

MARGARET ATWOOD'S *HAG-SEED*:  
PERFORMING WONDERS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

*Laura Giovannelli*

## **1. Introduction**

Just imagine a new-millennium performance of one of William Shakespeare's most celebrated and metatheatrical machine-plays being arranged within a penal institution in present-day Canada. Add to this the fact that an eerie director and producer, who conceals his identity under the captivating pseudonym of 'Mr Duke', chooses to put on an experimental and (in more than one sense) audience-oriented adaptation of *The Tempest* with a cast of prison inmates, so that Prospero's island literally becomes a New-World jail. Furthermore, within the (fictional) Fletcher County Correctional Institute none of the inmates happens to be known by his real name, being mockingly addressed via a nickname that often hints at his crime. A twenty-three-year-old computer hacker and forger thus goes by the funny name of '8Handz', and his slim figure, amazing technical skills and East Indian background make him a perfect Ariel for Mr Duke's postmodern, electro-digital performance. Also, if Sycorax imprisons Ariel in a cloven pine-tree because he refuses to obey her loathsome orders, so is 8Handz taken into custody after turning down the sordid proposal of an older colleague, who fails to coax him into hacking refugee charities and, out of spite, betrays him to the authorities.

A similar substratum of allusions and ironical parallelisms is discernible in the portrayal of 'WonderBoy', a handsome young man who used to sell fake life insurance. In Mr Duke's 'Persons of the Play' list (Atwood 2016a: 133-36), he appears as none other than Ferdinand, the King of Naples's son, whose own illusory decease, initial despair at his father's 'fake death' by drowning, and receptivity to Ariel's wonderful spells are ingrained in our cultural memory.

Instead, the role of Antonio, Prospero's usurping brother, is assigned to 'SnakeEye', a wily real-estate scammer of Italian extraction who falsified a number of deeds including his law degree and, as a sort of minor cousin of Bernard Madoff – the notorious American stockbroker and fraudster –, even tried his hand at a Ponzi scheme. Compounding the irony of it all is the presence of a red-haired Caliban, a former drug addict and veteran with an Irish and black background who fought in Afghanistan, developed post-traumatic stress disorder and was later charged with breaking-and-entering and assault. Should one associate his nickname 'Leggs' with his stout, muscular body and physical strength, the lustful savage in Shakespeare's play soon comes to mind, along with the anagrammatic/etymological pun concerning his name (as is commonly acknowledged, *Caliban* merges into the *cannibal* figure, deriving in turn from the anthropophagous *Carib*, or Kalinago, of the Lesser Antilles).

Finally, as regards the contrived apparitions of Iris, Ceres, and Juno in *The Tempest*, Mr Duke's provocative choice brings into play the glossy and manicured Disney world, as might be expected of a clever illusionist confronting a Westernized mass-consumption society. The three healing spirits of the goddesses in the Renaissance magus's betrothal masque are consequently replaced by cosier, Disneyfied popular icons, namely Snow White, Pocahontas, and Jasmine. The idealized benignity of these Princess dolls is however undercut by their being provided with weird digital voices, extravagant woolen outfits and heavy face-painting, as well as by their ghostly animation through a team of black-clad puppeteers (as, for that matter, the reassuring vision of a civilized community conveyed by Prospero's masque is curtly interrupted by his urge to resist the revels' forgetfulness and face impending threats).

These are some of the tantalizing features and ironic nods to both Shakespearean canon(s) and contemporary culture informing the multilayered, hall-of-mirrors world that Margaret Atwood ingeniously recreates in *Hag-Seed: The Tempest Retold*, a novel which came out in 2016, on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of

the Bard's death, clearly a momentous year of worldwide commemorations. What is more, her book was conceived as a contribution to the Hogarth Shakespeare project, consisting of a series of acclaimed writers' novels published as modern 're-imaginings' of Shakespeare's timeless plays.

A scintillating celebration of the playwright's trans-historical imaginary, with a parallel wink at the cultural capital circulating around the porous, post-/extra-textual phenomenon called 'Shakespeare', *Hag-Seed* has been described as an 'exuberant revisioning of *The Tempest* that teems with twins and doubles', according to a principle of 'gleeful multiplication' where Atwood does not seem to be 'enslaved by her master. Rap songs, Disney dolls, video montages and special effects spin her version off into a deliciously brave new world of its own' (Abrams 2016). A novel about physical and inner imprisonment as well as escape routes, it juxtaposes a stifling and sometimes obsessive sense of entrapment with a ramified network of open possibilities, both on the plotline level and from a metaliterary perspective. *The Tempest* is thus retrospectively transformed into a fluid hypotext, a mine of motifs (including the island as prison metaphor), situations and character profiles that easily hover between varying diegetic dimensions and shift across the narrative and theatrical medium.

## **2. The seeds and fruit of Margaret Atwood's experiment**

In a nutshell, *Hag-Seed* presents itself as a novel partly written as a script, framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue and comprising five sections and forty-seven chapters, which are loosely homologous to the acts and scenes in a prototypical theatre work of the Renaissance. Moreover, about half of the chapters are linked to a precise date, running from January to March 2013, which is the pivotal time span covered by the protagonist's plot for revenge and yearned-for redemption. The interpretive challenge begins as soon as the reader crosses the paratextual threshold – a domain that Genette (1997 [1987]) would sub-categorize in terms of peritextual fringe – since the titles and intertitles of the book's sections and

chapters weave together a panoply of short quotations from or allusions to *The Tempest*.<sup>1</sup> As to the textual core, *Hag-Seed* appears as interspersed with occasional references to the Shakespearean *corpus* as a whole, but most of all it sets out to incorporate a play inspired by Shakespeare's allegedly last (solo-authored, complete) comedy/romance, which is eventually staged, filmed, and screened in the detention centre.

Echoes of Shakespeare's *oeuvre* come to the foreground in the wake of Mr Duke's enthusiastic appreciation of such a great tradition and in connection with the plays that he manages to enact inside the Fletcher prison's walls, i.e. *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth*, preceding the artful and sensational treatment of *The Tempest* around which the novel crucially gravitates. Blatantly taking their cue from the various (real) Prison Shakespeare Programs, drama laboratories, arts-in-corrections protocols, and similar humanitarian initiatives that have been supported across the world over the past three or four decades, these performances fall into the category of a correctional education project called 'Literacy Through Literature'.

If still much in its infancy in the Canadian jurisdictional scenario – where the only inmate-run performing company turns out to be 'William Head on Stage' (WHoS), founded in 1981 at the homonymous federal prison in Victoria, British Columbia –, the correctional-institution production of Shakespearean plays for rehabilitation and reformation purposes is a relevant asset in the field of contemporary applied theatre. Indeed, this socially engaged art has recently grown into an impressive transnational phenomenon, with the United States

---

<sup>1</sup> These are the titles of the five sections: I. 'Dark Backward'; II. 'A Brave Kingdom'; III. 'These Our Actors'; IV. 'Rough Magic'; V. 'This Thing of Darkness'. The titles are all quotations from *The Tempest*; see respectively I.2.50; III.2.142; IV.1.148; V.1.50; V.1.275. As regards the internal titles, a large number of them are again echoes of the play, such as 'High charms' (Chapter 2; III.3.88); 'Rapt in secret studies' (Chapter 7; I.2.77); 'Oh you wonder' (Chapter 1; I.2.425); 'The isle is full of noises' (Chapter 17; III.2.133); 'Most scurvy monster' (Chapter 19; II.2.149); 'Some vanity of mine art' (Chapter 30; IV.1.41); 'Charms crack not' (Chapter 37; V.1.2); 'Our revels' (Chapter 46; IV.1.148); 'Now are ended' (Chapter 47; IV.1.148).

acting as a beacon. Suffice it to say that Curt L. Tofteland's best-known Kentucky- and Michigan-based 'Shakespeare Behind Bars' has now become an itinerant format and a sort of rallying cry for a healing, uplifting model of theatre-making. In the often quoted 'Vision Statement' that buttresses the project's mission, one reads that

Shakespeare Behind Bars was founded on the belief that all human beings are born inherently good. Although some convicted criminals have committed heinous crimes against other human beings, the inherent goodness still lives deep within them and can be called forth by immersing participants in the safety of a circle-of-trust and the creative process ... Shakespeare Behind Bars seeks to transform inmate offenders from who they were when they committed their crimes, to who they are in the present moment, to who they wish to become. ('About SBB: Mission & Vision - Vision Statement', <https://www.shakespearebehindbars.org/about/mission/>)

Locating itself squarely within a humanist ethic of reciprocity and entrenched sense of the individual's moral worth, this creed espouses a conception of theatrical performance as a tool for social integration and change. The liberal tenets regarding the inherent goodness of human beings, their redeeming, transformative potential and receptivity to attentive stimulus-and-response approaches, are at the basis of SBB's progressive principles and the credit that this program gives to cooperation and agency, empathy and trust, as well as accountability and learning. Founded by actor-director Curt Tofteland, a leading prison-arts practitioner and producer, SBB was launched in 1995 at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex in LaGrange, Kentucky. The pursuit of this charitable organization is contributing to the development of self-awareness, life and communication skills, relation and social responsibility among incarcerated (or post-incarcerated) adults and young people. This aim, it is believed, can be fulfilled by finding inspiration in Shakespeare's works, both drawing on their powerfully 'universal' themes and engaging in a long process of training, critical thinking, and rehearsal which is to climax in a series of performances before internee and outside audiences. Taking a nine-month rehearsal and production period as a model, such theatrical experiences are meant to awaken prisoners'

moral imagination and self-esteem, while fostering compassionate understanding and the capacity for self-analysis, so as to start figuring out their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Interestingly, from our point of view, prison-actors are encouraged to tap into their past experience, present condition, and creative imagination; it is little wonder that their extra-theatrical identities are expected to bring in vibrant nuances and poignant intimations all through the survey and staging of the plays. In Atwood's self-conscious narrative, this perception of an unconstrained continuity existing between a simulated world and the convicts' offstage life is exponentially magnified. First of all, her contemporary Prospero, into whose psychological recesses we are constantly projected via an internally focalized (heterodiegetic) narration, clings somewhat nostalgically to a mystique of the theatre as the 'art of true illusions! Of course it deals in traumatic situations! It conjures up demons in order to exorcise them!' (Atwood 2016a: 79). These emphatic tones acquire a sharp emotional tinge as he revives the word *catharsis* (Atwood 2016a: 80), the hyper-connoted Greek term which, with its references to purgation and cleansing from pity and fear through art – towards the envisaging of a new balance –, continues to hold currency among prison-theatre facilitators and arts-in-corrections coordinators.

Secondly, the slippage between ontological frames, diegetic and metadiegetic levels, illusion and mimesis, is intriguingly pushed to the fore by virtue of the uncommon symbiotic relationship that connects Mr Duke in *Hag-Seed* with the right Duke of Milan in *The Tempest*. Atwood's magus figure is an elitist, *avant-garde* artistic director of an Ontario theatre festival who indulged in intellectual and aesthetic self-absorption and was consequently – if bluntly – removed from his coveted position by a deviously manipulated festival board, wherein Anthony (Tony) Price, his Machiavellian public-relations manager, had been pulling wires in order to stealthily take over. These circumstances are of course meant to recall Prospero's championing of the mind, secret studies and the liberal arts, with

crafty Antonio eventually seizing power by taking advantage of his elder brother's neglect of 'worldly ends' (Shakespeare 1987: I.2.89). As the narrative progresses, parallels proliferate further so that F. Duke emerges not only as an eager, boldly inventive Shakespearean interpreter, but as a *real* embodiment of Prospero, a kindred spirit, an alleged incarnation of him in our age.

This metaleptic transposition of identity is soon adumbrated by his birth name, *Felix* Phillips, whose literal meaning becomes one with *Prospero*, both suggesting happiness, luck, fecundity, and a glowing health. At the same time, Felix appears as an epigone, a sneering, Bloomian ephebe<sup>2</sup> who is doomed to stand in Prospero's giant shadow while continuing to claim kinship with him, displaying the (Caliban-like?) 'grin of a cornered chimpanzee, part anger, part threat, part dejection' (Atwood 2016a: 10). No wizard in the full sense of the word, he is a sort of collateral descendant, a mimicker taking pains to extol secret alchemies and a daemonic power of his own.<sup>3</sup> Rather than commanding supernatural forces and controlling Nature, he is committed to a highly-refined, lush theatrical magic, of which his antique-shop freakish staff, an 'elegant

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, an interesting study on the phenomenology of poetic influence which investigates the relations among poets throughout history from a Freudian perspective. Bloom draws a parallel between the development of intra-poetic relationships and the family-romance dynamics. Such father figures as the English Renaissance poets are seen as 'great Inhibitors' with whom the 'young citizen of poetry, or ephebe as Athens would have called him' must come to terms. Literary ephebes are said to resort to misreading, acts of creative correction, and a palpable 'revisionary' attitude in order to carve out a space for themselves and overcome their anxiety of indebtedness (Bloom 1973: 10 *et passim*). In this view, 'the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance ... is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist' (Bloom 1973: 30).

<sup>3</sup> Here is a passage that gives a flavour of the snickering, tongue-in-cheek attitude shown by this recognizably Atwoodian character: '*Tip of the tongue, top of the teeth. Testing the tempestuous teapot. She sells seashells by the seashore. There. Not a syllable fluffed. He can still do it. He'll pull it off, despite all obstacles. Charm the pants off them at first, not that he'd relish the resulting sight. Wow them with wonder, as he says to his actors. Let's make magic!*' (Atwood 2016a: 10). The following thought is expressed with a further dash of amused self-scrutiny, as if Felix looked back on the iconographic representations of Prospero as an elderly wizard, epitomized by the stately figure to whom Henry Fuseli famously gave Leonardo da Vinci's features: '[Felix] cleaned himself up ... He even trimmed his beard. He'd grown it over the years; it was grey now, almost white, and he had long white eyebrows to match. He hoped he looked sage' (Atwood 2016a: 49).

Edwardian walking stick with a silver fox head on the top' and jade eyes (Atwood 2016a: 17), stands as a revealing synecdoche. Similarly, the posh-primitive garment that he designed for his role as Prospero in his first (sabotaged) performance of *The Tempest* was sewn out of unstuffed animal toys: squirrels and rabbits as well as wild lions and bears, with fake leaves, golden flowers and glittering feathers intertwined among the motley patches, in an effort to 'evoke the elemental nature of Prospero's supernatural yet natural powers' (Atwood 2016a: 17).

A belated, posturing double fluctuating between the poles of expressionist hyperbole and self-ironic, fanciful sophistication, Felix sits at an opaque intersection where his 'prosper-ity' loses the pristine quality of the original and turns subversive. Or, one should say, the analogies with his Shakespearean forebear/sibling rise to the surface via a two-way process of selection and heterogeneous, cross-historical dissemination. While some of Prospero's (shadowy) traits have more bearing than others on Felix's characterization, the protagonist of *Hag-Seed* is also a multifaceted creature who lends himself to virtually innumerable kinds of alignment within the fields of theatrical and audiovisual performance, the literary and artistic domains, across the centuries.

Although even a cursory overview would make us stray off topic here, it is worth noting how Felix's *boutade* 'Where there are boos, there's life!' (Atwood 2016a: 13) induces one to position him within an unorthodox trend of drama productions that purport to open up new horizons and hold audiences spellbound, while challenging bourgeois complacency and received assumptions.<sup>4</sup> Veering away from naturalistic modes, mimetic realism or strict

---

<sup>4</sup> Freed from their ironical and fictional connotations, Felix's performances might be seen as representative of those twentieth-century trends which 'contributed to Shakespeare's movement in the direction of a coterie art. One dominant turn was towards "director's Shakespeare", high-concept performances crafted by professional intellectuals who ... expected actors and designers to execute their interpretive ideas. Self-consciously engaged with theatrical and critical traditions, expected to say something new, unorthodox, even iconoclastic, director's Shakespeare aims primarily at the theatre aficionado already well versed in the plays and their history of performance and analysis' (Lanier 2002: 43). Yet, owing to a



historical accuracy, Felix has a penchant for costumes and set designs, props and special effects that push at the constraints of codified genres and acquire eccentric, fluid contours. In this regard, the magmatic substratum of *Hag-Seed*'s palimpsest may have gathered some impetus from, say, the *tableaux* virtuosity of Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991), a cutting-edge art cinema product pointing to the total artwork's aesthetic grandeur and starring the late Sir John Gielgud, himself a long-standing, revered Prospero in flesh and blood.<sup>5</sup> Looking further backwards, a fleeting hint could perhaps be detected of Giorgio Strehler's *La tempesta*, an exhaustively rehearsed masterpiece which was first performed at Teatro Lirico di Milano in June 1978; much more recently, in 2012, Piccolo Teatro Grassi hosted Myriam Tanant's *Remake. Racconto di Tempesta*, with Giulia Lazzarini and Maria Alberta Navello commemorating Strehler's admirable art and excellence in metacritical theatre-making. In the 1978 production, Tino Carraro/Prospero and Giulia Lazzarini/Ariel had worked in stunning synergy with the 'theater duke' from Trieste, who, in turn, appeared to lay claim to Shakespeare/Prospero's role, as if endeavouring 'to bring the English *Tempest* back to its Italian lineage' (Kott 2001 [1987, 1979]: 364-65). A curious reminder of Felix's attitude is to be found in Strehler's striking emphasis on the director-actor-audience dialogic circuit and in his vivid rendering of Ariel as 'a "theatrical" daughter of Prospero' (Kott 2001 [1987, 1979]: 366).

---

sort of karmic counterbalance, Director Phillips is bound to discover the rich potentialities of the 'Shakespearean kitsch' or 'Shakespop' of modern popular culture, too. As we shall see, his prison production of *The Tempest* includes rap – 'one of pop culture's outlaw idioms' (Lanier 2002: 15) –, contemporary slang, and electronic music.

<sup>5</sup> Gielgud's previous appearance in Peter Brook's introspective *mise-en-scène* at Stratford in 1957 is just one in a whole series. As pointed out by Stephen Orgel a few decades ago, 'Gielgud's Prospero, developed through a series of performances from 1930 to 1973, has proved in important ways a normative one for the modern theatre, though it is a norm that many directors have wished to displace. Expressive, intellectual, fastidious, his reading has always been built around the setpieces, and has given great emphasis to the richness and beauty of the verse throughout. At the Old Vic in 1930, at the age of twenty-six, he played the part beardless and modelled his appearance on Dante. In 1940 he again looked no more than his own age, wore a small goatee, and at times used spectacles. He brought to the role "a certain wry humour and scholastic irony". The magic of the play seemed his natural element; and in this interpretation, the exercise of Prospero's power expressed itself as a continual retreat into a world of fantasy' (1987: 80-82).

Yet, all these captivating clues may well become hermeneutic pitfalls, especially when the closing peritextual appendage of Atwood's novel is taken into account. As it happens, two liminal adjuncts follow 'Epilogue: *Set Me Free*', the aptly entitled diegetic coda of *Hag-Seed* borrowing the last three words from Prospero's final pleading and farewell to the audience: 'As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free' (Shakespeare 1987: V.1.337-38). The first peripheral adjunct contains a lucid and compressed summary of Shakespeare's romance, although the peculiar typesetting of its title – 'The Tempest: *The Original*' (Atwood 2016a: 285) – conspires to destabilize questions of authorship and historicized hierarchies by subverting the normative use of italics ('The Original', an appositive, is here italicized instead of '*The Tempest*'). Until the very end, then, Atwood seems to toy with the idea of 'The Tempest' as a meta-historical signifier which virtually embraces a whole repertoire of future appropriations and retellings.

A compelling zone of transaction, as Genette would have it, the second adjunct is even more double-edged. Under its neutral 'Acknowledgments' heading, and accompanying the author's words of thanks to editors, literary agents, collaborators, and assistants, this prose envoy works as a sort of *anticlosure* that piques the reader's curiosity (or would predispose his/her reception of the novel retrospectively, so to speak) by listing a number of possibly inspiring models for Felix's story. These models range from literature and drama to films, from critical studies (including prison literature) to real-world examples.

Temporarily restricting our inquiry to Shakespeare on stage and screen, a present-day lineage is traced which starts from American director Julie Taymor's *The Tempest* (2010). This film, excelling in scenic and costume design, featured charismatic Helen Mirren in the role of Prospera – supposedly the Duke of Milan's daughter, accused of witchcraft and patricide by her brother Antonio and consequently banished to a Hawaiian island –, Felicity Jones as a sympathetic

Miranda, Ben Wishaw as a spectral and pensive Ariel, and Djimon Hounsou as a creepy, solemn Caliban enveloped in a shamanic aura. Atwood subsequently mentions The Globe on Screen's version of *The Tempest*, a 2013 production by Jeremy Herrin, with Roger Allam impersonating Prospero at Shakespeare's Globe in London. She was most probably impressed by the British actor's high-pitched, riveting eloquence and by his heartwarming personification of an affectionate father as opposed to an awe-inspiring sorcerer. Here one caught the 'intensity of the father-daughter relationship', the afflatus of a 'profoundly paternalistic Prospero who struggled to let his beloved daughter go', recognizing that 'love sometimes means letting go' (Billington 2013, *passim*). Homage is also paid to Canadian acting legend Christopher Plummer, starring as Prospero in Des McAnuff's 2010 production of *The Tempest* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario. Plummer's intense performance struck a perfect balance between magniloquence and wit, lyrical flights and a feeling of paternal endearment. Wearing a patched-up, multicoloured cloak that might have set the pattern for the Atwoodian magician's grotesque garment, Plummer's presence gained in energy thanks to the partnership with Julyana Soelistyo, a talented actress/acrobat dressed in a light blue bodysuit and nimbly flitting about as an impish Ariel. In Felix Phillips's *mise-en-scène*, as a matter of fact, an ex-gymnast is cast for Miranda's role, while 8Handz/Ariel wears a pair of purple-blue ski goggles, blue rubber gloves and a bathing cap of the same colour, his face being painted blue, too.

After drawing attention to an American, British, and Canadian production, Atwood completes the picture by citing David Thomson's *Why Acting Matters* (2015), an engaging book in which the English prominent film critic and historian meditates on the power, mysteries, and dangers of acting, including its entanglement in the affairs of everyday life. Thomson highlights the dynamics relating to the casting process, screen and stage performance, while interweaving anecdotal appraisals of modern and contemporary celebrities. The topic of

Shakespearean performances worldwide and throughout history is also addressed via a reference to Andrew Dickson's *Worlds Elsewhere: Journeys around Shakespeare's Globe* (2015), where an impressive map is drawn comprising European and US areas, followed by chapters on India, South Africa, and China.

Canadian John Grigsby Geiger's *The Third Man Factor: Surviving the Impossible* (2009) – a collection of eyewitness reports about people avowing that an incorporeal being came to their aid when they were tackling near-death situations – is finally alluded to in connection with a haunting as well as soothing presence that lodges in Felix's mind, alongside his intellectual worship for the English Bard. Felix's obsession with things theatrical intermingles and jostles with his excruciating love for his daughter Miranda; if this comes as no surprise in a rewriting of *The Tempest*, a plot twist is introduced which pushes the protagonist of *Hag-Seed* to the brink of hallucinatory psychosis. This dismal twist has his daughter die of meningitis when she was three years old, while he was out of town on one of his productions. Felix was already a middle-aged widower at the time – Nadia, his young wife, had passed away just one year after their marriage due to a postpartum staph infection – and therefore found himself trying hard to 'survive the impossible', bearing the burden of loss, guilt, and regret over the following twelve years.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>The main timescale details chime in with *The Tempest*'s. Prospero states that Miranda was about *three* years old when they were banished from Milan in the dead of night and forced to board a rotting vessel, whereupon a *twelve*-year exile awaited them on a far-off island. Given the diversified topographical clues –informing the text itself or overlapping with the coeval historical background –, the play's setting might be traced back to both a Mediterranean region and a New-World land. The latter case sounds fascinating if heed is paid to the formation of the Virginia Company of London (1606) and the 1609 clamorous expedition to Jamestown, in the newly-founded colony of Virginia, when Sir Thomas Gates and Sir George Somers's ship got wrecked on the reef line of the Bermudas (1609-1610). Atwood treads yet another path, locating Shakespeare's imaginary and geographically splintered island in southwestern Ontario, probably – and quite suitably – on the fringes of the city of Stratford on the Avon River, a Canadian double for the Bard's birthplace in England. Felix's temporary dwelling (the eponymous 'Poor full cell' of Chapter 5) is an odd structure 'at the end of a disused laneway', looking as if 'it had been built into a low hillside, enclosed by the earth with only its front wall showing. It had one window, and a door standing agape ... The ceiling was low, with beams made of poles' (Atwood 2016a: 30-31).

In the first two chapters of the novel, ‘Seashore’ and ‘High charms’, which set out to creatively revisit Prospero’s monologue and stirring account of his past in one of the opening scenes of *The Tempest* (I.2.1-174), this getting to grips with misery, bitterness, and anguish is palpably stressed, before the protagonist’s thirst for revenge erupts full-blown. If Felix’s Miranda is not physically there, supportively listening to her father’s painful reminiscences and peremptory expostulations, she could all the more be compared to Prospero’s ‘cherubin / ... that did preserve’ him (Shakespeare 1987: I.2.154-55). By subsequently manifesting herself as a ghost, she manages to infuse a sort of supernatural strength in his soul, becoming, in a reformulation of the transcendent/paranormal phenomenon examined by Geiger, a *third (wo)man factor*: that is to say, a spiritual presence standing by and comforting those who are experiencing trauma or struggling in extreme environments, among whom are, significantly enough, shipwreck survivors.

Atwood, who, incidentally, also penned the introduction to Geiger and Owen Beattie’s *Frozen in Time: The Fate of the Franklin Expedition* (2004 [1987]), remarks in the Acknowledgments that ‘much about conversing with dead loved ones and other strange experiences can be learned in *The Third Man Factor*’ (Atwood 2016a: 292-93). In this perspective, her Miranda comes close to a guardian angel, a dear companion who prevents her bereaved father from leaping headlong into the abyss of insanity. At the same time, her entire existence appears to have been woven into *The Tempest*’s fictional texture since her birth – as confirmed by the following quotation, with its verbatim echoes of the play – and is bound to remain so up to her death and afterlife:

So he was on his own with his newborn daughter, Miranda. Miranda: what else would he have named a motherless baby girl with a middle-aged, doting father? She was what had kept him from sinking down into chaos ... Right after the funeral with its 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 to be a kind of reincarnation.

Miranda would become the daughter who had not been lost; who’d been a *protecting cherub*, cheering her exiled father as they’d drifted in their leaking boat over the dark sea; who hadn’t

died, but had grown up into a lovely girl. What he couldn't have in life he might still catch sight of through his art (Atwood 2016a: 14-15, my emphasis).

One wonders then who protects or presides over whom in this tricky terrain, where uncommonly permeable membranes separate life, death, and dream-like dramaturgical illusion. In fact, as the novel unfolds, the redeeming *bond* between Felix and Miranda tends to reach the far end of the spectrum and shades into *bondage*. For his part, he does not want to let her go, especially after his dismissal from the theatre festival's organization, when his plan for a gorgeous staging of *The Tempest* – a creation through which 'his Miranda would live again' (Atwood 2016a: 17) – fell to pieces. Cloistered away in his own 'Prospero's cell', he establishes an abiding paranormal dialogue which, though heartening, risks shutting him off from the world. Atwood's novel thus starts deviating from Geiger's path towards darker destinations. The reader is never allowed to know whether mediumistic powers are indeed part of Felix's up-to-date legacy from the Shakespearean magician-poet, or if the crumbling hovel he moves to is really haunted. The Canadian director's communication with the dead and its psychological *frisson* might as well be the product of a visionary neurotic harassed by a figment of his imagination, looking for a cure-all through feverish autosuggestion and a 'rich and strange' aesthetic metamorphosis (the first section of *Hag-Seed* tellingly closes with a chapter entitled 'Pearl eyes', recalling the second stanza of Ariel's charming song being heard by grief-stricken Ferdinand [I.2.397-403]).

What we do know for certain is that, after being fired – set adrift amidst the roaring sea, like Prospero –, Felix goes into hiding and lives for many years in self-imposed exile under the alias 'Mr Duke'. He takes refuge in a country shack, a forlorn backwater where the miserly family who own the place might at best be compared to watered-down stand-ins for some characters in *The Tempest*. At this point, Atwood is quick to probe our horizons of expectation, gearing our conjectures away from all-too-easy, surface-level correspondences:

[He] was ‘Mr Duke’ to Maude and Bert, and to their scowling little daughter, Crystal, who clearly thought Felix was a child-devourer, and to Walter, their surly teen-age son, who, for the first few years ... did indeed haul a few loads of fire-wood over to Felix’s modest abode every fall.

For a time, Felix tried to amuse himself by casting Maude as the blue-eyed hag, Sycorax the witch, and Walter as Caliban the semi-human log-hauler and dishwasher, in his own personal *Tempest* – his *Tempest* of the headspace – but that didn’t last long. None of it fitted ... If the Maude family was anything in *The Tempest*, they were lesser elementals (Atwood 2016a: 37-38).

At one remove from either a lush tropical paradise or a Utopian ‘brave new world’, these surroundings and their poor human capital seem to lay bare the grim as well as low-comedy traits of Shakespeare’s source text, the ‘lesser elementals’ being cognate with the farcical and conspiratorial/demotic overtones conveyed by such characters as Stephano and Trinculo in *The Tempest*’s sub-plot.

An archetypal pattern of Atwoodian strands should also be plain to see by now, starting from a peculiar combination of corrosive parody and romance, the facetious/grotesque and Gothic/weird, the ‘high seriousness and witty ironic vision which is the hallmark’ of her literary production (Howells, ‘Introduction’, in ead. 2006: 1). The references to choose from are undoubtedly many and might be extended, for instance, to the theme of the supernatural in Canadian fiction, where the Northern wilderness in particular has often materialized into ‘a symbol for the world of the unexplored, the unconscious, the romantic, the mysterious and the magical’ (Atwood, ‘Canadian monsters: Some aspects of the Supernatural in Canadian fiction’ [1977], in ead. 1982: 232).<sup>7</sup> These metaphorical

---

<sup>7</sup> In this provisional collection of samples concerning ‘Canadian monsters’, light is also thrown on a few figures of artist-magicians populating Canadian literature. Felix Phillips’s fictional ancestry might be partially traced to these ex-centric characters, wavering between the extremes of the demi-god, the true genius/master of illusions and the slightly insane, deceitful trickster. Not surprisingly, their marvellous and chilling feats are regarded with suspicion by a narrow-minded and puritanical audience. Atwood recalls, among others, Robertson Davies’s *Deptford Trilogy* (1970-75) and some of Gwendolyn MacEwen’s narrative works, such as *Julian the Magician* (1963), *King of Egypt*, *King of Dreams* (1971), and *Noman* (1972). Atwood later co-edited two comprehensive collections of MacEwen’s poetry (1993) and is clearly fascinated by that complex personality, as confirmed by the choice to dedicate *Hag-Seed* to the memory of two ‘Enchanters’, one of them being MacEwen herself (the other is Richard Bradshaw, an acclaimed opera conductor and General Director of the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto). Exerting a still deeper influence on the composition of *Hag-Seed* was probably

associations go in tandem with a wider mythography that still underpins Atwood's writing and has been scraping off the veneer of the mundane in order to offer insights into quest stories and underworld journeys, the psychohistories of nomadic or schizoid subjects, the dark-twin figure from folk-tales and ancient myths, the split self and its paranoid angst. Baffling interplays which juxtapose a rationally ordered universe with a threatening chaos, pantomimes of sham fright (as concocted by a trickster narrator or authorial figure) with a genuine fear of what may lurk behind the everyday, are other distinctive ciphers of Atwood's literary lexicon. Misperceptions and labyrinthine traps, the need to find a safe 'frontier garrison' and the parallel danger of a solipsistic withdrawal, are likewise deep-rooted concerns within her poetics of duplicity and challenging mirror-tricks. Among the facets of this seducing and frightening universe, the polarities of dislocation and belonging, crippling anxiety and reviving metamorphosis, are further marks worth considering. While bringing to light the borrowings from *The Tempest*, then, Prospero's double in *Hag-Seed* should also be approached as Atwood's brainchild, the protagonist of her own *Tempest* of the 'Canadian headspace'.

It would thus be tempting to detect a *fil rouge* that departs from the bush-garden *topos* conceptualized by major Canadian scholar (and Shakespearean critic) Northrop Frye – one of her professors at the University of Toronto's Victoria College in the 1950s, and the cartographer of the Canadian imagination *par excellence*<sup>8</sup> – and eventually unrolls within the rich fabric of statements by

---

Davies (1913-1995), a major Canadian novelist, playwright, and academic. Suffice it to mention his critical works on Shakespeare and theories of acting, his role of responsibility within the Stratford Shakespearean Festival of Canada, and the strong marks of his style, characterized by a conflation of serious meditation, Jungian overtones, and exuberant humour. Last but not least – and this is surely no coincidence – Davies named one of his daughters 'Miranda', while his 1951 novel *Tempest-Tost* focuses on the mounting of a production of *The Tempest* by an amateur company in Salterton, an imaginary Ontario town.

<sup>8</sup> Frye's authority as an intellectual and a literary theorist hardly needs stressing. What often goes unnoticed, though, is the fact that the very title of *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971) was inspired by Atwood's 1970 cycle of poems *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Journal II, 'Dream 1: The Bush Garden'), a memorable psychological reconstruction of Mrs Moodie's pioneering experience in Canada as first recorded in *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852). In



Atwood the cultural historian and commentator. Among the several inferential walks we might take, a trajectory glancing back at *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* conveniently serves our purpose here. An early (now relatively outdated) map-making attempt to trace the contours of national identity through a readily accessible, thematic survey of Canadian literature, *Survival* spelled out a victimization/endurance dynamics that can be briefly re-engaged to determine Felix's victim position and search for escape patterns. His 'Canadian victim' parable could be inscribed in a mature phase, when the annihilating sense of threat has gone beyond a hostile or untrustworthy natural environment and turned psychological, with the obstacles and menace being internalized. Yet, with regard to what Atwood called the four 'Basic Victim Positions', Felix appears to totally skip Position One (that is, denying outright 'the fact that you are a victim') and Two ('To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim', but attributing it to an unassailable Victor, an external Will or Necessity). In fact, he jumps straight to Position Three – according to which the subject recognizes victimhood but refuses to accept its assumed inevitability, identifies empirical causes, and channels energies or anger into constructive action – and Position Four, the healing perspective of the 'creative non-victim', when the victor/victim role-playing has become obsolete (Atwood 2004 [1972]: 46-49).

This of course happens because, beyond the sheer frame of national identity, Felix/Prospero embodies the protean Artist, the Chosen One who is to break evil spells and use his magic to catalyze positive transformation (with an eye to gaining retribution, too). In order to accomplish this task, though, he needs to start afresh, from the 'lesser elementals' of his impaired condition and embarking on an underworld journey that prompts him to navigate the curved labyrinth of his mind, unearth buried fears and confront the 'violent duality' of ominous counter-voices. Belying his name and temporarily falling prey to gnawing

---

her creative retelling, Atwood proceeds to foreground the English immigrant's symptoms of 'paranoid schizophrenia' and 'violent duality' of vision, to finally imagine her return from the nether regions as a witness and haunting spirit of the nation wandering in twentieth-century Toronto.

unhappiness, Felix experiences a critical rite of passage, or, in Atwood's idiom again, he can be said to orchestrate a 'negotiation with the dead'.

*Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* is the title of Atwood's 2002 volume of essays based on her contributions to the Empson Lecture Series (University of Cambridge, 2000). During an interview with Brian Bethune immediately following the publication of *Hag-Seed*, she referred to one of these six lectures as a key to understanding why, when asked by Hogarth Press to reinterpret one of the Bard's works for their Shakespeare project, she instinctively took on *The Tempest* (Atwood 2016b). One of the reasons, besides the hyper-signifying, spell-binding richness of the play itself, was her enduring interest in the multifarious personality of the 'master of magic' pulling the strings to control destinies, as confirmed by her fourth lecture in the series, which was included in the collection as '*Temptation: Prospero, the Wizard of Oz, Mephisto & Co. Who waves the wand, pulls the strings, or signs the Devil's book?*'. *Hag-Seed*, the fourth Hogarth Shakespeare novel (looking in turn at his fourth romance), might therefore be obliquely approached through the lens of this *fourth* Empson Lecture, where Atwood carries out a lively excursion into the literary personifications of the artist as an illusionist, a craftsman/chemist, and a Faustian figure. In this variegated picture, Shakespeare's Prospero occupies the highest rung, the top shelf reserved to the 'grand-daddy of all the rest' (Atwood 2008 [2002]: 102).

While conceding that Prospero uses the arts of illusion 'for the purposes of moral and social improvement' (Atwood 2008 [2002]: 102), Atwood tacitly agrees with the large number of modern critics who have been assessing Shakespeare's Duke not so much as a flawless or utterly benign sage, but as a hero with 'a thousand and one faces', so to speak. To quote from Stephen Orgel's edition of *The Tempest* – one of her avowed sources in *Hag-Seed* –, Prospero's historical reception has anchored him to manifold contexts/models (depending on each re-producing culture and audience-response) and hereby

unveiled his elusive complexity. Prospero has alternately been linked to ‘a noble ruler and mage, a tyrant and megalomaniac, a necromancer, a Neoplatonic scientist, a colonial imperialist, a civilizer’, with the corollary of the ‘radically differing claims about Shakespeare’s allegiances’ (Orgel 1987: 11).<sup>9</sup>

In this ocean of shifting identities and contradictions – which implicitly strengthen the case for viewing *The Tempest* as an open text, whose chameleon-like quality has been boosted via a centuries-old performing tradition – Atwood takes however a different course from the high road followed by much contemporary criticism (and by several Shakespearean rewrites aiming to deconstruct and reroute Western myths). In fact, she wanders off from the surge of postcolonial readings that hinge on the Prospero/Caliban dichotomy – the European master/native slave trope – and usually develop or rethink the racial issue addressed by such seminal works as Octave Mannoni’s *Psychologie de la colonisation* (1950; *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, 1956) and Aimé Césaire’s *Une Témpeste* (1969), to name a couple of paradigmatic examples. Atwood’s artistic director living in an Ontario town embodies no imperial-emissary or proto-colonizer hypostasis. Instead, he reminds us of a secularized ‘mage’ of a roguish middling sort, a scaled-down version of a ‘tyrant and megalomaniac’ whenever it comes to art and theatrical performance. His wayward and mercurial ambivalence is bound up with the ambiguity of an Orphic artist for whom the *thing of darkness* is ultimately his ‘criminal self’ and the poetic mysteries he has been unravelling,<sup>10</sup> as Atwood intimates in her lecture,

---

<sup>9</sup> In the Acknowledgments, among the books she found particularly helpful, Atwood cites the ‘excellent and highly useful edition of *The Tempest* in the Oxford World’s Classics series; the editor is Stephen Orgel’ (Atwood 2016a: 291). Echoes of Orgel’s commentary can occasionally be heard within the novel. See for instance the following string of rhetorical questions, palpably mimicking the American scholar’s evaluations: ‘So many contradictions to Prospero! Entitled aristocrat, modest hermit? Wise old mage, revengeful old poop? Irritable and unreasonable, kindly and caring? Sadistic, forgiving? Too suspicious, too trusting? How to convey each delicate shade of meaning and intention? It can’t be done. They cheated for centuries when presenting this play. They cut speeches, they edited sentences, trying to confine Prospero within their calculated perimeters’ (Atwood 2016a: 179).

<sup>10</sup> See Prospero’s famous sibylline words, literally acknowledging Caliban as his own ‘property’: ‘... this demi-devil – / For he’s a bastard one – had plotted with them / To take

where she also alludes to the Matryoshka-doll effect of interpolated voices in *The Tempest* (a strategy she would cleverly exploit in her 2016 novel):

Without his art, Prospero would be unable to rule. It's this that gives him his power. As Caliban points out, minus his books he's nothing. So an element of fraud is present in this magician figure, right from the beginning: altogether, he's an ambiguous gentleman. Well, of course he's ambiguous – he's an artist, after all ... Consider the words in which Prospero, alias the actor who plays him, alias Shakespeare who wrote his lines, begs the indulgence of the audience: 'As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free.' It wasn't the last time that art and crime were ever equated. Prospero knows he's been up to something, and that something is a little guilt-making (Atwood 2008 [2002]: 103).

The traits of Prospero that have more bearing than others on Felix's characterization, then, partake of this kind of crepuscular ambiguity, as Atwood perceives it. A basic assumption in her poetics is that literary writing is ancestrally motivated by 'a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead' (*Descent: Negotiating with the dead. Who makes the trip to the Underworld, and why?*, in Atwood 2008 [2002]: 140). And Felix does have his Eurydice to bring back from the dead, this being Miranda, his daughter and Muse, a person as well as a reification of his brutally suppressed creative energy. Like Ariel, she is a 'spirit in thrall' (Atwood 2016b) and, within the metatheatrical allegory that permeates *Hag-Seed*, she falls very much in line with Strehler's 'theatrical daughter'. Indeed, Ariel's androgynous figure – whose sexual identity has not always been represented as male throughout *The Tempest's* production history – is here split into a male and female counterpart, two intimately related agents who are equally instrumental in bringing about retribution and regeneration. While 8Handz, one of the inmates mentioned at the beginning of

---

my life. Two of these fellows you / Must know and own; this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine' (Shakespeare 1987: V.1.272-76). Orgel's argument may have served as a conceptual entrance for Atwood's portrayal: 'If Prospero in his moment of triumph speaks as Medea, then we have no grounds for making easy distinctions between white and black magic, angelic science and diabolical sorcery. The battle between Prospero and Sycorax is *Prospero's battle with himself*, and by the play's end he has accepted the witch's monstrous offspring as his own' (Orgel 1987: 23, my emphasis).

this paper, is to personify the technologically-minded, stage-manager male side during the prison production of the play, Felix's daughter is associated with an ethereal, female manifestation of Prospero's air-spirit.<sup>11</sup>

This finally allows us to circle back to the analysis of the novel's plot and its metaphoric ciphers. As already underlined, Felix appears at once as more vexed and cynical, less dignified and forbearing than his Shakespearean precursor. The awareness of having being wrongfully dethroned does nothing but fuel his acrimony and *mal d'esprit*, in accordance with a tragicomic and occasionally grotesque vein which bears a visible Atwoodian imprint. Furthermore, he cannot help brooding upon retaliation and revenge rather than ways to solicit repentance and reconciliation. While walled-in in his shanty, this calculating charmer starts from scratch but does not cease to wave his wand, taking pains to re-create meaning and find an order that would suit his plans. He thus spends the first nine years of his exile keeping track of his enemies and refreshing his skills via the white-magic arsenal of Internet technology (from Google to YouTube and email accounts). More crucially, he sets out on his 'risky trip to the Underworld'. Whether a real spirit or the product of an obsessive-compulsive neurosis, the ghost that he conjures up is, on the one hand, like balm for his grieving soul. During their meals together, she gently (almost maternally) scolds him when he does not follow any balanced diet, while he, as a provident father/educator, teaches her the rules of chess. This is more than a passing nod to the scene in *The Tempest* (V.1.172-78) where Prospero famously pulls aside the curtain to reveal Miranda and Ferdinand engaged in a game of chess, through

---

<sup>11</sup> The association of Ariel with the female sex and a daughter figure also informs 'Tempests', a story included in Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen)'s collection *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), which Atwood lists in the Acknowledgments among her numerous sources. In this story, Valdemar Soerensen, an eccentric theatre-director, dreams of a *Tempest* production where he is to play Prospero's part. He eventually assigns Ariel's role to Malli, an enthusiastic young actress who becomes entangled in his obsessive plan to bring the Shakespearean world back to life. As in *Hag-Seed* – but in a melodramatic and romantic-fantasy vein that is alien to Atwood –, a complex interpenetration between theatrical illusion and mimesis, fake and real storms, gradually turns Soerensen, Malli (a personification of both Ariel and Miranda), and a few other characters into recognizable *dramatis personae* from *The Tempest*.

which the magus probably intends to acquaint his daughter with the duplicitous codes of society, its pawn-moving exchanges and strategic role-playing (including marriage contracts).

On the other hand, the Miranda that Felix wills into being and talks to for even a longer period – twelve years, so that she apparently grows up into a sensitive fifteen-year-old girl, like her double in *The Tempest* – gets tired of waiting every day by the chess-set and begins to show signs of both possessiveness and female empowerment. Atwood seems to pick up a few seeds lying buried in Shakespeare's source text and make them sprout. If the mythologized (patriarchal) image of an innocent and passive Miranda has generally led critics to ignore the component of self-conscious responsiveness and independence of judgment that nonetheless finds its way into the portrayal of Prospero's daughter,<sup>12</sup> in *Hag-Seed* the manipulating magician is bound to come to terms with female self-assertiveness.

To prevent their relationship from degenerating into a noxious 'circle game', Felix realizes he must *negotiate* with this spectral visitation and give her access to the theatre realm. In the hyperconnoted terms we should now be able to grasp, the 'theatre must be in her blood, because now she's determined. She insists on being in the production' and meet her Ferdinand. Echoing Prospero's rebuke to rebellious Ariel ('How now? Moody?', Shakespeare 1987: I.2.245), Felix bursts out with the retort 'What, moody?' (Atwood 2016a: 168), and these words seem to work like a mantra. When he subsequently runs through the line relating to Prospero enjoining Ariel to approach (I.2.188), Felix hears his Miranda answer in unison with Shakespeare's airy spirit: 'All hail, great master, grave sir, hail! I come

---

<sup>12</sup> This is no longer so, as attested by countless contemporary productions of the play which have turned conservative cultural policies on their head by filling the gaps and considerably expanding on obliterated textual material. Orgel helps readers find relevant clues when pointing out that Shakespeare's Miranda is also 'conscious of what her relation to her father requires her to say ... Directors who decide to underplay the second claim in favour of the first will leave us unprepared for the decidedly active Miranda who indignantly berates Caliban ('Abhorred slave...', lines 350ff.), energetically defends Ferdinand against her father's incomprehensible attacks (445ff.), and disobeys his injunction against speaking with Ferdinand (3.1.36-7, 57-9)' (1987: 17).

/ To answer thy best pleasure, be't to fly ...' (Atwood 2016a: 180). This is an example of how, in David Thomson's phrasing (*Why Acting Matters*), the all-pervading ways in which acting can matter operate through the novel; both rehearsed and spontaneous, acting and its alchemies thrillingly overlap with everyday communication, becoming larger than life.

The negotiation between father and daughter ends with the sealing of a positive deal. Miranda has 'made a decision: she'll be understudying Ariel – surely he [Felix] can't raise any objections to that' (Atwood 2016a: 180). She is going to blend in at rehearsals and throughout the staging at Fletcher Correctional, hovering like a diaphanous glimmer behind 8Handz (her sublunary male counterpart), and now and then prompting him.

When the novel draws to its close, both 8Handz and Miranda achieve their longed-for freedom, the former being granted early parole and the latter being released from her glass coffin as a revived Snow White. *The Tempest* has by now been staged and all spells – be they good or evil – are broken. In 'Epilogue: *Set Me Free*', Felix prepares to leave his shanty, with Maude and her family having vanished into thin air like raw 'dream stuff'. Although he has got his old job back at the theatre festival, he is ready and willing to delegate power to younger and talented collaborators. The ritualistic staff-breaking and book-drowning are to follow soon, then.

While 8Handz, possibly an emancipated Ariel's double, joins him on a cruise to the Caribbean (is Atwood playfully engaging at last with a postcolonial perspective, given that the West Indies were a notorious 'crime scene' of white imperial exploitation?), the entity being unreservedly returned to the elements is Miranda, whose ontological affirmation supplants Prospero's momentous entreaty and valedictory address. In *Hag-Seed*, in fact, the curtain falls on Miranda's liberation from the glass cage of her father's aesthetic credo, so that the imperative 'Set me free' might as well be attributed to this female Ariel/Muse who, finally, *is*:

He picks up the silver-framed photo of Miranda, laughing happily on her swing. There she is, three years old, lost in the past. But not so, for she's also here, watching him as he prepares to leave the full poor cell where she's been trapped with him ... She's asking him a question. Is he compelling her to accompany him on the rest of his journey?

What has he been thinking – keeping her tethered to him all this time? Forcing her to do his bidding? 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).

Needless to say, investigations of gender politics, the female psyche, and the gulf between history and silenced *herstories*, are other recurrent motifs in Atwood's writing, and should be duly appraised within the pattern of self-referential strands that inform her *Tempest Retold*.<sup>13</sup> True, *Hag-Seed*'s polysemous richness resists pigeonholing, inasmuch as it ranges from the novel's main plot to the branching off of secondary stories (in a very Shakespearean system of mirrors, at that), from the hypotext's legacy to the paratextual links. But each time knots may be untangled by carefully retracing our steps to, say, banished enchantress Prospera in Julie Taymor's film, or the relevance of the father-daughter relationship in Roger Allam's performance. The whole nexus of themes, atmospheres, and paradigms highlighted so far should be paid attention to, including the prison *topos* and prison-theatre practice, which shall be examined in the following section.

As a concluding gloss, it is worth underlining that Atwood's 'novelization' of *The Tempest* springs from a genuine appreciation of Shakespeare's genius. The very inclusion of *Hag-Seed* in the Hogarth Shakespeare Series, celebrating the Bard's 'brand' through a number of literary transformations by bestselling novelists, deters one from approaching it as a political counter-discourse committed to 'writing back' to the Empire.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding its (humorously)

---

<sup>13</sup> For a deeper analysis of Atwood's Miranda as a vital 'motivator of action' and 'surrogate mother', as opposed to a helpless pawn on the patriarchal chessboard, see Aldoory 2017.

<sup>14</sup> This expression is of course meant as an echo of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), a seminal text within the Postcolonial Studies field where attention is drawn to the literary production of peoples formerly colonized by the British and, in more general terms, by European countries. Light is shed on the political, ethical and creative force of such works, unfolding as counter-narratives and compelling answers to Western



misleading title, Atwood's book enjoys a conspicuous place as a homage to Shakespeare's canon seen as an everlasting Signifier, witness the ebullient afterlife of that canon in our day. In this respect, her dialogue with Shakespeare is not new, since it originated in the years she attended university and progressively gained ground through her published works, such as her short stories.<sup>15</sup>

This is not to say, though, that she subscribes wholesale to a myth steeped in the Stratford-Upon-Avon backdrop. Atwood pushes the point further and wittily gives shape to a Canadian Stratford version where Felix takes centre stage via his surname, which, we are told, is borrowed 'from the late [English-born] Robin Phillips, long-time theatre director at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada' ('Acknowledgments', in Atwood 2016a: 292). Robin Phillips (1940-2015) successfully ran this internationally recognized Canadian festival throughout six seasons in the late 1970s, helping it achieve worldwide acclaim. Thanks to his masterly productions – which, differently from Felix's feats of expressionist extravaganza, prioritized historical accuracy and minimalism –, Phillips received public acknowledgment and honours from the Canadian cultural establishment.<sup>16</sup>

---

(Eurocentric) cultural tradition, which is in many ways appropriated, deconstructed, and purposefully rethought or rewritten.

<sup>15</sup> In her illuminating analysis of *Hag-Seed*, Muñoz-Valdivieso states that 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 college, where Frye was her teacher. 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* (2017: 110-11). This essay also touches on women authors' rewritings or adaptations of *The Tempest* and includes references to Canadian examples, such as Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974).

<sup>16</sup> In 2005, Robin Phillips was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada; five years later, he received the prestigious Governor General's Performing Arts Award. In the Acknowledgments, Atwood recommends watching *Robin and Mark and Richard III* (2016), a posthumously-released documentary film which testified to Phillips's actor-coaching qualities;

Atwood similarly refers to Felix's ambition to turn the Ontario repertory celebrations into 'the standard against which all lesser theatre festivals would be measured' (Atwood 2016a: 12), but she gives Stratford the funny name of 'Makeshiweg' (make-*swag*, 'cool'? or make-*shwig*, a 'gulp of an alcoholic drink?'), implicitly mocking its mores and manners and again bringing her ludic impulse into play. And, within the contemporary Canadian context at large, both this ludic vein and a phenomenon of Shakespearean 'vampirization' appear to characterize a variegated corpus of revivals, rewritings, and adaptations.<sup>17</sup>

All writers 'must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past' (*Descent: Negotiating with the dead*, in Atwood 2008 [2002]: 160). In her compellingly dialogical and multidirectional novel, Atwood accomplishes this task by leading a pivotal series of negotiations (literary, cultural, and transnational). Yet, if the seeds she has been sowing or collecting are of a hybrid variety, the fully ripened fruit shows a brand of its own. She carves out her niche beside Shakespeare's iconic position, like a Canadian daughter of Miranda or, more provokingly, a blue-eyed Sycorax, the witch exiled to the unnamed island before Prospero's arrival, a dark double

---

he was featured while guiding Mark McKinney through script analysis of Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

<sup>17</sup> In her introduction to a recent critical collection, Makaryk argues that, if 'Canadians were slow to acquire Shakespeare, they are now eager in their rush to possess him. Shakespeare is, at present, a profitable market commodity ... the property of both high and low culture, stage, classroom, text, intertext, and webtext. Thoroughly permeating all aspects of Canadian culture, Shakespeare is a ready-made, immediately recognizable source of meaning for any number of endeavours. Such multiplying Shakespeares increase the value of his ownership' (2002: 38). More particularly, Nestruck assumes that *Hag-Seed* 'falls into a perhaps unappreciated subgenre of Canadian literature – fiction about amateur, semi-pro or underfunded productions of Shakespeare. Notable works in that vein stretch from Robertson Davies's *Tempest-Tost* (1951), about a small-town troupe putting on *The Tempest*, to Carole Corbeil's *In The Wings* (1998), about a Toronto alternative theatre's production of *Hamlet*, to Aaron Bushkowsky's Leacock-nominated *Curtains for Roy* (2014), in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is staged at a winery in the Okanagan Valley' (2016). For her part, Atwood underlines her cultural debt to Frye's essay on *The Tempest* in *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* (1986), with its perceptive anatomy of the play's romantic and operatic spectacle, upturning of social and ontological categories, intricate and paradoxical blending of the real and illusory (see again the novel's Acknowledgments).

and stark symbol of insidious feminine power. In a contribution tellingly entitled ‘Witches’, Atwood confessed in amused self-awareness that her favourite New England (probable) ancestor was Mary Reeve Webster, a seventeenth-century alleged sorceress who miraculously survived death by hanging (*The Handmaid’s Tale* is also partly dedicated to Webster’s memory). Atwood then added that we ‘still think of a powerful woman as an anomaly, a potentially dangerous anomaly ... Women writers are particularly subject to such projections, for writing itself is uncanny: it uses words for evocation rather than for denotation; it is spell-making’ (‘Witches’ [1980], in Atwood 1982: 331).

*Hag-Seed* – whose title is derived from one of the insults hurled by Prospero at Caliban, Sycorax’s brutish and misshapen son, whom the mage holds captive (Shakespeare 1987: I.2.363) – could thus be defined in a metaliterary sense as the *seed* of a *hag*, as the textual ‘monster child’ of an author/sorceress, a chthonic weaver of illusions, a sister of ‘sybils, witches, supreme plotters’ (Howells 1996: 62). Hence, again, the deviation from the postcolonial truisms one would expect to find in a contemporary rewrite of *The Tempest* penned by an Anglophone author, flaunting a resonant title and apparently issuing a clarion call to let subalterns speak.<sup>18</sup> Caliban, the debased New-World Other and colonized-servant epitome, does *not* take the podium here as a Fanonian embodiment of blackness or a revolutionary counter-icon beating Prospero at his own game. Rather, he is rescued from oblivion through some lingering effects produced by the reiterated ‘thing of darkness’ motif, the inmates’ fervent discussion of his character traits, and the hulking prison-actor playing his part. In the final recording of the jailhouse performance, Leggs is immortalized in a cameo appearance while wearing a scaly Godzilla headgear with lizard eyes and singing a

---

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, some critics pointed to the jarring mismatch between the novel’s title and its actual plot development. As far as Atwood’s handling of race is concerned, Broad, for one, remarks that ‘ultimately telling the story from Prospero/Felix’s perspective leaves *Hag-Seed* firmly in territory that predates these critical [postcolonial] readings, as does her casting. Atwood’s characters are either white civilians or non-white criminals ... There is a veritable void where Atwood’s Caliban should be; beyond the title, his character and the critical readings centred around him seem to have had little impact on the novel at all’ (2017).

brazen rap number to the accompaniment of his ‘Hag-Seeds band’. This is basically how, in the novel, Caliban’s drive for self-affirmation is gaudily displayed, to be soon put to rest and harmlessly revived in the fifth and last section, ‘This Thing of Darkness’, focusing on the imaginary afterlives of *The Tempest*’s characters.

However, theatre magic also creates mesmeric, synergistic moments when ontological barriers dissolve and the whole incarcerated population, regardless of their skin colour, seem to be sympathetically ‘possessed’ by Caliban, as though he were ‘disembodied and re-constituted as a multifarious collective ... a repository of the very human foibles and failures of a Canadian prison’ (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017: 116), virtually encompassing Felix’s vengeful drive and his enemies’ misconduct, too. If admittedly losing the seditious and primitive potential of Shakespeare’s sub-human slave, *Hag-Seed*’s Caliban retains some subterranean poignancy by dint of this deracialized, collective dissemination.

Ultimately, through a further spell cast by Atwood-the-witch and Felix-the-enchanter, the original hag-born character manages to people the island/prison/theatre with half-tamed Calibans who learn to act and even to curse, in a colourful demotic idiom drawing on *The Tempest*’s script.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Felix’s first written assignment for the Fletcher Correctional Players,<sup>20</sup> the troupe of inmates who are to perform in his Shakespearean adaptation, requires them to make a list of the curse words they come across in the Bard’s romance. In their circumscribed *theatrum mundi* – the rooms in the medium- to maximum-security jail where they go through the text’s scenes and concentrate on rehearsals –, the

---

<sup>19</sup> In the Acknowledgments, Atwood mentions a source titled *Shakespeare Insult Generator*. This is probably Barry Kraft’s *Shakespeare Insult Generator: Mix and Match More Than 150,000 Insults in the Bard’s Own Words* (2014), although there are several digital archives and websites offering access to this funny corpus, even expanding it through permutations and new random combinations. See, among others, <http://www.literarygenius.info/a1-shakespearean-insults-generator.htm/>; <http://www.mainstrike.com/mstservices/handy/insult.html/>, last accessed on 01-08-2018.

<sup>20</sup> This company of ‘correcting Fletchers’ staging Shakespeare’s farewell romance might ironically look back on the taking over of John Fletcher, the Bard’s historical collaborator, as the new house playwright for the King’s Men.

prisoners are not allowed to use swear words unless they are Shakespearean quotations. Felix's wicked pedagogical games have their iron rules, and these must be followed if actors want to score points and be hired.

Mr Duke sets out to celebrate the marriage of art and crime, aesthetic creation and fraud, from the very inception stage of his revenge plan up to his highest illusionist feat: a *tempest-raising* show performed inside the prison and designed to snare his foes, beginning with Tony Price, his gold-grubbing traitor and usurper.

### **3. 'It's about prisons': Felix Phillips's production of *The Tempest***

As occurs with a fair number of themes developed in *Hag-Seed*, the prison setting and the experience of incarceration or panoptic surveillance are not new to Atwood's narrative, as attested by such novels as *Bodily Harm* (1981), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), predating her Shakespearean retelling by just one year (and dialoguing with Shakespeare in its own way, too). In *Hag-Seed*, however, this particular theme emerges as strictly conjoined with a close reading of *The Tempest* carried out by Felix and his acting trainees *inside* a carceral environment, ascending a scale of semantic and figurative complexity.

Through her artistic director, Atwood anatomizes *The Tempest* as a play which, besides capitalizing on scenic machinery, stagecraft wonders, and operatic devices, and ultimately extolling the value of forgiveness and second chances, is actually haunted to the core by images of imprisonment and isolation, escape and long-awaited release. Originally performed at court as well as in the Blackfriars Theatre's indoor candlelit space (c.1611), and then at court again during the festivities in honour of the wedding of James I's daughter (1612-13), *The Tempest* seems to be genealogically grounded in a closed environment setting. As to the textual level, the play is deeply imbued with the notion of confinement. From Caliban's rock to Ariel's cloven pine, from Prospero's cell to the mock-enslavement of his shipwrecked enemies – 'all knit up / In their distractions' owing to the magician's high charms (Shakespeare 1987: III.3.89-90) –, the

spectator is plunged into a realm of ‘paralyzing anxiety’ where the princely enchanter often resorts to a ‘romance equivalent of martial law’ and appears at the end ‘anxious and powerless before the audience to beg for indulgence and freedom’ (Greenblatt 1990: 143, 156-57).

Shakespeare’s wronged Duke is both warden and captive on his island/penitentiary, which is at once a physical place of forced exile and a prison of regret, enervating tension and wounded pride, a distressing chasm of the mind. Atwood’s wronged Duke similarly wrestles with a solitary-confinement condition, although his contacts with the detention centre’s population are triggered by an attempt to break out of his cocoon of solipsism and paranoia and re-invent himself as a creative non-victim. After nine years spent in his backwoods hovel, rubbing shoulders with Miranda’s ghost, he feels it is now high time to take action: ‘Snap out of it, Felix. Pull yourself together. Break out of your cell. You need a real-world connection’ (Atwood 2016a: 47). Paradoxically enough, this connection falls back on a world which is neither free, nor totally real, inasmuch as the teaching job he gets at the local prison ends up paying tribute to the mesmerizing charms of Shakespearean performance. During their first meeting, before introducing himself with the *nom de plume* ‘Mr Duke’, he addresses his *Tempest* troupe thus: ‘Welcome to the Fletcher Correctional Players. I don’t care why you’re in here or what they say you’ve done ... As of this moment, you are actors. You will all be acting in a play’ (Atwood 2016a: 84).

Calling attention to the intertwining of the theatrical and extra-theatrical – to a circular or mirror-like framework whereby the stage world is made continuous with what lies outside the theatre – would be redundant at this juncture. Instead, what should be taken notice of is the way Felix immediately traces *The Tempest* to an overwhelming sense of confinement – ‘Oh, the actors will relate to it, all right ... It’s about prisons’ (Atwood 2016a: 72) – and the universal theme of vengeance (vs reconciliation).

Swinging back and forth between his shack/cell and the Fletcher prison/island, he organizes his course by heightening psychological support (fostering cooperation and team spirit) and adopting teaching methods which aim to stimulate and actively engage this unorthodox group of learners. Classroom debates, individual study and written assignments are crucial steps on Felix's agenda, well before entering the stages of casting and skill-gaining, warm-up exercises or rehearsal sessions. To build a basic knowledge of the topic, his acting troupe must go over the playbook, from memorization to dissection and evaluation; meanwhile, they are encouraged to explore the main characters and the island's kaleidoscopic symbolism. Felix is ready to help by providing introductory notes, a keyword list (including of course 'Prisons'), and essential clues to figure out modern correspondences; for instance, he leads them to surmise that a twenty-first century equivalent for Ariel is likely to be a flying alien or a special-effects expert rather than a fairy, a role no inmate would otherwise play. His second written exercise consists in finding out how many kinds of prisons are present or hidden in *The Tempest*; the students are quite successful in their research, since they manage to spot eight of them, in connection with different characters and circumstances.<sup>21</sup> But Felix/Prospero challenges them to look for the ninth prison in the play, which, as they are bound to discover after their *Tempest* has been staged, is objectified by the text itself, whose closing lines finally invest the audience with the power to release the artist/jailer/captive from the fetters of his own enchantments. Spectators and readers – the artistic feat's addressees – are thus ultimately cast as the true rescuers in the extra-textual domain:

---

<sup>21</sup> 'Second assignment: Prisoners and jailers', the one-page opening chapter of Part III, shows a class-results table containing a list of eight prisoner/prison/ jailer triads which are supposed to inform *The Tempest*. Among them are: Sycorax/Island/Government of Algiers; Ariel/Pine tree/Sycorax; Prospero and Miranda/Island/Antonio and Alonso (Atwood 2016a: 125). The 'incarceration events' within the play are variously associated with the island, the pine tree, the leaky boat, the hole in the rocks, chains and the muddy pond, the effects of enchantment and madness.

The island is many things, but among them is something he [Felix] hasn't mentioned: the island is a theatre. Prospero is a director. He's putting on a play, within which there's another play. If his magic holds and his play is successful, he'll get his heart's desire. But if he fails ... (Atwood 2016a: 116).

And, towards the end of the novel:

'... *The Tempest* is a play about a man producing a play – one that's come out of his own head, his "fancies" – so maybe the fault for which he needs to be pardoned is the play itself ... The last three words in the play are "set me free", says Felix. 'You don't say "set me free" unless you're not free. Prospero is a prisoner inside the play he himself has composed. There you have it: the ninth prison is the play itself' (Atwood 2016a: 274-75).

By laying such a marked emphasis on the prismatic entanglements of captivity, places of detention, and agents of liberation, Atwood also succeeds in striking responsive chords within the sphere of contemporary prison-theatre practice, as exemplified by the already mentioned 'Shakespeare Behind Bars' project. In her serious/ironic duplicitous mode, she helps us realize how *The Tempest* has been setting an impressive record among the most frequently performed Shakespearean plays inside correctional facilities worldwide. There are a variety of reasons for this, one of them certainly being the way *The Tempest* gives shape to a tragicomic exploration of violence and absolution by building on the themes of betrayal, punishment, and revenge together with the regenerating effects of mercy, forgiveness, and moral redemption.

As an aside that could be potentially developed further, it is interesting to reflect on how some affinities with Curt Tofteland, who similarly started his career as the producing artistic director of an annual Shakespeare Festival (the one in Louisville, Kentucky), might add to the several kinds of alignment Felix lends himself to. Now retired (Matt Wallace having taken over leadership of the SBB's Kentucky program in 2008), Tofteland is a well-known public figure and the recipient of prestigious awards and fellowships. A director, playwright, actor and teacher/facilitator with many artistic qualities, he is also a fascinating personality and an indefatigably committed professional, as testified to by his constant involvement in the organization of conferences, lectures, and cultural



events globally (including the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario). If the protagonist of *Hag-Seed* propitiously gears the high-school level course at Fletcher Correctional towards Shakespearean productions (replacing a syllabus which relied on classic novels), Tofteland created his 'Shakespeare Behind Bars' as an offshoot of a literacy-based prison program started by Bellarmine University in Louisville and called 'Books Behind Bars'. Like Tofteland, Atwood's character considers Shakespeare as his ideal mentor and the supreme investigator of human behaviour, to say nothing of their common belief in the transcendent power of the Bard's poetic voice, allegedly capable of infusing spiritual energy and the courage to hope, of working 'miracles' through soul-searching and epiphanic journeys (were it not that Felix's 'Underworld trip' precipitates a gloomier metamorphosis of the heart, which does not exactly call forth sparks of innate goodness).

Quite predictably, a more explicit link emerges in connection with *The Tempest*, which SBB staged at Luther Lockett Correctional Complex in May 2003, whereupon the inmates were allowed to tour their performance to other prisons (September-October 2003). This venture attracted so much attention that Philomath Films decided to chronicle its nine-month gestation and staging process in the award-winning documentary *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, which premiered at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival in Utah and was selected to screen at dozens of international film festivals. Written and directed by Hank Rogerson, this docudrama vividly renders the efforts and 'cleansing marvels' of a special ensemble of prisoners in long-term lockup; Luther Lockett comes to objectify their island of captivity and purgation, while the play's plot gives allegorical intensity to their own personal stories and crimes. This company's dedication proves so strong that they can be seen to increasingly inhabit characters and delve deeper still, until they experience an emotional and unifying awakening (apparently, some parolees chose to remain on the premises in order to complete their work on the show).

Besides a well-choreographed combination of back-stage views and intermedial shifts between live performance and filming, Felix's exploit shares with Rogerson's documentary (and Tofteland's program) the sense of the participants building a cohesive troupe identity. Through 'traditional acting exercises, verbal challenges from director Tofteland, and multiple recitations of lines, the group is presented almost consistently as a team' (Marshall 2009: 145), and the creative re-fashioning of identities becomes tangible when each team member is given a stage name. For instance, the role of Caliban was played by massive and boasting Jerry Guenther, alias 'Big G', while Ryan Graham/'Bulldog' cast himself as Ariel, and pensive Hal Cobb/'Hal' impersonated Prospero. Briefly stated, the analogies speak for themselves,<sup>22</sup> and are possibly strengthened when leafing through Tofteland and Cobb's 'Prospero Behind Bars', a 2013 article in which the director and the leading actor (an uxoricide serving a life-sentence) took stock of that extraordinary production of Shakespeare's romance by relating it to the offender's redemption/forgiveness/transformation trajectory.<sup>23</sup> Dating back to 2013 is also the first international Shakespeare in Prisons Conference, which took place at Notre Dame University (Indiana) and managed to bring together over fifty Prison Shakespeare practitioners and scholars under a high-profile official banner. And, by a curious coincidence, 2013 is the year when Felix's interactive adaptation of *The Tempest* – an impeccably crafted *coup de théâtre* – is finally staged.

---

<sup>22</sup> But differences are hard to miss, too. SBB's courses take place over a nine-month period, with a culminating performance where scenery is reduced to a minimum, and in which inmates participate through self-casting. Moreover, they are allowed to play before an outside audience, generally consisting of their family members. By contrast, Felix's classes are three months in duration, with the director presiding over the casting process and being himself featured in plays characterized by a more elaborate stage setting; members of the company's family may not attend, and a professional actress gets Miranda's starring role. Finally, SBB's actors have often committed violent felonies (such as murder, pedophilia, or sexual abuse), whereas the program participants in *Hag-Seed* are charged with comparatively less serious crimes.

<sup>23</sup> In the meantime, Tofteland has become executive producer of another *Tempest* adaptation tellingly titled *Prospero's Prison*. This is a film-in-progress by Tom Magill, a filmmaker, drama facilitator and co-founder of the Educational Shakespeare Company charity in Northern Ireland.

Atwood however adds her dash of provocative irony, so that the ‘Felix Behind Bars’ event in *Hag-Seed* is scheduled on a more exact time: Wednesday, March 13, 2013, on the *third* day of the week, during the *third* month of the year, after a *three*-month teaching course. A superstitious date for most people, it is in fact a magically auspicious one in Felix’s stellar cartography for payback and victory. After all, Prospero himself performs his wonders in three hours, with number three being again referred to when he appraises his love for Miranda in terms of a *third* of his own life (IV.1.3), and subsequently muses on his every *third* thought being his grave (V.1.311).

Be that as it may, extricating oneself from the guilefully double nature connoting the plot and characters of *Hag-Seed* is not easy, especially when moral issues are raised. In the case of arts education programs and prison-house drama, it can be argued that Atwood purposefully draws on some of their basic assumptions and methodologies – allowing for a number of similarities in her novel – and then proceeds to filter them through her trickster lens. On the one hand, prison literature is significantly kept in sharp focus in the Acknowledgments section, where she cites the encouraging example of Laura Bates’s *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard*, a memoir published in 2013 (Felix’s lucky year, again). This book powerfully records Professor Bates’s activities and achievement as the starter and facilitator of the ‘Shakespeare in Shackles’ program within maximum-security prisons in Indiana. In particular, it reconstructs the process of spiritual and intellectual awakening of Larry Newton, a murderer long housed in solitary confinement at Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, who had been working side by side with Bates on the creation of student’s guides to Shakespeare for inmates. Not differently from Tofteland’s SBB, which was actually instrumental in showing her a range of edifying and transformational possibilities, Bates magnifies ‘the transcendence-through-Shakespeare paradigm’ and ‘views the inmates’ encounters with Shakespeare as salvational ... invested with an under-problematized and almost

mystical capacity to transform lives’ (Lehmann 2014: 91-92). Almost in the same breath, Atwood refers us to the prison college programs run by liberal-arts Bard College, in all probability the so-called ‘Bard Prison Initiative’ (BPI) operating in New York State and aiming to pave inroads of access to higher learning and college-degree granting for incarcerated individuals. Through the knowledge of those programs, the author adds, it was helpful ‘to learn of many others’ (Atwood 2016a: 292), among which might well be Tofteland’s SBB – along with Amy Scott-Douglass’s *Shakespeare Inside: The Bard Behind Bars*, a path-breaking, sympathetic collection of interviews and testimonies by actor-prisoners from Luther Lockett and a few other American penitentiaries – but also Agnes Wilcox’s Prison Performing Arts in Missouri, or Jonathan Shailor’s Shakespeare Prison Project in Wisconsin.<sup>24</sup>

In a word, Atwood casts her net wide. On the other hand, Felix Phillips is portrayed as an assertive theatre professional who is no keen advocate of any volunteer-based, civic-engagement project thoroughly inspired by the philanthropic ideals of healing and positive self-transformation, or a restorative circle-of-trust approach that would pave the way for ex-felons’ re-entry into

---

<sup>24</sup> Much can be learned about the mission, core values, and goals of these projects and organizations by visiting their websites; see URLs cited in the References section, including a link to the ‘Shakespeare in Prisons Network’ (SPN), a global forum founded by the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. Readers who wish to expand further on the Prison Shakespeare topic may start with such landmark studies as the already mentioned Scott-Douglass 2007, along with Shailor 2011, Herold 2014, and Pensalfini 2016. In addition to Bates’s book and Bard College programs, Atwood lists in the Acknowledgments: *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women’s Prison* (2010), a memoir by American Piper Kerman chronicling her 2004-05 detention on money-laundering and drug-trafficking charges, which has also inspired a popular Netflix original comedy-drama series (2013-18); Canadian Stephen Reid’s *A Crowbar in the Buddhist Garden: Writing from Prison* (2012), a prize-winning collection of autobiographical essays testifying to the overwhelming impact of both delinquency and prison life on the author-inmate, a notorious bank robber; American Rene Denfeld’s *The Enchanted* (2014), an acclaimed and award-winning novel focusing on a death-row offender who turns to the redeeming ‘magic’ of story-telling in the attempt to escape from the nightmare of incarceration; Jerusalem-born Avi Steinberg’s *Running the Books: The Adventures of an Accidental Prison Librarian* (2010), the compelling and trenchant account of a librarian who worked for a couple of years at the Suffolk County House of Correction in Boston; and Andreas Schroeder’s *Shaking It Rough: A Prison Memoir* (1976), in which this German-Canadian author movingly meditates on his two-year confinement.

society. His position is Janus-faced, so that, when it comes to actually drawing on the Bard's 'rehabilitative potential' in the attempt to bring a compelling attitudinal impact on the inmates' hearts and minds, he tends to shy away.

Felix stands somewhere in between, in the sense that building foundational skills and expanding the range of expression among the incarcerated become real goals the moment he envisages how to marshal forces on his behalf and carry out his 'stormy revenge'. Indeed, no sooner does the chance to perform *The Tempest* present itself than the description of Felix's workshops and teaching activities goes into more detail, eventually covering over half of the novel. Here is when the participants' capacity to sustain complexity, cope with anger management, cultivate self-discipline and 'emotional intelligence' is dramatically – and ironically – put to the test. If Atwood's director does succeed in provisionally transcending prison walls and creating a sacred imaginative space, the theatre remains for him 'a monarchy ... You are a team. But I'm the king of it. All decisions final' (Atwood 2016a: 147-48). On top of that, he obstructs the inmates' self-casting and arrogates the lead role to himself, starring as a Prospero who is more than ever 'struck to th' quick' with high wrongs (Shakespeare 1987: V.1.25).

Occasionally, Felix also lets slip some tart remarks or suspiciously looks askance at his eager trainees, as when in Chapter 25 ('Evil Bro Antonio'), during a rehearsal session, SnakeEye announces that his team would like to replace Prospero's doleful reminiscing monologue in Act I, Scene 2, with a different kind of flashback: a bracing rap performance by 'Evil Bro', the usurping brother, with his team singing *a cappella*, setting the rhythm and snapping their fingers. While getting everything ready for the Big Day of his ambush against Tony Price and his gang, Prospero/Felix is thus simultaneously faced with mock-usurpation by a grinning double of Shakespeare's Antonio:

Ha. He's cutting me out, thinks Felix. Elbowing me aside. Making a bigger part for himself. How appropriate for Antonio. But isn't this what he's asked them to do?

Rethink, reframe? ... Scene stealer! But he tamps down on that emotion: it's their show, he scolds himself (Atwood 2016a: 155, 158).

Emotions, however, prove harder to conceal when, soon afterwards, the same inmate playing Antonio obliquely brings *The Tempest's* villain to life by sadistically rubbing salt into Felix's deepest wound. SnakeEye suggests that their director might display the picture of his beloved daughter, together with those of the prisoners' children, so as to heighten the intensity of the passage in the play where Miranda is compared to a preserving cherub. This allusion momentarily plunges the protagonist into his old hole of grief, making him feel again lost 'at sea, drifting here, drifting there. In a rotten carcass the very rats have quit' (Atwood 2016a: 160).

If Felix's acerbic reactions are basically in tune with a Prospero-like, aristocratic condescension, Atwood has yet another string to her bow, this time making an incursion into the academic world. Felix takes up his job at the correctional facility thanks to a good-luck charm intermediary: Estelle, a senator's granddaughter and a Guelph University professor supervising the 'Literacy Through Literature' program from a distance, whom he often meets at a Wilmot restaurant called 'Zenith'. A seductive and sometimes naïve personification of bountiful Lady Fortune delivering Prospero's foes to the island – the 'auspicious star' upon which the magician's 'zenith' depends (Shakespeare 1987: I.2.178-82)<sup>25</sup> –, Estelle also typifies the distance that frequently comes about between prison-theatre practice and academia. Her doubts at the beginning recall those of scholars who take issue with the idea of 'high culture' being forced on semi-literate criminals and pose questions concerning the very 'ethics of appropriating Shakespeare in a carceral environment' (Lehmann 2014: 90). As she apologetically anticipates, Felix's part-time employment consists in 'teaching, well, convicted criminals. The goal of the

---

<sup>25</sup> These lines are also echoed by the titles of two chapters: 'Auspicious star' (Chapter 10) and 'Bountiful Fortune, now my dear lady' (Chapter 31).

course is to improve their basic literacy skills so they can find a meaningful place in the community once they're back in the world' (Atwood 2016a: 51). Although she has devoted energies and lobbied quite hard for the program, Estelle thinks she ought to dampen false hopes in the ambitious director. Hence her dismayed surprise at realizing that Mr Duke – the pseudonym under which he sent his application – intends to design his course exclusively around Shakespearean study and performance.<sup>26</sup>

In his own teasing and flirting way, however, Felix manages to spark the professor's interest in his far-reaching education project. In the play's words, he *courts* the influence of his auspicious star until, during the watershed twelfth year of his exile, Estelle happens to bring his antagonists to the island/penitentiary, with his magic storm being finally staged, as we shall see.

The account of the intervening period – the first three years of his Fletcher Correctional Shakespeare classes – is dealt with in just one short chapter entitled 'Bring the rabble', a quotation from *The Tempest* (IV.1.37) significantly referring to the magus's bidding Ariel bring all the 'meaner fellows' to help him perform 'another trick'. Ariel's fellow spirits are here the actor-inmates themselves, eventually involved in the prison-house productions of *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth*. In the space of twelve pages, we learn about the success of Felix's courses, with an increasing number of trainees lining up and a parallel raising of their reading and writing scores. The instructor's strategies are basically the ones

---

<sup>26</sup> See the following passage, in which Estelle's clichéd response is countered by Felix's smart repartee. The theatre professional sets out to refurbish the Bard's image, eventually fiddling with a cultural materialist approach: "Shakespeare?" Estelle, who'd been leaning forward, sat back in her chair. Was she reconsidering? "But surely that's far too ... there are a lot of words ... They'll get discouraged; maybe you should choose things more at the level of ... To be frank, some of them can barely read". "You think Shakespeare's actors did a lot of *reading*? ... They were journeymen, like ... bricklayers! They never read the whole play themselves; they only memorized their own lines, and their cues. Also they improvised a lot. The text wasn't a sacred cow ... He was simply an actor-manager trying to keep afloat. It's only due to luck that we *have* Shakespeare at all! Nothing was even published till he was gone! His old friends stuck the plays together out of scraps – bunch of clapped-out actors trying to remember what they'd said, after the guy was dead!" (Atwood 2016a: 52-53).

he is to adopt for *The Tempest's* project, i.e. textual analysis and written reports, healthy competition, room for debate, and the formation of backup teams for each main character, with the teams being allowed to rewrite parts of the script if they wish to make them sound more modern. What follows is rehearsing and working on soundtrack, props and costumes, whereupon the men are ready to perform. For security reasons, no live audience may attend, although the actors are prompted to video every scene and edit it digitally, so that all detainees can watch the play on the closed-circuit TVs located in their cells. The facilitator's last assignment poses a final challenge to his students, who are encouraged to imagine an afterlife for some of the characters they have impersonated, or stage a coda in which the surviving characters assess the dead protagonist (this being another example of the 'open possibilities' coming to the fore in Atwood's fictional reworking).

Up to this point, Felix could be singled out as an energetic, bold facilitator who is living proof of the positive effects of prison college programs inspired by the language of drama and revitalizing Shakespeare in a unique environment. He deems the Fletcher performances 'a little rough' but 'heartfelt' (Atwood 2016a: 58), animated by a kind of emotion and a wealth of experience he has never come across among professional actors.<sup>27</sup> Yet, despite this vein of sympathy, the humanization of convicts is definitely not on his list of priorities.

---

<sup>27</sup> Within a transnational panorama, Felix's observations appear to be on the same wavelength as those of Fabio Cavalli, a well-known Italian actor, director, and coordinator of drama laboratories in Rome's Rebibbia Prison, who declaredly 'finds working with prisoners far more fulfilling than working with professional actors, who he says have or feel a need to pretend, while the prisoners have lived the experiences in the plays' (Pensalfini 2016: 47). As quoted in Cavecchi (2017: 8), Cavalli remarked that his maximum-security prison-actors 'happen to have accumulated, sadly for them, life experiences that I would not dream of going through or wish to have. When you face them and discuss Shakespeare ... you discover that what you know of the concept of justice, revenge, brotherhood, betrayal and conspiracy you have learned from literature, while they have experimented it the hard way and at their own expense. As a result, you bring, so to speak, the high word of poetry and they bring the visceral word of life. When these two things meet, when mutual esteem is formed, the outcome is fruitful. Spoken by them, some words are extraordinarily powerful and express a depth professional actors are not able to reach'. Cavecchi's article offers a particularly rich overview of Italian prison theatre in connection with *The Tempest*, including references to the



Felix knows that, ‘hidden somewhere under a rock’, a box ‘marked V for Vengeance’ lies in store for him (Atwood 2016a: 59). And this box is eventually delivered like a lucky bag in the lead up to Christmas 2012, at the Zenith restaurant, where Estelle (now similar to the bright Star in the East) jubilantly conveys the good news: thanks to her political and diplomatic connections, a delegation of government dignitaries will be visiting Fletcher Correctional. Unbeknown to her, among these are Felix’s old adversaries and their close relations: Tony Price, who, after usurping the artistic-director position at the Makeshiweg Festival, has elbowed his way up as Heritage Minister; Sal O’Nally, ascending from Heritage Minister to Justice Minister and a modern-day incarnation of Alonso; Frederick O’Nally, Sal’s son and a Ferdinand in the flesh; Sebert Stanley, Minister of Veterans Affairs and a real-life Sebastian who is running for party leadership; soft-hearted Lonnie Gordon, a consulting business manager and Chairman of the Makeshiweg Festival Board, a Gonzalo double who had once shown signs of empathy towards Felix. Soon after the latter’s sacking, he was the one who gave him back the fox-head cane and the Prospero cloak and false beard, including *The Tempest’s* script with Felix’s notes (a transliteration of the Shakespearean magus’s books).

This fortunate circumstance is the spark that ignites Felix’s big show, where he will dexterously play with art and life, truth and illusion, monitoring the whole undertaking like a mastermind who wants ‘to see without being seen’ (Atwood 2016a: 150), and never fails to hear thanks to a comfortable pair of headphones. Indeed, he puts on a technically and technologically sophisticated spectacle whose outcome – the power to rouse fear, pity, and amazement in a thunderstruck audience – depends on both his directorial dominance behind the scenes and a synergistic ensemble work. In particular, his techno-fantasy

---

Compagnia della Fortezza, a company based in Volterra prison and directed by Armando Punzo (who, like Felix, often plays the central role in his productions). On Shakespeare in Italian prison theatre, see also Montorfano 2017. Finally, I would like to thank Sara Soncini for her helpful suggestions on contemporary Italian theatrical experiments.

offshoots of Prospero's theurgic orchestrations would not be possible without 8Handz, who plays Ariel's part in the fullest sense of the word, accomplishing tasks both onstage, as an actor, and offstage, by means of his digital expertise. He assists Felix in installing microphones, speakers, and mini-cameras in the different areas they are using, while also helping him fix a computer behind the video projection screen in the main room. This young hacker thus turns ethical; or, from the opposite point of view, he is actually cajoled into further breaking the law, because the plan requires him to circumvent the prison's surveillance system and launch a surprise attack against a tough-on-crime Minister of Justice.

On the back cover of *Hag-Seed*, Atwood is reported as saying that '*The Tempest* is, in some ways, an early multi-media musical. If Shakespeare were working today he'd be using every special effect technology now makes available'. Correspondingly, Felix's prison production can be described as a contemporary musical relying on rap- and rock-singing, dance numbers, and electronic instruments, besides capitalizing on special effects, video-editing, and digital scenery. As far as cutting-edge choreography and sparkling energy are concerned, he has a further ace up his sleeve, that is, Anne-Marie Greenland, the athletic dancer and professional actress who should have played Miranda in his cancelled Makeshiweg staging. Now she is back in the show, as a reckless and muscular Miranda of the new millennium, an Atwoodian waggish character who switches between the opposites of non-conformity and dirty talk vs a housewifely passion for baking and wool-knitting, along with a matronly control over the inmate troupe. Her inventiveness and support are crucial to the success of the *mise-en-scène* and its real-life sequel, since she gradually metamorphoses into Felix's surrogate daughter beyond the boundaries of theatrical representation. As a matter of fact, Frederick O'Nally, a postgraduate of the National Theatre School currently interning at Makeshiweg, falls in love at first sight with her and, to complete the picture, their sentimental bond is reinforced by a professional relationship that will guarantee continuity within the festival circuit. If Prospero

had forged a far-sighted alliance by marrying his daughter to the King of Naples's son – so as to keep a tight rein on Antonio –, Felix safely paves the way for his own retirement by hiring Sal's son as his assistant director and Anne-Marie as chief choreographer throughout the Makeshiweg events. In doing so, he gives the young couple's future a firm direction in the world of the performing arts.

Picking up the plot thread where we left it, we subsequently learn that *The Tempest's* scenes are duly shot and recorded, with a polished video being cut together, ready to be watched in the main screening room of the penitentiary. The wardens, though, are to see the play exclusively through the closed-circuit TVs upstairs, so as to cunningly prevent their *lawful* interference.

At this point Felix's climactic show splits in two, following a sort of stage-to-screen and back-to-stage parable and unfolding as an interactive, hyper-real *pièce* where a crucial part of the entertainment is performed live. This means that the (guilty) viewers become in turn the protagonists of a cruel reality show in which they are induced to behave the way Antonio, Alonso, Sebastian, Ferdinand, and Gonzalo did in Shakespeare's hypotext. In a crowning paradox, Felix enhances participatory (meta)theatricality in order to 'augment' reality and frame his enemies – the present-day incarnations of *The Tempest's dramatis personae* – by means of artistic fraudulence. Differently put, he holds a mirror up to Prospero, his giant precursor, who is committed to producing a play within a play in the course of which he captures, spies on, and beleaguers his antagonists, almost driving them insane.

March 13, 2013 is the 'zero hour' of Felix's feat and of Atwood's novel itself. As if reminding us that *Hag-Seed* is both a book that incorporates an adaptation of *The Tempest* and a work that creatively appropriates and narrativizes it at full length, Atwood's text opens with a prologue ('Prologue: *Screening*') that focuses on the image of a ship being tossed on the rocks – here a bathtub-toy sailboat on a plastic shower curtain – amid clashing sounds of thunder and flashes of

lightning, as in Act I, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's romance. This prefatory appendage is then literally reproduced in Chapter 34 ('Tempest'), which coincides with the beginning of the Fletcher Correctional Players' filmed performance.

After being ushered into the main screening room by a group of actor-inmates dressed as sailors – in a repeat of Shakespeare's mariners assuming control of the vessel and subverting power hierarchies –, the dignitaries are offered some refreshments and soft drinks (which Felix has secretly dosed with drugs) and start watching the storm-at-sea video. All of a sudden, the screen goes black and a few shots are fired. Felix's tumultuous live show has begun, with cracking thunderstorm noises in the background and a phalanx of black-clad prisoners/Goblins carrying out a series of risky (and belligerent) tasks. This mob of 'goblin servants' abduct Frederick and induce Sal to believe that the boy has been murdered, while the latter is similarly driven to suppose that his father has been killed, so that they both get clapped in the irons of mourning. In the meantime, the three ministers and Lonnie Gordon are frog-marched into another room, where optimistic and generous Lonnie/Gonzalo strives to lift his friends' spirits, commending prison reform and restorative justice, in a patent nod to Gonzalo's Utopian commonwealth fantasy and Montaigne-inspired thoughts.

As to the corrupted and scheming ministerial group, we gather that Sal and Sebert are both competing for the laurels of leadership and that each of them needs Tony's backing to achieve this ambitious goal. As soon as Sal and Lonnie fall into a deep slumber – owing to Felix's dosed drinks –, Tony makes his self-advantageous move by trying to persuade Sebert to kill the two sleeping men and then conveniently lay the blame on the Fletcher rioters. Felix has of course been video-recording this unwitting replica of the moment Antonio gives a boost to Sebastian's dreams of glory by hinting at the benefits that would derive from the King of Naples's death (II.1.195-295). It is now time for Ariel's awakening music

– 8Handz’ radical choice falling on Metallica’s ‘Ride the Lightning’, a blaring song that tackles the issue of electric-chair execution –, whereupon Felix’s ‘reality show’ skips to *The Tempest*’s Act III, Scene 3. Here a fruit bowl with poisoned grapes emerges as the equivalent for the banquet table in Shakespeare’s play, although Sal, Sebert, and Tony do manage to taste the hallucinogenic food, before the terrifying shadow of a huge bird is projected onto the room’s wall and the bowl vanishes. The ‘three men of sin’ duly experience their drug-induced, nightmarish anguish, with Felix’s half-intimidating, half-sardonic message being reinforced by Leggs/Caliban and the ‘Hag-Seed dancers’, who begin to chant lines of bitter recrimination against the ‘white-collar crook[s]’ (Atwood 2016a: 230).

Felix’s ominous, perlocutionary performance finally comes to a head, with Ariel’s expected plea for compassion and forgiveness and Prospero’s consequent appeal to the rarer action residing in virtue:

‘Don’t you feel sorry for them?’ says 8Handz.

All this time Miranda has been hovering behind him – a shadow, a wavering of the light – though she’s been silent: there haven’t been any lines she’s needed to prompt. But now she whispers, I would, sir, were I human. She’s such a tender-hearted girl.

Has 8Handz heard her? No, but Felix has. ‘Has thou’, he says, ‘which art but air, a touch, a feeling of their afflictions, and shall not myself be kindlier moved than thou art?’ ...

‘Anyway I succeeded’, he tells himself. ‘Or at least I didn’t fail’. Why does it feel like a letdown?

The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance, he hears inside his head.

It’s Miranda. She’s prompting him (Atwood 2016a: 231, 239).

#### **4. Textual closure and exit points**

Escorted back to the main room of the penitential island and assembled in that ‘magic circle’, Felix’s captives face their last ordeal. The artistic director can now fully enjoy his moment in the spotlight, stepping out ‘from behind the folding screen with a flourish of his stuffed-animal magic garment. Raising his fox-head cane into the air, he cues more elemental music’ (Atwood 2016a: 232), similar to the solemn air Prospero creates to soothe the spirits of the plotters. In this

theatrical moment of being, order is restored, the enemies are reminded of their wrongdoings and, so to speak, conditionally absolved.

Felix has his own claims to make, starting from his position at the Makeshiweg Festival. He also wants the ministers to ensure five more years of funding and unreservedly back the ‘Literacy Through Literature’ program, by which time Tony shall resign and Sebert is to withdraw from the leadership race. Should they oppose this decision, their ‘Truman Show’ video is ready ‘to go viral on the Internet ... The video’s already stored in the cloud’ (Atwood 2016a: 234). Moreover, 8Handz must get early parole, while Sal may find peace of mind by being reunited with his son Freddie, now sincerely in love with Anne-Marie/Miranda (Felix does not forget to show his guests/prisoners the cell where the two lovers are playing chess).

In the upshot, every little piece of *Hag-Seed*’s mosaic falls into place with mathematical exactness. In her dramatized novel, or novelized drama – or ‘play within a play within a novel’ (Groskop 2016), whatever one chooses to call this virtuoso rewrite –, Atwood also converses with *The Tempest* by encapsulating the ‘extravagant materials of romance’ (Zimbardo 1968 [1963]: 234) within a rigorous formal structure. At the same time, taking her cue from Shakespeare, she allows readers/viewers to ‘imagine the characters having more adventures after the ending of the play’ (Zimbardo 1968 [1963]: 234).

The novel’s closing section – its fifth Act – actually makes room for a series of imaginary new departures, thanks to the Fletcher Correctional Players’ backup teams presenting their reports on the post-play lives of the characters they have impersonated. If Ariel becomes a holographic projection of weather systems, flying off to tackle climate change, Antonio remains an unrepentant schemer and even degenerates into a brutal killer. Miranda (Anne-Marie) thinks of herself as a tomboy, an expert in self-defence techniques, and a female wizard, while good Gonzalo seizes the chance to set up a Utopian kingdom-republic on the island. Finally, the riddle concerning Caliban as Prospero’s ‘thing of darkness’ is dealt

with from both a metaphorical and a literal perspective: surly and beastly Caliban is said to stand for the magician's bad 'other self' as well as for his biological son from Sycorax (Atwood again hints at a possibly deeper connection existing between the magus and the witch in *The Tempest*). In Team Hag-Seed's inventive report, Caliban goes back with his father to Milan, where he gets a second chance at life by becoming a world-famous musician and starting his own band called 'Hag-Seed and the Things of Darkness', an idea that Leggs would like to develop in a future Fletcher musical production.

'The spell is now controlled by the audience', says Felix in one of the final pages, paraphrasing Prospero's words (Atwood 2016a: 274). By the same token, the readers of *Hag-Seed* might be cast as textual cooperators/liberators opening the door to the 'circulation of social energy' (Greenblatt 1990: 157) while finding their way through Atwood's hypertextual maze. Her *Tempest Retold* is unquestionably more than an imitative byproduct, being the outcome of an appropriation-plus-adaptation transaction where, on the one hand, fidelity turns mischievously 'hyper-real' and, on the other, Shakespeare's romance is deconstructed and reinvented, looking at what Douglas Lanier has called 'an accelerated transcoding of Shakespeare from theater and book to mass media, pop culture, and digital forms' (2014: 22).

True, in *Hag-Seed* the Bard scarcely loses his legitimating power and pre-eminent cultural authority, with the novel offering a clever, hyper-stratified re-contextualization of *The Tempest* which 'does indeed mean, and *with a vengeance*' (Lanier 2014: 25, my emphasis). At the same time, Atwood's revision seems to situate itself at an interface between a vertically conceived entelechy – stretching from a stable, original root/source (*The Tempest*) to a tangle of literary branches/outgrowths (within *Hag-Seed*) – and a horizontal, non-teleological spreading of satellite themes and multiple exit points. To draw again on Lanier's observations, this time concerning Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's

philosophical concept of the rhizome, it can be argued that *Hag-Seed* surreptitiously courts a rhizomatic structure consisting of

a horizontal, decentered multiplicity of subterranean roots that cross each other, bifurcating and recombining, breaking off and restarting. In some places, rhizomatic roots collect into temporary tangles of connection or nodes that then themselves break apart and reassemble into other nodes, some playing out in dead ends, others taking what [Deleuze and Guattari] call 'lines of flight' ... A rhizomatic conception of Shakespeare situates 'his' cultural authority not in the Shakespearean text at all but in the accrued power of Shakespearean adaptation, the multiple, changing lines of force we and previous cultures have labeled as 'Shakespeare' (Lanier 2014: 28-29).

Just a brief glance back at some of the features highlighted in the course of our analysis – from Felix Phillips's extended family of virtual peers to the trans-generic, cross-historical network of Shakespearean allusions, from Atwood's self-referentiality to the contemporary phenomenon of prison theatre – will suffice to suggest the degree of such an 'accrued power'. Well before encountering the exit points or 'lines of flight' objectified by the imaginary afterlives of *The Tempest's* characters, *Hag-Seed's* readers do meet up with aggregated nodes which eventually break apart and then reassemble into other tangles, according to a disjunctive logic of planar propagation. We actually sense how Atwood proceeds to recast the malleable material of Shakespeare's legacy, along with its historical transitions and interpretations. And this process cannot but be bolstered by such a textual choice as *The Tempest*, 'one of the Bard's most wondrous and enigmatic plays', where magic 'is still potently seductive, dangerous, cathartic and restorative, like theatre itself' (Awad 2016).<sup>28</sup> Like Felix's prison workshops and dazzling *pièce*, Atwood's retelling provokes and illuminates, instructs and beguiles, brings justice and breaks the rules, inviting us to continuously explore Shakespearean itineraries of unity, difference, and becoming.

---

<sup>28</sup> Awad's remarks sound particularly interesting if seen in connection with a rhizomatic process of non-binary propagation: '[In *Hag-Seed*] one thing is never just one thing. Felix, a.k.a. Prospero, is both the victim of one plot and the master manipulator of another. The actors are also prisoners – dangerous but vulnerable. The means of vengeance – the theatre – are also the means of forgiveness and grace. Illusion is also truth ... And even though we have been backstage all along, watching Felix assemble the tools and mechanisms of his revenge, he hides from us as any good magician would. The climax is still a wondrous surprise' (2016).



## References

- Abrams, Rebecca 2016.  
 ‘Hag-Seed by Margaret Atwood review – *The Tempest* retold’, *The Financial Times*, 28 October, <https://www.ft.com/content/a07b7940-9a93-11e6-8f9b-70e3cabccfae/>, last accessed on 09-01-2018.
- Aldoory, Awfa Hussein 2017.  
 ‘Atwood’s recreation of Shakespeare’s Miranda in *The Tempest*’, *CS Canada: Studies in Literature and Language* 14/3: 58-62.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 1989.  
*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London, Routledge).
- Atwood, Margaret 1982.  
*Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto, Anansi).
- Atwood, Margaret 1995.  
*Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).
- Atwood, Margaret 2004.  
*Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* [1972] (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart).
- Atwood, Margaret 2005.  
*Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983-2005* (New York, Carroll & Graf).
- Atwood, Margaret 2008.  
*Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* [2002] (London, Virago).
- Atwood, Margaret 2016a.  
*Hag-Seed: The Tempest Retold* (London, Hogarth).
- Atwood, Margaret 2016b.  
 ‘Margaret Atwood recasts *The Tempest* inside a prison’, Interview with Brian Bethune, 7 October, <https://www.macleans.ca/culture/books/margaret-atwood-recasts-the-tempest-inside-a-prison/>, last accessed on 08-07-2018.
- Awad, Mona 2016.  
 ‘Review: Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed* is an insightful retelling of *The Tempest*’, *The Globe and Mail*, 14 October [updated 6 April 2017], <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-margaret-atwoods-hag-seed-is-an-insightful-retelling-of-the-tempest/article32360859/>, last accessed on 09-01-2018.
- Bates, Laura 2013.  
*Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard* (Naperville, IL, Sourcebooks).
- Billington, Michael 2013.  
 ‘*The Tempest* – review’, *The Guardian*, 3 May, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/may/03/the-tempest-globe-review/>, last accessed on 18-07-2018.
- Bloom, Harold 1973.  
*The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London / Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press).
- Broad, Leah 2017.  
 ‘Review: *Hag-Seed*’, *The Oxford Culture Review*, 1 January, <https://theoxfordculturereview.com/2017/01/01/review-hag-seed/>, last accessed on 09-01-2018.
- Cavecchi, Mariacristina 2017.  
 ‘Brave New Worlds. Shakespearean Tempests in Italian prisons’, *Altre Modernità: Rivista di studi letterari e culturali* 11: 1-21, Numero Speciale: *Will forever young! Shakespeare & Contemporary Culture*, <https://doi.org/10.13130/2035-7680/9174/>, last accessed on 10-07-2018.

- Frye, Northrop 2010.  
 'Shakespeare's *The Tempest*' [1979], 333-45, in T.Y. Grande and Garry Sherbert (eds), *Northrop Frye's Writings on Shakespeare and the Renaissance* (Toronto / Buffalo / London, University of Toronto Press).
- Genette, Gérard 1997.  
*Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* [*Seuils*, 1987], translated by J.E. Lewin, with a Foreword by Richard Macksey (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Grace, Sherrill 1980.  
*Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood*, edited by Ken Norris (Montreal, Véhicule Press).
- Greenblatt, Stephen 1990.  
*Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).
- Groskopf, Viv 2016.  
 'Hag-Seed review – Margaret Atwood turns *The Tempest* into a perfect storm', *The Guardian*, 16 October [last modified 2 December 2017],  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/16/hag-seed-review-margaret-atwood-tempest-hogarth-shakespeare/>, last accessed on 09-01-2018.
- Herold, Niels 2014.  
*Prison Shakespeare and the Purpose of Performance: Repentance Rituals and the Early Modern* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan).
- Hoenselaars, Ton 2017.  
 'Captive Shakespeare', 138-53, in J.C. Bulman (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Performance* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Howells, Coral Ann 1996.  
*Margaret Atwood* (Basingstoke, Macmillan).
- Howells, Coral Ann (ed.) 2006.  
*The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Kott, Jan 2001.  
 'Prospero, or the director: Giorgio Strehler's *The Tempest*' [1987, 1979], 364-70, in P.M. Murphy (ed.), *The Tempest: Critical Essays* (New York / London, Routledge).
- Lanier, Douglas 2002.  
*Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Lanier, Douglas 2014.  
 'Shakespearean rhizomatics: adaptation, ethics, value', 21-40, in Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (eds), *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan).
- Lehmann, Courtney 2014.  
 'Double jeopardy: Shakespeare and prison theater', 89-105, in Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (eds), *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan).
- Makaryk, Irena R. 2002.  
 'Introduction: Shakespeare in Canada: "a world elsewhere"?'', 3-42, in ead. and Diana Brydon (eds), *Shakespeare in Canada: A World Elsewhere?* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press).
- Marshall, Kelli 2009.  
 'The creative process and the power of art in *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, or so this is what *Looking for Richard* meant to do?', *Literature / Film Quarterly* 37/2: 140-50.
- Montorfano, Beatrice 2017.  
 'Beyond the walls of the page: Shakespeare in Italian prison theatre', 411-18, in Carla Dente and Francesca Fedi (eds), *Journeys through Changing Landscapes: Literature, Language, Culture and their Transnational Dislocations* (Pisa, Pisa University Press).
- Muñoz-Valdivieso, Sofia 2017.

- 'Shakespeare our contemporary in 2016: Margaret Atwood's rewriting of *The Tempest* in *Hag-Seed*, *SEDERI* 27: 105-29,  
<https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/SEDY/article/download/61981/37859/>, last accessed on 09-01-2018.
- Murphy, P.M. 2001.  
 'Interpreting *The Tempest*: A history of its readings', 3-72, in id. (ed.), *The Tempest: Critical Essays* (New York / London, Routledge).
- Nestruck, J. Kelly 2016.  
 'Margaret Atwood explains why she rewrote Shakespeare', *The Globe and Mail*, 7 October [updated 3 April 2017], <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/margaret-atwood-rewrites-shakespeare-in-new-novel-hag-seed/article32295990/>, last accessed on 01-07-2018.
- Orgel, Stephen 1987.  
 'Introduction', 1-87, in William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, edited by Stephen Orgel (Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press).
- Pensalfini, Rob 2016.  
*Prison Shakespeare: For These Deep Shames and Great Indignities* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan).
- Rosenberg, Jerome H. 1984.  
*Margaret Atwood* (Boston, Twayne Publishers).
- Scott-Douglass, Amy 2007.  
*Shakespeare Inside: The Bard Behind Bars* (London / New York, Continuum).
- Shailor, Jonathan (ed.) 2011.  
*Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* (London / Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers).
- Shakespeare, William 1987.  
*The Tempest*, edited by Stephen Orgel (Oxford / New York, Oxford University Press).
- Tofteland, Curt L. and Hal Cobb 2013.  
 'Prospero Behind Bars', *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespeare Studies and Production* 65: 429-44.
- Zimbardo, Rose Abdelnour 1968.  
 'Form and disorder in *The Tempest*' [1963], 232-43, in D.J. Palmer (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Tempest. A Casebook* (London, Macmillan).

*Other electronic sources*

- 'Bard Prison Initiative', <https://bpi.bard.edu/>, last accessed on 02-07-2018.
- 'Hogarth Shakespeare', <http://hogarthshakespeare.com/>, last accessed on 01-07-2018.
- 'Prison Performing Arts', <http://prisonartstl.org/>, last accessed on 05-07-2018.
- 'Shakespeare Behind Bars', <https://www.shakespearebehindbars.org/>, last accessed on 10-08-2018.
- 'Shakespeare in Prisons Network', <https://shakespeare.nd.edu/spn/>, last accessed on 10-09-2018.
- 'Shakespeare Prison Project' [Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble, Australia],  
[http://www.qldshakespeare.org/prison\\_project.html/](http://www.qldshakespeare.org/prison_project.html/), last accessed on 10-08-2018.
- 'Shakespeare sulle scene italiane', <http://www.dislocazioni-transnazionali.it/banche-dati/shakespeare-sulle-scene-italiane?id=1>, last accessed on 26-10-2018.
- 'The Shakespeare Prison Project' [Wisconsin, USA], <https://www.shakespeareprisonproject.com/>, last accessed on 07-08-2018.
- 'William Head on Stage', <https://whonstage.weebly.com/>, last accessed on 05-09-2018.