performance, beginning with their attraction to the cursing in Shakespeare's texts. Each inmate-actor gets to choose ten swear words from the text which he can use in their class discussion and rehearsals, making thus Shakespeare's language their own as variations and combinations of his swear words and bawdy

language, which are frequently integrated in their interactions.¹² In the play Caliban says to Prospero “You taught me language and my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse” (1.2.437–38); in the novel, Felix thinks about the inmates “Your profanity [...] has oft been your whoreson hag-born progenitor of literacy. Along with your whoreson cigarettes, may the red plague rid them” (Atwood 2016a, 89)—in his innovative program, swear words lead the inmates to the Bard, so that it could be argued that their improved literacy is indeed the hag-seed of the Bard’s profanity. And Caliban’s rebellion is thus channeled through language, as they learn how to curse in Shakespeare’s idiom and later develop the skills to envision new endings for the play they are performing.

The motley crew into which Caliban becomes reincarnated in the novel are at the center of Section V of the novel, significantly entitled “This thing of darkness,” Prospero’s famous final acknowledgement of Caliban as his own in act 5. In this final section, Atwood toys with the afterlives of the original characters by presenting Felix’s final assignment to his students; the last class is reserved for their presentations on their understanding of what will happen to the characters when the play finishes, so that when the inmates gather to deliver their after-performance team reports Atwood’s novel flaunts its ingenious straying from Shakespeare’s play. Each team has thought out what will happen to the characters once the play ends and they leave (or do not leave) the island and *Hag-Seed* closes with several chapters devoted to possible afterlives of the characters and answers to some of the many questions left hanging in the play. Thus in the conclusions of the Caliban-inmates, for instance, Ariel does not vanish into thin air but “stays on earth and he flies off to tackle climate change” (Atwood 2016a, 248); Antonio remains unrepentant and allies himself again with Sebastian on the voyage back, the two of them killing everyone else on the ship—a version of the characters’ afterlives that is contradicted by another version (by the one young actress that Felix has brought in to play Miranda) which reconstitutes Miranda as the natural inheritor of Prospero’s magic who beats all of them; and the freed Caliban becomes a famous rapper after he is finally acknowledged and pampered by

¹² Atwood credits in the acknowledgements *The Shakespeare Insult Generator*. There several available online, but from her comments in interviews she is most likely referring to a 2014 volume by Barry Kraft.

Prospero as the son he had with Sycorax (one version) or he is abandoned, festers in his rage and plans his revenge on Prospero (another, more generally appealing version):

Felix is intrigued. Caliban has escaped the play. [...] Now there's no one to restrain him. Will Prospero be spared, or will retribution climb in through the window one dark night and cut his weasand? Felix wonders. Gingerly, he feels his neck. (Atwood 2016a, 272)

This multiplicity of endings allows Atwood to incorporate subversive, against-the-grain, re-visions of *The Tempest* that the tight premise of the Hogarth series has bounded in, and provides a glimpse of insights that could pan out into alternative appropriations of the play. Atwood's novel sketches thus, as in an afterthought, what Chantal Zabus describes as the center of recent appropriations of the play: "These 'alter-native' plots serve to dismantle narrative authority and to reorient the circulation of knowledge. The singular, punctual *Tempest* is ousted by *Tempests*, which accommodate the multiple instabilities of contemporary texts and contexts" (2002, 2).

After the multiple Calibans reinvent the lives of the characters in the play, the novel closes with the Epilogue, entitled with Prospero's words, "Set me Free." In *The Tempest* Prospero asks the audience to set him free; in the novel, Felix is finally free of the ghost of his daughter and the guilt that has marked his life since she died. This moment also works as the liberation of his most intimate Ariel-Miranda, the force that has made his last performance possible, and Felix's words are exactly those used by Prospero when liberating Ariel:

How selfish he has been! Yes, he loves her, his dear one, his only child. But he knows what she truly wants, and what he owes her.

"To the elements be free," he says to her.

And, finally, she is. (Atwood 2016a, 283)

Given Atwood's remarkable fan following there is a distinct possibility that more readers may come to read Shakespeare's original *Tempest* by way of her retelling. Atwood has claimed that fan fiction on a grand scale really started with the admirers of Shakespeare, who through the centuries have responded to his works and rewritten his stories in endless ways. She is fully aware that *The Tempest* has been done in all possible modes on the stage

and other media and that it has been analyzed ad infinitum.¹³ When she took up this project she felt it was a daunting task, but she has compared the restrictions imposed on her novel by the previous work to the situation she had when creating *The Penelopiad*, her rewriting of the *Odyssey*. She sees the limitations imposed by the existing *Tempest* as not so different from the strictures created by set literary forms such as the sonnet: instead of limiting the resources of the writer, they can increase her creativity ("Margaret" 2015, 1.00.22).

The subtitle of the novel, *The Tempest Retold*, highlights the necessary nature of *Hag-Seed* as a retelling of a canonical play. In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Atwood discusses the inevitable dialogue that authors must maintain with those that preceded them: "All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you; you are also judged and held to account by them" (Atwood 2002, 178). In the case of *Hag-Seed*, the writer's negotiation with the dead is a particularly complex process, since Atwood's aim is to retell *The Tempest* to create a contemporary double of the original, a recognizable copy that is at the same time its own creature. *The Tempest* is commonly considered to be Shakespeare's last solo play, but Atwood's negotiations with the dead in this novel turns her *Tempest Retold* into an uncanny collaborative work in which Shakespeare contributes his Prospero and other characters, some of his basic premises and some of his language, but lets his collaborator play with them and transform them into something rich and strange. As for some of the characters of the original *Tempest*, this is a process of transformation by drowning—our drowning, the play's drowning—in the magic ocean of our suspension of disbelief.

Another way to express what Atwood does in this novel, a more wicked view of her negotiations with Shakespeare's text is provided by her choice of words at the end of the five-page summary of *The Tempest* which she includes in her book. While Winterson's summary of *The Winter's Tale* in *The Gap of Time* is placed *before* her novel (which she then labels with the music term "cover version"), Atwood chooses to include her summary, which she calls "The

¹³ Atwood mentions three specific performances of the play in the acknowledgements: Julie Taymor's 2010 film with Helen Mirren as Prospera, the Globe on Screen 2013 production with Colin Adam as Prospero and the Stratford, Ontario 2010 version with Christopher Plummer as Prospero.

Original," after her own retelling, so that it seems to work as her own teasing epilogue in the hall of mirrors that is *Hag-Seed*. Atwood's summary of the play closes with a reference to Prospero's epilogue, understood by her as his request to the audience to set him free "by using *its own magic* to applaud the play" (Atwood 2016a, 289; emphasis added), and thus Atwood's ending seems to be a playful wink to her devoted readers to apply *their* own magic in their response to this quirky, multifaceted, *hag-seed* of a novel which both is and is not *The Tempest*—a peculiar polymorphic creature that, like Caliban in the inmates' final reading of the play, is the offspring of two magicians: Shakespeare and Atwood, Atwood and Shakespeare.

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Shakespeare our contemporary in 2016: Margaret Atwood's rewriting of *The Tempest* in *Hag-Seed* SEDERI 27 (2017): 105-129. *Hag-Seed* is part of a larger project of fictional retellings of the Bard's plays conceived by Hogarth Press for the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of his death, a moment when Shakespeare's cultural capital seems to be circulating more energetically than ever. The present article analyses *Hag-Seed* as a neo-Shakespearean novel that is original in the double sense of the term that Atwood's teacher Northrop Frye so frequently remarked: imaginative, innovative, and inventive but also true to its fountain and origins. Save to Library. Download. Margaret Atwood's version of *The Tempest* is a detailed, nuanced reading of it in the form of comic fiction. Nor would one necessarily expect a contemporary retelling of a Shakespeare play to be a barrel of laughs. "Hag-seed" is one of Prospero's insults to Caliban in *The Tempest*, and a nasty insult it is. Author Margaret Atwood: one of the great living writers in English. But in this novel, a production of *The Tempest* is put on by a cast of prison inmates and Atwood plays it for its comedy. Atwood helpfully includes a summary of *The Tempest* at the end of *Hag-Seed*, if you've forgotten your high school English class. Briefly: Prospero is the duke of Milan, but instead of ruling he spends all his time studying magic, so his brother Antonio usurps him, sending Prospero and his daughter Miranda to a magical island. They're a swell of voices ready to be educated by Felix, demanding more violence and sex in their Shakespeare until they learn, with guidance from their wise teacher, to appreciate the beauty of the Bard. *Hag-Seed* is not interested in doing any kind of character study on these prisoners; it is also not interested in offering a social commentary on the state of Canada's prison system. Part Shakespeare, part Atwood, "*Hag-Seed*" is a most delicate monster -- and that's "delicate" in the 17th-century sense. It's delightful."--The Boston Globe. "Atwood has designed an ingenious doubling of the plot of "*The Tempest*" Felix, the usurped director, finds himself cast by circumstances as a real-life version of Prospero, the usurped Duke. If you know the play well, these echoes grow stronger when Felix decides to exact his revenge by conjuring up a new version of "*The Tempest*" designed to overwhelm his enemies."--The Wash... "Margaret Atwood's modern retelling is an entertaining romp of revenge, redemption."--Minneapolis Star-Tribune. "A triumph [...] The book illuminates the breadth and depth of the whole play. Margaret Atwood's -- whose latest book, *Hag-Seed*, will be released early October -- is seen on Sept 27. Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail. J. Kelly Nestruck. Follow Kelly. *Hag-seed* concerns a Canadian theatre director named Felix Phillips who puts on a production of *The Tempest* at a local prison with a cast of inmates who have colourful nicknames like 8Handz, Leggs and SnakeEye. At the same time, Phillips also seems to actually be living out the plot of Shakespeare play's -- using his actors and production to enact revenge against the men who overthrew him as artistic director at a theatre festival many years earlier (the way the wizard Prospero pulls off a similar trick on the men who exiled him from Milan and wash up on his enchanted island in Shakespeare's