Dana Percec

The Canadian *Tempest*
Margaret Atwood and Shakespeare Retold as *Hag-Seed*

Abstract: The paper discusses one of the most successful exercises of rewriting Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in Margaret Atwood's 2016 novel *Hag-Seed*. This is part of a large series of eight books commissioned by Hogarth Press to celebrate 400 years since Shakespeare's death. The study focuses on the peculiarities of this project of rewriting against the more general landscape of appropriation and on how Atwood's version of *The Tempest* is simultaneously convergent and divergent both in terms of its adaptation of the story to contemporary audiences and in terms of the Canadian writer's own preferences of plot and style, who gives up her usual dystopias for a less predictable scenario.

Keywords: Appropriation; Dystopian Scenario; Hogarth Shakespeare; Rewriting; Shakespeare Studies.

Dana Percec
West University of Timișoara, Romania
dana.percec@e-uvt.ro

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2018.34.23

Readings and Rewritings

A book about Shakespeare and appropriation, written at a time when the phenomenon gained more momentum than ever, argued that the omnipresent desire to make Shakespeare "our contemporary" stems from "the realization that the mere contemplation of a four hundred year old play can scarcely supply the grounding for an adequate response to its complex demands."[1] This signaled that cultural studies had already played their trump card and had caused a radical shift, in the study of literature, from text to context. It also revealed a "worrying truth," that nobody can simply read a play by Shakespeare as if it were an independent aesthetic object. That is why Desmet and Sawyer, paraphrasing Tom Stoppard and his parody of *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, argue that reading or playing Shakespeare becomes like "living in a public park,"[2] the private sphere (of understanding, liking, or interpreting) merges with the public one. We must, therefore, remember that the appropriation of Shakespeare has usually followed two paths: a big scale one, which

turns the Bard into an institution of the establishment, in cultural and educational terms, mainly, but also with political overtones, and a small scale one, an individualized or local revisitation or reclaim. The project described in the present study seems to be at the crossroads between "big-time" and "small-time" Shakespeare, combining the missions of conservative ideology and the personal acts of discovery and survival via Shakespeare.

The project, initiated by the prestigious London publishers Hogarth (established, in the interwar period, by none other than Virginia Woolf), was meant to capitalize on the celebratory mood of the English-speaking world, which, in 2016, under an inspired logo put forth by the British Council (*Shakespeare lives*), counted four centuries since the Bard had become a major cultural icon. The publishers commissioned several important British, American and Canadian writers to propose novels that would transfer the plot of some famous tragedies and comedies from the Elizabethan stage into the contemporary world. Jeanette Winterson opened the series, with the rewriting of *The Winter's Tale* as *The Gap of Time* (2015). She was followed by Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* (2016), an obvious modernization of *The Merchant of Venice*, by *Vinegar Girl* (2016), an original approach to *The Taming of the Shrew* offered by Anne Tyler, *Hag Seed* (2016), in which Margaret Atwood rewrites *The Tempest*, Tracy Chevalier turning *Othello* into *New Boy* (2017), and three other best-selling authors closing the installments in 2018: Gillian Flynn, known for the mysteries and stories about dysfunctional families, deemed fit to attempt a new *Hamlet*, Jo Nesbo, whose numerous crime novels make him a legitimate rewriter of *Macbeth*, and Edward St. Aubyn, a writer about the decadence of British aristocracy today, who will illustrate this theme in a new *King Lear*.

Postmodernism has taught us that there is no reading without rewriting and the problem of writing something new is a formidable challenge for all writers. One may argue that things were quite similar for Shakespeare, too, since most of his plots were borrowed from the Italian Renaissance, from French romances or from his contemporary Elizabethan playwrights, plus a touch of history from the English chronicles, for good measure. But today's inclusive, global, intertextual awareness has made the reading of one text against another compulsory, and thus the pressure for "originality" more dramatic. Narratives have grown more complicated, more insightful and metatextual, this structural sophistication compensating for a plot that can no longer invent something brand new. In addition, the echoes from the area of cultural studies and their satellites, feminism, (new) historicism, postcolonialism, etc. have made the experience of reading and re-writing literature a pluridimensional act. Consequently, the Hogarth rewritings are not "reimaginings," but "reactions" to Shakespeare, with a focus not on the story as such, but on the "twists" in the story[3] that articulated the major themes Shakespeare studies discuss today: gender roles and gender relations, racial intolerance and anti-Semitism, isolation and exploitation, authority and legitimacy. Reviews of these rewritings reiterate an aspect which is generally explained by studies in appropriation: "If Shakespeare is our contemporary, it is not because he shares

our attitudes but because he shares our agonies."[4] The novels in the Hogarth series make Shakespeare modern because they add history to the story and because they attempt to humanize even the more artificial and mechanical aspects of the plays.

The Hogarth Project

What Winterson, Tyler, or Atwood do with Hogarth Shakespeare is something that, in musical terms, could be called a "cover version." From "big-time" Shakespeare, they borrow the authority and the prestige of intersecting their literary products with a central figure of the Western canon and one that still sells extremely well, whether the sale includes the *Complete Works*, tickets to the theatre, books of criticism, travel packages to Stratford and the festivals, or T-shirts with the Bard's large forehead. "Small-time" Shakespeare is present in each author's personal touch and signature.

Jeanette Winterson, herself a "foundling," confesses having felt drawn from an early age to Perdita's plight and the wondrous family reunification at the end of *The Winter's Tale*. But this empathy did not help in trying to come up with a plausible, modern interpretation of the fantasy, which cast statues brought to life and other logically impossible twists and turns of the plot. King Leontes' inexplicable transformation from doting husband into jealous tyrant and then, much later, back into a humane father, Perdita's extraordinary survival in the wilderness, the pastoral romance with Florizel, the coincidences of parentage and friendship, are all elements of a fairy tale plot, which have disappeared from all contemporary narratives except children's stories. So Winterson retrieves the fantasy by inserting the weight of video games, a modern, technological version of escapism into a world of magic – and a way to make lots of money and become a king, who, without a crown or scepter, rules over a digital empire. Shakespeare's exotic Sicily and Bohemia (which, for the Elizabethans, must have also looked like an island, since the first stage direction of the play indicates a place "by the sea") are present-day London and a provincial American town, New Bohemia, the good shepherd who raised Perdita is now an African-American, queen Hermione is a French dancer and singer, etc. The absence of an atmosphere of fantasy is also compensated by Winterson's preference for philosophy, the book being permeated with thoughts about love, innocence, and dreams. And, of course, about time, as the very title of the novel announces.

The gap of time is, in Shakespeare's romance, the years that passed since King Leontes banished his child until he was reunited with his family. He wants to retire and meditate about all that happened in the meantime. This gap is, thus, a chronological breach, which facilitates a mental time travel. The phrase appears in the name of the video game Xeno invents, based on the story of the Shakespearean heroes. Thus, the gap secures the link between two moments (Elizabethan England and contemporary London/United States) and three environments (the Shakespearean text/stage, the postmodern rewriting, the virtual world of the computer).

Howard Jacobson, often dubbed "a British Philip Roth" but confessing he prefers the label of "a Jewish Jane Austen," seems almost a natural choice for the

provocative rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice*. His general preference for the dark comedy and for *doppelgängers* justifies a new Shylock narrative in which the "original" Venetian usurer travels, in space and time, to meet his twin, Simon Strulovitch, in contemporary Manchester. Simon is a modern millionaire whose problematic relation with his daughter Beatrice suggests, though, that some aspects of life, such as mentalities or family relations, may never change, even if the "gap" consists of four centuries and the Holocaust. The privileged of Manchester, living in a neighborhood called the Golden Triangle, are not prosperous merchants and sophisticated aristocrats, but a successful football player, an inaccessible art critic and a famous TV star. These characters are made to look deliberately caricature-like, excessively polished and superficial in comparison with their more credible, more humanized Venetian counterparts. The novel's climax replicates the conflict of the pound of flesh demanded in court, but changes the stake and, partly, the moral of the story – D'Anton (Antonio) is sentenced to circumcision but the readers find out, surprisingly, that he is already circumcised. This ingenious denouement draws attention to the main dilemma of Shylock's drama: was he the victim or the victimizer? Was Shakespeare anti-Semitic or a critic of anti-Semitism? These alternatives still make the play and subsequent rewritings of it extremely vulnerable.

Anne Tyler, best-selling author of romantic comedies featuring somewhat eccentric heroines, takes a rather unusual turn with her Shrew. If most contemporary criticism of this play comes from the area of gender studies, a feminist Kate might have been expected, perhaps a martyr sacrificed on the altar of the ultimate female liberation. But Tyler makes her heroine, rather than comment on the hardships of being a woman, conclude by saying that "it's hard to be a man." An egalitarian touch, though, could not be missed, so the Epilogue shows husband and wife standing in the doorway, neither of them one step forward or backward. This inclusive approach is obvious in the author's decision to explain Kate's excentricity as social awkwardness rather than shrewishness, which makes her alliance with an equally anti-social Pyotr all the more likely. What looks, in the original play, like a father's punishment for his daughter's disobedience turns, in Tyler's novel, into something more like a reward. When Doctor Battista's Russian assistant needs a visa extension to work in the USA, a plan dawns, to marry him into an all-American family – his own. Initial protests disappear when Kate and Pyotr manage a relationship which is not based on the classical war of the sexes, but on cultural differences than can be naturally overcome.

Tracy Chevalier's idea of rewriting Othello has been called "ambitious" by some reviewers,[5] in the sense of being less convincing than other attempts. The main reason for this is probably the exaggerated attention paid to the original plot, to the detriment of explaining the complicated psychological mechanisms that start with love, jealousy, doubt and hate and end in tragedy. Osei Kokote is an 11-year-old student starting a new school in Washington DC. His problem is that he is the only black boy in school in a time, the 1970s, when the civil rights movement had not yet permeated all layers and mentalities

in America. No wonder he becomes the main target of the school bully, Ian (Iago), despite the disinterested friendship of Italian-American Dee (Desdemona). The story is captivating and moving, but is already familiar to Shakespeare Retold fans, who liked the 2001 spin-off *O*, set in an American high-school which has a good basketball team, or spin-offs of romantic comedies like *She's the Man* (2006, loosely based on *Twelfth Night*), in which teenage Viola joins an all-male soccer team. Chevalier's attempt to revert to the rules of the classical theatre and organize the entire novel around one day only may be recognized in earlier experiments, such as the very successful *Saturday* (2005) by Ian McEwan, a novel whose entire action takes place on February 15, 2003.

Another Tempest

Margaret Atwood's response to *The Tempest* seems to be, so far, one of the most successful in the Hogarth Shakespeare project. Some reviewers believe this is the case because the novel "feels so much like something Atwood would have written anyway."[6] On the contrary, I believe the novel's success resides precisely in the fact that the Canadian writer departs both from the predictability of her own typical stories and genres and from the equally typical reading of the Bard's last play along the lines of the postcolonial script. Some of Margaret Atwood's best-selling novels are dystopias, pieces of speculative fiction or social science fiction, in which the author imagines gloomy versions of the post-Apocalypse in the western world. This very successful and popular contemporary genre would rhyme well with many modern reinterpretations of Shakespeare's fantasy, most notably the 1956 spin-off *Forbidden Planet*, considered today the very first SF movie in history, featuring a spaceship and inter-galactic travel. The island of the Elizabethan play was, here, a distant planet on which a father and a daughter had been stranded and an expedition was sent, years later, to retrieve them.

On the other hand, the greatest quantity of literary criticism of *The Tempest*, as well as most of the books or films which are adaptations of the last play, are produced by the contemporary reception and appropriation of Prospero's and Caliban's stories in the postcolonial context. In the 1980s, scholars were already summing up interpretations of *The Tempest* in these terms: "It has long been recognized that *The Tempest* bears traces of the contemporary British investment in colonial expansion."[7] This pattern of interpretation encourages the analysis of the dramatic text as a piece of early imperialistic ideology, according to which the British colonizer, member of a superior race, subjects the primitive and often evil natives of far-flung continents for their own good. Prospero is, thus, the master who usurps an island legally owned by the savage Caliban, who had presumably inherited it from his mother, the black witch Sycorax. Cohabitation on the colonized island is mirrored with the help of two problematic pairs, Prospero and Ariel and Prospero and Caliban. While the former illustrates a solution for peaceful cohabitation, in which each party makes compromises in order to survive, the latter shows forms of resistance, control and punishment. The good native, Ariel, submissive and non-conflictual, is presented in sheer contrast with the evil savage,

Caliban, who uses the master's language only to curse him and threatens to rape the master's daughter.

Such readings of the Shakespearean fantasy are echoed in many contemporary novels, films, or plays, which attempt to appropriate *The Tempest* and voice a critical stance towards the early process of colonization and the problematic 20th century process of decolonization. Francophone playwright Aimé Césaire wrote, in 1969, *Une tempête*, whose central subject is race and revolution, which diverges from the original plot in that at the end, while Ariel is released, Caliban remains in chains, the message being that one can never again be totally free after being born and raised a slave. Marina Warner's 1992 novel *Indigo* sets a dual plot, in 20th century London and in the 17th century Caribbean, following the destinies of the British conqueror Kit Everard and his descendants, with a special focus on the female characters – Sycorax is a powerful presence, as healer and indigo dyer, and Ariel is female, and thus more obviously exploited and victimized than Shakespeare's spirit. The colonizer's descendants are also girls, who go back to the island for a celebration and, becoming familiar with the place and learning about its traditions, indirectly acknowledge and repent for the wrongs of the past. Another feminist encryptation is ventured by director Julie Taymor, whose 2010 *The Tempest* introduces a female magician, Prospera, played by Helen Mirren, who takes refuge from the "civilized" world after she is accused of witchcraft. Together with her daughter, she seeks protection on the island rather than control, like her Elizabethan male counterpart, who had turned his exile into occupation when announcing his intention of settling on the island "to be the lord on't." (V, 1)

Of all Shakespeare's plays, *The Tempest* has one of the greatest potentials, equal with or even higher than the texts that have been invested by traditional criticism with supreme authority, under the umbrella of "the great tragedies." It is a hybrid genre, both comedy and fantasy. It features a hero who remakes an ideal life Shakespeare would have wished for himself – the reconciliation with his family, retirement and a peaceful life near his daughter(s). It can be read as the Bard's testament: his last play, it ends with Prospero burying his books, a gesture which is interpreted as Shakespeare's own way of saying goodbye to the theatre. The play is also very contemporary in the sense that it leaves room for a postcolonial interpretation of the European tale about conquest and cohabitation on a remote island. It has an esoteric air, with its stories of the wise magus, the evil witch, charms and rituals of initiation. It blends all the favorite themes of the classics: love, revenge, power, hope, redemption, and a second chance. Last but not least, it is political and philosophical in a sophisticated Renaissance manner, applying the then latest Machiavellian views on society and rulership. In the 16th century, power was regarded, under the influence of the Italian thinker, as a force for both good and evil, the figure of the prince being central. This ideal ruler had skills which made him "multifunctional": he was a monarch, a strategist, a politician, a philosopher, heredity being doubled by competence in his endeavor to reach his supreme goal of regular leadership. Ruthless action, sometimes taken for tyranny, can be excused, in the Machiavellian line of thought, if it serves

a superior target, if it is only a necessary tool in the game of power. The play also brings into focus the issue of legitimacy, such a frequent motif on the Elizabethan stage, reflecting a serious preoccupation of the society in general, in a time when the medieval traditions of kingship were combined with early modern political views of the science and art of governing.

The Tempest is indeed about the scholarly prince Prospero (from Latin, "to prosper, to render fortunate") who is removed from authority despite his hereditary legitimacy, because of his bookish incompatibility with politics. His path tells the story of necessary ruthlessness, as he wants to transform his exile into conquest and control over the island, and then his maturation and transformation into a competent politician who deserves to have power "thrust" back upon him. Prospero's example is dual, since he is at the same time the legitimate ruler of Milan, usurped by his brother, and the illegitimate ruler of the island, stolen from the native owner Caliban. The moral of the plot is complicated further by such dilemmas related to rulership and authority as these: How legal was it to remove Prospero, who had inherited the right to rule, but was uninterested in and unskilled at ruling? How correct is it for Prospero to claim rulership of the island over a native who is subhuman in form and intellect but has, himself, inherited the right to rule from his mother, the witch Sycorax? Is justice done in the end, when Prospero is given back the scepter, because his birth right is restored to him or because he has, in the meantime, proved his competence – in other words, should heredity or meritocracy prevail? All these questions show how modernly complex and ambiguous Shakespeare's last play is, how complicated and abstract is its study of power, in the most intimate and hidden aspects.

The New Wilderness

In *Hag-Seed*, Margaret Atwood is clever enough to depart from the obvious and exploit the less evident reverberations of Shakespeare's last play. As mentioned above, she chooses a less predictable strategy, avoiding the dystopian genre in which she excels and which has often suited the purposes of writers and directors retelling *The Tempest* for a modern audience. The novels that established her reputation as a bestselling author are the pieces of speculative fiction, including *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), or *The Year of the Flood* (2009), which describe a future western society returning to primitivism as a result of a large-scale catastrophe, the few survivors trying to cope with a post-apocalyptic reality and accommodate to harsh living conditions and totalitarian political regimes. The Canadian writer avoids such a scenario for her Hogarth *Tempest*, which, however, bears more subtle traces of Atwoodian plotlines. Perhaps most notably, there is the retreat she imagines for her new Prospero, aka Felix Philips, art director of a Canadian Shakespeare festival, who retires after his assistant plots against him and takes his job. This retreat is a wooden cabin which, the narrator explains, might have been inhabited by a pioneer in the 1830s, and which is remote from any element of civilization, barely accessible from the main road in the summer and completely impracticable in winter. This is an ideal location for Felix, whose wounded

ego is more burdened by the loss of his three-year-old daughter, who had died of meningitis a short while before he was made redundant.

The retreat, with its ancient appliances, its rustic appeal and its hermit-like seclusion, reminds Atwood's fans of her early novel, *Surfacing* (1972), in which the heroine abandons the modern world and retires deeper and deeper into the vast Canadian wilderness as a form of protest against the consumerist society, the male establishment, industrial-scale tourism, and neglect of the environment. She gives up civilization gradually, renouncing the comfort of a built shelter, cooked food and clothes, choosing to be reunited with elemental nature when she gives birth to her baby, alone in the forest. This complete separation from civilization, in which the individual feels small and insignificant, is an element Margaret Atwood theorizes elsewhere, in her influential *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (2013 [1972]). Here she identifies the specific features of Canadian literature in contrast with the British and American one, considering that, in the former, the notion of survival is central, making way for the persona of the victim. She goes on to identify four victim positions in Canadian literature: Position One – denying the status of the victim; Position Two – acknowledging victimhood with resignation; Position Three – acknowledging victimhood but fighting against it, making the difference between "the role" and "the experience" of the victim; Position Four – being "a creative non-victim," a survivor who capitalizes on the experience of victimhood creatively, by writing survivor narratives.

It is not hard to follow this trajectory of victimization, from anger, resignation, experimentation, to creativity in *Hag-Seed*. Felix's project of putting a barrier between himself and the world that has harmed and wronged him stops just before such "progressive insanities" – to quote a poem by Margaret Atwood about man's fight with nature – get the best of him. His literary and spiritual ancestor's space, the island, is replaced here by the four walls of the wooden refuge in the Canadian interior. After years of growing a beard, eating only macaroni on the rare occasions when he remembered that eating was necessary, and having imaginary conversations with his dead child, Felix decides to return to life even if his only coherent reason is revenge against Tony, his usurper, and his ministerial accomplice, Sal. The revenge takes the unexpected form of a menial job as teacher of creative writing and drama in a local prison, where he gets hired with the pen-name Mr. Duke. However, this position proves more gratifying than anyone might have expected, even before the popularity of the course places the trainer back in the limelight and his program is visited by high officials, none other than Tony and Sal. This is an opportunity of placing the antagonists face to face at last, and Felix must take advantage of it, so, when a riot breaks out in prison, this can only be perfectly convenient for his revenge plan.

Another link between Felix's journey and Margaret Atwood's theoretical views on the specificities of Canadian literature is the trope of the garrison (which is opposed to the theme of the frontier, in American literature, and the island, in British literature). The garrison mentality, described by other Canadian scholars like Northrop Frye, consists of an uncontrollable human desire to build walls against the world

at large. For fear of the emptiness of the landscape outside (which Atwood calls, in another book, "the malevolent North"), for fear of an unknown spatial, animal, or supernatural entity (in her poems about the first Canadian settlers, "the green vision, the unnamed whale" – 1978), characters choose a self-imposed incarceration, feeling besieged, powerless, giving up fighting and frequently going mad. The trope of the garrison is opposed, in American literature, by the myth of the frontier, of infinite opportunity and optimism, and, in British literature, on a model set by the very Elizabethans, Thomas More and his *Utopia* and, of course, Shakespeare and *The Tempest*, by the geography and symbolism of the island. Thus, a rewriting of Prospero's tempest on an island as a scholar's retreat in the middle of the Canadian wilderness is only a natural evolution of literary themes attached to the specificity of the two English-speaking cultures.

In *Hag-Seed*, the progress from insecurity to insanity is embodied in the grieved father and art director's desire to disappear from a world that has taken from him the two things he had – an angelic daughter and a creative passion for Shakespeare. Felix imagines his daughter growing up, helps her with her homework, listens to her frolicking outside in the snow, as she is followed and echoed by the small birds and animals of the forest, plays chess with her, cooks her favorite meals, while he watches, on Google, his enemies' success and glamorous life, figuring out ways to make them suffer: seducing Tony's wife, luring him into a cellar and poisoning him, inducing him an incurable illness. When these imaginings threaten to take him over completely, Felix buys a new green shirt and goes out, to meet his future employer, Estella, for an interview at the local Mc Donald's restaurant.

The connections with the original Shakespearean plot are so far covert. Felix, another Latin name with a positive load ("happy") for the new Prospero, is the father of a daughter named Miranda and suffers the deception of those closest and most loyal, who force him to renounce his esteemed position and seek the exile in an unnamed part of the Canadian interior, where he spends years waiting for an opportunity to punish the wrongdoers and return to the world of the theatre. Despite being stabbed in the back by Tony, Felix more or less admits that his removal was also partly his fault as he had repeatedly neglected his social connections and had refused a more sedate approach to staging, as his superiors had requested. We recognize the basic original plot of betrayal, punishment and restoration, as well as the names of some characters (Miranda, unchanged, Tony, short for Antonio, Prospero's usurping brother), and we wonder about the absence of other characters (Ferdinand or Caliban). But Atwood's real *coup de théatre*, as it were, in this modern retelling, is the device of the play within a play, or rather, of a play within a novel, a scheme Shakespeare was very fond of, since it shed light on the philosophical and aesthetic notion of theatrical illusion and it served the practical purposes of solving the complications of the plot. It is true, Will employed this technique in *Hamlet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Taming of the Shrew,* but not in *The Tempest*. Margaret Atwood uses this device to bring the Elizabethan plot closer to contemporaneity and increase its credibility after she has trained her hand

of creating a *mise en abyme* in *The Blind Assassin* (2000), in which the narrator, Iris, tells the readers about a novel written by her sister, Laura, also entitled "The Blind Assassin," whose embedded plot focuses on a murder, which, coincidentally, echoes the murdering of Laura herself in the main plot. In *Hag-Seed*, the main story, about Felix's tribulations, frustrations and revenge, frames the two consecutive stagings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: the first one, at the Makeshiweg Festival, interrupted by Tony's scheming, and the second one, at the Fletcher County Correctional Institute, meant as payback for Tony's scheming. The textual interconnections implied by the story within a story are echoed structurally in this novel by the writer's decision to divide her book into five acts, with titles reminiscent of Shakespeare but also of the typical Atwoodian scenario (*Dark Backward, A Brave Kingdom, These Our Actors, Rough Magic, This Thing of Darkness*), preceded by a Prologue and followed by an Epilogue. The "brave kingdom," reminding of Miranda's own wonder at the "brave new world" is followed by "this thing of darkness" which, in the play, was a literal description of Caliban, and which now is a comment on Felix's obsessions and vulnerabilities.

Felix's ideas of staging an Elizabethan play are daring, sometimes labeled by conservative critics as demented. If an almost naked, freely bleeding Lavinia may be regarded as only too faithful to the original plot of *Titus Andronicus*, *Pericles* imagined on a spaceship filled with aliens, Hermione's transformation into a vampire at the end of *The Winter's Tale* and *Julius Caesar* featuring the Roman ruler in tartan, like a Scottish king, are definitely imaginative and provocative contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare, Atwood picking here some of the most extreme examples in the history of Shakespeare's adaptation for the stage or the big screen. If the esteemed artistic director of the Makeshiweg Festival is given enough funding and credit for such performances, despite the provincial hesitation of some board directors and spectators, when he is reduced to the status of a retired teacher training inmates, his creativity is severely curtailed and censored. No fake blood in *Macbeth* because it could stir the prisoners' violent instincts. No staging of the romantic comedies because they are too frivolous and the questions of sex are forbidden. No *Lear* or *Hamlet* because there are enough suicidal attempts in prison anyway. No prompts or special effects: "nothing sharp, nothing explosive, nothing you could smoke or inject."[8] The final satisfaction of the audience's response to the performance is also lost, as "administration was leery of gathering the whole prison population in one place for fear of riots."[9] The show would then be watched by all inmates on the closed-circuit TV.

The experience of adapting Shakespeare is, for Felix, endlessly gratifying. As artistic director, he has money, fame and a free hand to take the Bard's plays and characters where he wants. Even criticism gives him great satisfaction, because the protestations show the intensity of attention paid to him: "Where there are boos, there's life!"[10] But there is a strange consistency in Felix's satisfaction even when he replaces the glamorous Makeshiweg Festival with the Fletcher Correctional Shakespeare:

> The performances were a little rough, maybe, but they were heartfelt. Felix

> wished he could have squeezed half that much emotion out of his professionals, back in the day. The limelight shone briefly and in an obscure corner, but it shone.[11]

The convicts' joy at seeing their names in bold letters at the end of the video, when the credits rolled, moves the hardened Felix beyond words as he understands this fleeting celebrity helps these lost men feel more at peace with their lives. After "a stellar career like his," teaching a group of "thieves, drug dealers, embezzlers, man-slaughterers, fraudsters, and con men" may look like a fate worse than death, but Mr. Duke's efforts are soon noticed, his method is deemed cutting-edge, funding starts coming in and fame is partially restored.[12] This gives him the opportunity he has waited for so long, to avenge his betrayal with the tools he masters best – not poison, guns and fornication, but a play by Shakespeare. Thus, Felix follows in Prospero's footsteps, conjuring a tempest to trap his enemies, only the tempest proposed by Margaret Atwood is a metatextual device. The play within the novel is an occasion, for writer and readers, to rediscover the hidden potentials of the Bard's last play, down to the most minute lexical details (hence the very title of the novel). "Hag-seed," a curse word used in the original play against Caliban, is among the most cryptical, hard to explain and hard to translate phrases, but it points out an empathetic strategy teacher and director Mr. Duke uses in his classes. The prisoners, rough, uneducated men, are forbidden to swear unless they use lines from Shakespeare. As their apprenticeship advances, they have to limit themselves to cursing with words taken only from the play they are studying at that moment. Transgressors are punished, while the successful speakers are rewarded with cigarettes, smuggled in by the teacher for this purpose. So, for example, if *Macbeth* is being rehearsed, one could only be heard saying, in anger: "The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon."[13] For *The Tempest*, the complete list of curse words read out, in ministerial tones, by the inmates is quite impressive:

> Born to be hanged. A pox o'your throat. Bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog. Whoreson. Insolent noisemaker. Wide-chapp'd rascal. Malignant thing. Blue-eyed hag. Freckled whelp hag-born. Thou earth. Thou tortoise. Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself. As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed, With raven's feather from unwholesome fen, Drop on you both. A south-west blow on ye, And blister you all o'er. Toads, beetles, bats light on you. Filth as thou art. Abhorr'ed slave. The red plague rid you. Hag-seed. All the infections that the sun sucks up, From bogs, fens, flats, fall on – add name here – and make him, By inch-meal a disease. Most scurvy monster. Most perfidious and drunken monster. Moon-calf. Pied ninny. Scurvy patch. A murrain on you. The devil take your fingers. The dropsy drown this fool. Demi-devil. Thing of darkness.[14]

Felix's directing of *The Tempest* is the most *avant-garde* of all. Early in the novel, while still at Makeshiweg Festival, he imagines Ariel as a transvestite on stilts, Caliban as a homeless, black or native, bum,

Miranda as a former child gymnast, and Prospero dressed in animal skin – not genuine for fear of protests from animal rights organizations – made of plush toys which had been unstuffed and sewn together. At the Fletcher Correctional Facility, the cast is more predictable: a con artist with large eyes as Ferdinand; a slender, cool juvenile hacker as Ariel; Snake Eye, the real estate fraudster, with his slanted left eye and lopsided mouth, as Antonio. For the fifteen-year-old innocent and vulnerable Miranda, Felix has limited options, so he returns to his initial Makeshiweg cast and employs Anne-Marie, now professional actress, who takes this challenge with enthusiasm. Shakespeare's text is abridged and conveyed by the inmates with a touch of slang, a twist of the amateur's awkwardness and a sprinkle of the illiterate man's naivety. The result is a prologue which reads:

> ANNOUNCER: What you're gonna see, is a storm at sea:
> Winds are howlin', sailors yowlin',
> Passengers cursin' 'em, 'cause it gettin' worse:
> Gonna hear screams, just like a ba-a-d dream,
> But not all here is what it seem,
> Just sayin'.
> *Grins.*
> Now we gonna start the playin'.[15]

Gone are lines like "Blow, till thou burst thy wind," or "What cares these roarers for the name of king?" from Act I Scene 1 and the catastrophic narrative blended with a melancholy, lyrical mood, just as gone is the theatrical illusion. But the impression, thwarted as it may be, is still extremely powerful and symptomatic of the century-long story of Shakespeare's appropriation in all areas of knowledge and walks of life.

Conclusion

One of the best retellings of the Bard's plays in the Hogarth Shakespeare's project, Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* has the quality of versatility. It is close enough to the Elizabethan poet's last play to invite contemporaries to meditate on the valences of *The Tempest* beyond the labels that have so frequently been applied to it by criticism. At the same time, it departs from the original plot and meaning enough to be a brilliant novel in its own right, which blends particular elements of Canadian culture with universal and atemporal themes of love and loss, creation and destruction, death and rebirth.

Works Cited

Allfrey, Ellah Wakatama, "*New Boy* by Tracy Chevalier review – If Othello were a schoolboy," *The Guardian*, May 17, 2017
Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale*, New York, Anchor Random Books, 1998
Atwood, Margaret, *Surfacing*, New York, Doubleday Random Books, 1998
Atwood, Margaret, *The Blind Assassin*, New York, Anchor Random Books, 1998
Atwood, Margaret, *Oryx and Crake*, New York, Anchor Random Books, 2003
Atwood, Margaret, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Hachette Digital, 2009
Atwood, Margaret, *The Year of the Flood*, New York, Doubleday Random Books, 2009
Atwood, Margaret, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature,* Toronto, Harper Collins Canada, 2013

Atwood, Margaret, *Hag-Seed*, London, Hogarth Shakespeare, 2016
Césaire, Aimé, *A Tempest*, trans. Richard Miller, UBU, Repertory Theater, 1969
Chevalier, Tracy, *New Boy*, London, Hogarth Shakespeare, 2017
Desmet, Christy and Robert Sawyer (eds.), *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999
Dollimore, Jonathan and Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare. Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994
Gopnik, Adam, "Why Rewrite Shakespeare?," *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2016
Groskop, Viv, "*Hag-Seed* review – Margaret Atwood turns *The Tempest* into a perfect storm," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2016
Jacobson, Howard, *Shylock Is My Name*, London, Hogarth Shakespeare, 2016
Shakespeare, William, David Bevington (ed.), *William Shakespeare's Romances,* Pearson Longman, 2003
Tyler, Anne, *Vinegar Girl*, London, Hogarth Shakespeare, 2016
Warner, Marina, *Indigo*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1992
Winterson, Jeanette, *The Gap of Time*, London, Hogarth Shakespeare, 2015

Notes

1. Terence Hawkes, "General Editor's Preface," in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (eds.), *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999, p. xiv.
2. Christy Desmet, "Introduction," in *ibidem*, p. 2.
3. Adam Gopnik, "Why Rewrite Shakespeare?," *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2016.
4. *Ibidem.*
5. Ellah Wakatama Allfrey, "*New Boy* by Tracy Chevalier review – If Othello were a schoolboy," *The Guardian*, May 17, 2017.
6. Viv Groskop, "*Hag-Seed* review – Margaret Atwood turns *The Tempest* into a perfect storm," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2016.
7. Paul Brown, "'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine': *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism," in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare. Essays in Cultural Materialism,* Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994, p. 48.
8. Margaret Atwood, *Hag-Seed*, London, Hogarth Shakespeare, 2016, p. 57.
9. *Ibidem*.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 13.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 58.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 59.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 56.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 91.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 3.