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"The Island Is a Theatre": Metafiction, Institution, and Scenery in Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*

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Abstract
This article examines Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016) as a form of metafiction rather than just a simple update of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Unlike other Hogarth Shakespeare adaptations, which set their source plays in modern settings and leave interpretation implicit, Atwood's novel directly engages with, teaches, and debates *The Tempest* within its own framework, making adaptation part of its story. Using the play's extensive critical history as a reflection on theatre and authorship, and Linda Hutcheon's view of adaptation as a visible act of "transcoding" across mediums, genres, and frames, the article shows how *Hag-Seed* shifts Prospero's magical power into a more ordinary and transparent realm of institutional authority: Felix Phillips's power relies on boards, ministries, and funding cycles, unlike Prospero's. The article further argues that this shift depends on the novel's distinct Canadian setting, which incorporates real institutions such as the Stratford Festival and Ontario's arts bureaucracy, a national tradition of critical hostility (Frye's "garrison mentality," Atwood's Survival), and an Indigenous voice that highlights settler-colonial history. These elements keep the connections between Shakespeare's original and Atwood's reimagining visibly intertwined, illustrating that meaning is shaped by who reads a text and where, rather than residing solely within the text itself.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *Hag-Seed*, *The Tempest*, metafiction, Shakespeare adaptation, Caliban

Introduction

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[1] This article originated in the conference paper "Updating the Shakespearean Metatheatricality for the 21st Century: Margaret Atwood's Art of Metafiction in *Hag-Seed*", presented at the 4th International Online Conference New Dimensions of Philology – Languages, Literature, Linguistics, Culture (The State University of Applied Sciences in Płock, Poland, April 2018), co-authored with my late colleague, Gabriela Iuliana Colipca-Ciobanu (1975-2021). The present study substantially expands, revises, and recontextualises the ideas first explored in that conference presentation. Following Gabriela's untimely death in 2021, the project remained unfinished for several years. This article is dedicated to her memory. The surviving author takes full responsibility for this expanded and revised form.

of his death – Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* reimagines *The Tempest* not just as a story of plot and characters but as an exploration of theatre itself. Where other contributors to the series have tended to relocate their plays into new settings and leave the interpretive work largely implicit, Atwood makes her commentary explicit: *Hag-Seed* stages, performs, teaches, and discusses *The Tempest*, all within a novel structured like a Renaissance play. Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* and Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl*, the other most prominent entries in the series, mainly adapt their source plays into modern settings, relying on the parallels to convey meaning indirectly. Atwood takes a more exposed route: her characters read *The Tempest*, discuss its staging, and analyse its interpretations within the story itself, so that adapting Shakespeare becomes an integral part of the narrative rather than a hidden technique. This approach is the engine of the novel's metafictional argument and enables *Hag-Seed* to serve both as a story and as a piece of literary critique—a duality that this article takes as its central object of analysis.

This article contends that *Hag-Seed* is best understood as a sustained exercise in metafiction that uses the language of Shakespearean theatricality to explore three interlocking concerns: the fate of the artist who falls from institutional power and must reinvent his craft and identity; the transformation of prison into a site of authentic artistic and pedagogical labour; and the ethical stakes of adapting a canonical work on commission, in full view of the critical scrutiny such a commission invites. The plot supplies the scaffolding for all three. Felix Phillips, the artistic director of the Makeshiweg Theatre Festival, is ousted by his administrative partner, Tony Price, during preparations for a new production of *The Tempest*. He then retreats into a twelve-year self-imposed exile before resurfacing under the name Mr Duke, teaching literacy through drama at Fletcher Correctional. When a ministerial visit brings his old enemies, Tony and Sal O'Nally, to watch a performance, Felix stages *The Tempest* as an elaborate trap, enticing the ministers into the production and enacting his long-deferred revenge. Afterwards, he guides his cast through a final creative-writing exercise, comes to terms with his daughter Miranda's death, and declines the returned directorship in favour of Sal's son, Freddie.

Like Shakespeare's Prospero, Felix loses his position through the machinations of a trusted collaborator, retreats into exile, and eventually uses theatrical illusion to orchestrate his own restoration. But whereas Prospero's island is a space of magic set apart from ordinary social relations, Felix's "islands"—first the Makeshiweg Festival, then the prison classroom—are always also institutions, subject to boards of directors, literacy programmes, and ministerial visits. It is this friction between magical stagecraft and institutional constraint that gives Atwood's metafictional project its particular charge.

(Meta)theatricality in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Atwood's rewriting derives its authority from a longstanding critical tradition that interprets *The Tempest* as an intensely self-aware and theatrical work. Stephen Greenblatt characterises the play as acting like an echo chamber for Shakespeare's recurring motifs, resonating with themes that preoccupied him throughout his career (Greenblatt 1997, 3047). The play deploys, almost programmatically, the full repertoire of theatrical resources – storm and spectacle, music and dance, monstrosity and magic, comedy and courtly masque – in a way that draws attention to its own artifice at every step. The masque created by Prospero for Miranda and Ferdinand is the clearest example of this self-awareness, but it simply

exemplifies a broader theme woven throughout the play: how illusion and artifice influence human bonds related to parenthood, marriage, power, and responsibility—relationships that the play notably declines to resolve in any tidy or conventional way (Orgel 1998, 47–56; Bickley and Stevens 2013, 311–313).

From this important tradition, a common interpretation of *The Tempest* as an extended metaphor for theatre develops, with Prospero seen as its stage manager (Voigts 2014, 45). Prospero is described as an actor-manager (Frye 2010, 48) and, in more theoretical terms, as a modern visionary figure who maintains the "assertoric gaze" and acts as the creator and master-manipulator of a fiction that becomes reality (Voigts 2014, 45). This perspective aligns with the longstanding, though debated, biographical tradition that interprets Prospero's relinquishment of his art as a subtle farewell from Shakespeare himself, written near the end of his career as he prepares for retirement to Stratford (Bickley and Stevens 2013, 307). Whatever one makes of the biographical claim, the structural analogy is difficult to resist: the island, with its poetry, song, and illusion, stands opposed to the Machiavellian realpolitik of Milan and functions as a figure for the theatre itself: a space in which magic, wielded by Prospero and enacted by Ariel, becomes the essential instrument for sublimating revenge and teaching a lesson in reconciliation and acceptance. Nevertheless, the restoration achieved by the play remains notably provisional: there is no certainty that Prospero's forgiveness will endure once the ensemble disperses. The paramount lesson conveyed by the play appears to be that art can both entertain and educate, yet cannot replace real life; upon the conclusion of the performance, "the actors will return to their proper identities" (Vitkus 2003, 419), a return that is literalized in Prospero's relinquishment of his magic and his voyage back to Milan.

This interpretation of *The Tempest* as a play centred on theatricality did not originate solely with late twentieth-century critics, although it was most extensively theorised there. Anne Righter's foundational study of the idea of the play in Shakespeare's work traced a lifelong interest, spanning from early comedies to late romances, in examining the stage itself as a central subject. This fascination is most evident in *The Tempest*, where the line between the play's world and the audience's is intentionally, and often, blurred (Righter 1962). What distinguishes The Tempest within this larger pattern is the degree to which its central figure is not merely a character who happens to stage spectacles, as many Shakespearean rulers and schemers do. Instead, Prospero's entire authority is explicitly theatrical: he doesn't rely on inherited titles, which he has lost, but on his books – tools of learning and imagination rather than political power. Notably, Caliban's attempt to overthrow him depends on seizing these very books – "for without them / He's but a sot" (3.2.90–91); the play asserts, at the level of plot, that Prospero's dukedom-in-exile is a dukedom of the imagination, maintained through the same resources (text, performance, illusion) that uphold the theatre itself (Kermode 1958, xl–xliii).

Nowhere is this self-consciousness more pointed than in the interruption of Prospero's own masque. Having conjured the goddesses Iris, Ceres, and Juno to celebrate Miranda and Ferdinand's betrothal with a grand dance and song, Prospero abruptly breaks off the performance mid-flight, startled by the memory of Caliban's conspiracy. He then dismisses the spirit-actors, reflecting on the fleeting nature and eventual collapse of all forms of spectacle, both theatrical and worldly:

> "Our revels now are ended. These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits, and / Are melted into air, into thin air: / And, like the baseless fabric of this vision, / The cloud-capp'd

> towers, the gorgeous palaces, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself, / Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve, / And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, / Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep." (4.1.148–158)

The passage is doubly metatheatrical: it compares human life to a play and demonstrates this by having a play break down in real time, with its illusion visibly shattered as "real" dramatic events from elsewhere in the story appear. Prospero's actors, Iris, Ceres, and Juno, are identified as spirits even as they disappear, and the pun in "the great globe itself" extends beyond the fictional world to refer to Shakespeare's own playhouse. This causes the speech to dissolve not only the masque but also implicitly the Globe theatre where the audience is watching. As critics have observed, this reminds viewers that they are watching a play, just as the play-within-the-play also highlights this fact to its own audience (Orgel 1998, 29–32).

A further, complementary gesture arrives at the very end of the drama, when Prospero renounces his art in terms that make its theatrical character explicit—breaking his staff and drowning his book "certain fathoms in the earth" (5.1.54–57)—before stepping forward in the Epilogue to speak directly to the theatre audience. Here, the fiction of the island falls away entirely, and Prospero speaks in the voice of an actor rather than a duke, asking to be released by applause.

> "Now my charms are all o'erthrown, / And what strength I have's mine own, / Which is most faint... / release me from my bands / With the help of your good hands. / Gentle breath of yours my sails / Must fill, or else my project fails... / As you from crimes would pardon'd be, / Let your indulgence set me free." (Epilogue, 1–3, 9–12, 19–20)

Few moments in the Shakespearean canon dramatise the actor's dependence on the audience's collaboration so nakedly, and it is precisely this collapsing of the distinction between magician, actor, and playwright that later criticism would come to read as the play's central theoretical proposition.

Atwood has been unusually candid about how she arrived at this same reading of the Epilogue while composing her own rewriting of the play. Writing in *The Guardian* shortly before the novel's publication, she described a long, frustrated process of rereading *The Tempest* and watching every film version she could find, unable to find a contemporary equivalent for a marooned magician with a marriageable daughter—until, on a further rereading, she tried the play "backwards" and was struck by its final three words: "The last three words Prospero says are 'Set me free.' But free from what?" (Atwood 2016b). That single question, arrived at only after repeated, almost exhausted returns to the source text, turns out to be the germ of the entire novel: once Prospero's ending is read as a confession of imprisonment rather than a magician's graceful exit, every other character's confinement (Ariel's pine, Caliban's rock, Miranda's cell) becomes legible as a variation on the same problem, and a prison becomes the logical place to stage it.

Atwood transfers this reading directly into Felix's own voice. Late in the novel, he offers his students an explicit gloss on why the play ends where it does, folding the Epilogue just discussed directly back into the novel's own argument about theatre and captivity:

> *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.' 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, 274–275)

The line is Atwood's own compositional discovery handed to her protagonist: Felix arrives, within the novel, at exactly the insight his author had while writing it. It supplies the clearest possible statement of the claim this article develops across the sections that follow—that the Epilogue is not an incidental coda but the structural key to the whole play, and that Atwood's rewriting earns its place in the Shakespearean tradition precisely by taking that key and turning it, quite literally, on a lock.

It is worth noting, finally, that this reading of *The Tempest* as a meditation on theatre and authorship has developed alongside, and at times in some tension with, an equally influential postcolonial tradition. This alternative reading emphasises the relationship between Prospero and Caliban as a dramatisation of colonial appropriation—of land, labour, and language (Vaughan and Vaughan 1991). Atwood's *Hag-Seed*, as later sections of this article will show, is conspicuously more interested in the metatheatrical strand of this critical inheritance than in the colonial one, redirecting the Prospero–Caliban relationship away from questions of territorial dispossession and toward questions of imprisonment, pedagogy, and the shared, if unequal, capacity of gaoler and gaoled to be transformed by art.

Hag-Seed as Metafiction

This inherited theatricality gives Atwood a ready vocabulary for her own metafictional ambitions, ambitions that belong to a much longer postmodern lineage. Postmodern fiction, confronted with its own inability to represent the unrepresentable, unsettled by the deconstructionist rejection of any claim that fiction could be totalising under the sovereign authority of an author, and increasingly attentive to literature's fundamental condition as language, pushed metafictional technique until innovation itself became something close to a formal norm—a development that, even in comparatively conventional narratives, left writers newly alert to language's creative power (Klinkowitz 2017).

Atwood works within this lineage but tempers it with a certain wry self-deprecation. Throughout *Hag-Seed*, she repeatedly reminds the reader that what they are holding is, in the end, only a text engaging with another text, an implicit refusal to let the novel's fictional world claim more authority than it has earned. This impulse may have practical as well as philosophical roots: Hag-Seed is not only a rewriting of a canonical work, and therefore already a kind of reverential pastiche, but also a commissioned book, written to order for a publisher's series, a status that exposed it in advance to charges of artificiality. Atwood's solution, in something close to a pre-emptive strike, is to advertise that artificiality loudly rather than disguise it, folding potential criticism directly into the text and thereby "fictionalising" it before a critic ever has the chance to raise it (Lodge 1992, 208). She does this through both overt and covert commentary on her Shakespearean source (Hutcheon 1980), producing a novel that, in the taxonomy developed by Monika Fludernik, belongs to the category of "allo-metanarration" – metafictional writing that thematises the narrative style of another author or text, rather than reflecting on its own composition directly (Fludernik 2003, qtd. in Neumann and Nünning 2014, 349).

Hutcheon, who supplied the vocabulary of "overt and covert" commentary in 1980, returned to the general problem of rewriting a quarter-century later, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, with

a more systematic account of what an adaptation is. Hutcheon there defines adaptation, at the level of form, as "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works," a "transcoding" that may involve a shift of medium, a shift of genre, or simply a change of frame that recontextualises the same story from a new point of view (Hutcheon 2006, 7–8). *Hag-Seed* simultaneously undertakes multiple transcodings: it transforms the medium from a stage play to a novel, which then incorporates a nested performance of the play; it changes genre and tone, turning Jacobean verse drama into modern prose fiction interrupted by student essays, rap lyrics, and screenplay-style stage directions; and it shifts frame most drastically of all, relocating the story from a mythical Mediterranean island to a literal Canadian penal institution. Hutcheon's insistence that adaptation is simultaneously a product, a process of creation, and an act of reception (2006, 7–9) captures why *Hag-Seed* insists on dramatising all three: the novel is itself an adaptation, it repeatedly shows Felix adapting the play for his cast, and shows that cast receiving, resisting, and reinterpreting the material he gives them. Therefore, adaptation is not only what Atwood does to Shakespeare but also what the novel's own characters are shown doing in real time on nearly every page.

Hag-Seed functions simultaneously as a rewriting of *The Tempest* and as a sustained critical commentary on it, one that visibly favours certain interpretive threads over others: revenge, the father–daughter bond, and power—reframed away from the colonial dynamics that have dominated much recent criticism of the play and toward questions of imprisonment and the longing for freedom—together with a broader meditation on the nature of theatre as an art form. Atwood is not shy about making this reading explicit in Felix's own voice. Reflecting on the prison itself, Felix arrives at a formulation that could stand as the novel's thesis statement: "The island is a theatre. Prospero is a director. He's putting on a play, within which there's another play" (Atwood 2016a, 116). This interpretive commitment plays out on two levels within the novel. First, in its plot, through the sustained depiction of a theatrical production being built from the ground up: sections such as "Felix Addresses the Players," "First Assignment: Curse Words," "Invisible to Every Eyeball Else," "This Island's Mine," "Most Scurvy Monster," "Second Assignment: Prisoners and Jailers," "Prospero's Goblins," and "The Persons of the Play" trace the pedagogical and rehearsal work that turns inmates into performers. Second, in more implicit and satirical asides on Shakespeare's status as a contemporary cultural icon, visible, for instance, in the "Bring the Rabble" sections, which gently mock the packaging and marketing of Shakespeare for mass audiences.

Hag-Seed: Creating Worlds

Felix Phillips (aka Mr Duke) as Prospero

Felix occupies the role of Prospero on two distinct registers. Even his name signals the kinship: "Felix" and "Prospero" both descend from Latin words with a similar semantic charge: "fortunate" and "favourable" rather than strict synonyms. Atwood's protagonist carries a name that echoes, without exactly translating, his Shakespearean original's name: a discreet piece of doubling that matches the more visible plot correspondences noted by Dana Percec in her own reading of the novel (Percec 2018, 301). As a father, he is both the biological parent of the lost Miranda and, later, a surrogate father to Anne-Marie Greenland, who takes on the role of Miranda in the prison production and thereby allows Felix to work through his grief at one remove. As an artistic director, he is a creator of worlds on stage in the fullest sense: at the Makeshiweg Festival, his extravagant productions—rich with

"fountains of glitter and capes made of stuffed toys"—have already been read as a gently self-mocking meta-critique of the excesses of postmodern theatre, playfully sending up the seriousness with which Felix approaches his craft (Broad 2017). The Makeshiweg Festival thus becomes, in effect, Felix's first island. His second island is the prison itself, where he reprises the role in a darker key, functioning simultaneously as a Shakespeare-like actor-manager and as an avenger plotting his return. Felix's own words make the equivalence explicit: "My island domain. My place of exile. My penance. My theatre" (Atwood 2016a, 81). The prison is at once his confinement and his stage, the space in which loss is transmuted into art. He announces this equivalence to his students on their very first day together, stripping them, at a stroke, of their inmate numbers and reassigning them a theatrical identity instead: "Welcome to the Fletcher Correctional Players. I don't care why you're in here or what they say you've done: for this course the past is prologue… As of this moment, you are actors" (Atwood 2016a, 84). The phrase is not merely administrative encouragement: "what's past is prologue" is itself lifted from *The Tempest*, where Antonio uses it to urge Sebastian towards murder (2.1.258), so that Felix's welcome speech quietly repurposes a line about seizing power through violence into one about starting over through art. Asked, in an unguarded moment, what a Shakespearean play about magic and shipwreck could possibly mean to convicted men, Felix answers with a bluntness that collapses the distance between hypotext and prison plot: "Oh, the actors will relate to it, all right… It's about prisons" (Atwood 2016a, 72).

The doubling of Felix's islands is worth dwelling on, because it is here that Atwood's adaptation departs most instructively from her source. Prospero's island is, in an important sense, extra-institutional: it lies outside the reach of Milanese law, and his authority over it derives from magic rather than office. Felix's islands, by contrast, are institutions through and through. The Makeshiweg Festival answers to a board of directors; the prison answers to the Corrections system; a literacy programme has its own funding cycle; and, eventually, to visiting government ministers. Felix's control over each of his "islands" is always tentative, subject to being revoked by those above him. This is exactly how he loses his first island to Tony Price. His revenge, when it comes, is not the exercise of a magician's sovereign will but a piece of institutional theatre staged for an institutional audience: he does not banish his enemies to a desert isle but traps them, quite literally, inside a room, using the conventions of participatory performance to make them complicit in their own humiliation. In this sense Atwood keeps Prospero's magic but relocates its source: where Shakespeare's magus commands spirits, Atwood's director commands stagecraft, casting, and the unwitting cooperation of his audience, a shift that quietly re-grounds *The Tempest*'s fantasy of restored authority in the more mundane, and more recognisably contemporary, machinery of institutional power.

This reading of Felix's power as institutional rather than magical should not be mistaken for a claim that the novel treats it as untroubled. The inmates who make his revenge possible are incarcerated for reasons that have nothing to do with his grievance against Tony and Sal, and nothing in the novel obliges them to serve as instruments of a director's decade-old vendetta; Felix's culminating trick – a fabricated prison riot, staged to frighten his enemies into confessing their own criminal intentions on tape – works by manipulating men whose confinement is real, not scripted, for the benefit of a plot they did not choose to be caught inside. Atwood does not resolve this tension explicitly. The novel's own account of the literacy programme's success—improved reading scores, a renewed sense of purpose, the

closing image of inmates watching themselves "loved" on screen—sits alongside, rather than answers, the fact that Felix's operating motive throughout is revenge rather than pedagogy, and that his students remain largely unaware of the role they are playing in his private plot. This ambivalence belongs with the ethical stakes this article's introduction raised with respect to Atwood's own commissioned rewriting: just as Atwood submits her adaptation to the reader's scrutiny rather than concealing its artificiality, the novel submits Felix's motives to the reader's scrutiny rather than insisting on his benevolence—a further instance of the refusal to adjudicate this article traces below in the novel's handling of Red Coyote's classroom dissent.

Atwood's Caliban

If Felix inherits Prospero's role, the inmates of Fletcher Correctional collectively inherit Caliban's, a debt the novel signals openly in its very title, *Hag-Seed*, one of the insults Prospero hurls at Caliban in Shakespeare's text. Like Caliban, the inmates are defined by an unresolved tension between brutality—the histories of crime and manipulation that brought them to Fletcher—and an unexpected sensibility, expressed through their engagement with poetic language and their responsiveness to the performance around them, much as Caliban himself is capable of both violence and a startlingly lyrical response to Ariel's invisible music (Bloom 1998, 678). It is Caliban, after all, who speaks some of the most tender lines in the entire play, reassuring the frightened Stephano and Trinculo that the island's magic is a source of wonder rather than threat:

> "Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not. / Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments / Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices, / That, if I then had waked after long sleep, / Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming, / The clouds methought would open, and show riches / Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked / I cried to dream again." (3.2.130–138)

Atwood's inmates are not given a single equivalent speech, but the impulse behind Caliban's lines – a capacity for beauty and longing that survives, and is not cancelled by, a history of violence and dispossession—is precisely what Felix's literacy programme sets out to locate and cultivate in men whom the institution has already classified simply as dangerous. For these men, the prison becomes both an "island" of confinement and a "theatre" of possibility: theatrical performance, and the production of *The Tempest* in particular, offers a genuine form of education, a connection Atwood herself draws from personal experience, noting in her Acknowledgements her long-standing interest in literature and drama taught and experienced within prisons (Atwood 2016a, 292). At the same time, performance becomes a vehicle for the inmates' own desire for freedom, rehearsed and partially realised through art even as it remains legally and physically out of reach.

Language Awareness

Atwood's metafictional method extends beyond plot mirroring into the texture of the prose itself. Like any writer working self-consciously within the metafictional mode, she "scrutinises all facets of the literary construct" (Christensen 1983, 10), producing a text marked by pronounced "self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing" (Waugh 1990, 2). Her intertextual engagement with The Tempest goes well beyond

the mere recreation of plot and character: Shakespearean phrases supply the titles for the novel's sections: "Dark Backward," "A Brave Kingdom," "These Our Actors," "Rough Magic," and "This Thing of Darkness", while the novel as a whole is modelled on a Renaissance play, with a prologue, five acts, and an epilogue. This awareness of language is not confined to the level of authorial technique; it becomes explicitly thematic within the story and is embodied in Felix's own pedagogical method. Through his exercises in textual analysis and creative writing, Felix seeks to awaken in his students—his "actors"—a desire to find their own means of articulating feeling and experience rather than simply reproducing Shakespeare's: a project that could be described, in Fredric Jameson's phrase, as an escape from the "prison house of language" (Jameson 1972), even though neither Felix nor Atwood ever uses that term directly.

Exercises in Creative Writing

The novel's culminating metafictional gesture is the set of alternative endings its inmates devise for Shakespeare's minor characters—a device that is at once a familiar exercise in creative-writing pedagogy and an established technique of metafictional practice more broadly, in which a narrative is deliberately extended or multiplied beyond the point where its original author chose to stop. Prompted by the play's own concluding lines—Prospero's "Be free, and fare thou well!" (5.1.318) and, in the Epilogue, "Let your indulgence set me free" (Epilogue, 20)—the inmates and Anne-Marie are set the task of imagining what becomes of Ariel, Antonio, Miranda, Gonzalo, and, most significantly, Caliban after the play's double liberation.

The results diverge sharply in tone and genre, and each functions as a small essay on the possibilities of fiction. Ariel's story becomes a holographic projection with overt science-fiction overtones, echoing *Star Trek* and *X-Men* (in the section "Team Ariel"). The casting of the role already anticipates this reading: Felix gives Ariel to 8Handz, a young hacker convicted of identity theft and forgery, whose backstory records that he was "betrayed by an older colleague when he wouldn't hack refugee charities" (Atwood 2016a, 68), a detail that echoes Ariel's original servitude to the witch Sycorax, who imprisoned the spirit in a cloven pine for refusing her commands. Laura Giovannelli reads this casting choice as one of the novel's subtler strategies for translating *The Tempest*'s master–servant dynamic into the vocabulary of contemporary digital labour and betrayal, recasting Ariel's magical bondage as a young technologist's exploitation by an unscrupulous employer (Giovannelli 2018). Antonio's story, by contrast, is deliberately realistic and violent, its inmate authors explicitly wanting to "tell the truth in some kind of real way" (Atwood 2016a, 253), itself a pointed, if understated, critique of the pretensions of realist fiction, a critique immediately counterbalanced by the fantasy conclusion Anne-Marie devises for Miranda, who receives an intertextual deus ex machina from the trio of goddesses who appear within Shakespeare's own masque (sections "Team Evil Bro Antonio" and "Team Miranda"). Gonzalo's ending opens onto a Foucauldian meditation on the nature of power and its indifference to virtuous intentions, gesturing back to the tradition of literary utopia even as it seems to register Atwood's own well-documented preference for dystopia, the darker counterpart of utopia (section "Team Gonzalo"). Caliban's story, finally, is the most exuberant and formally playful of the set, and also the one that carries the greatest interpretive weight. Tellingly, when Felix invites the cast to choose which character's afterlife they want to write, most of

the men choose Caliban (Atwood 2016a, 263), the character with, on the face of it, the fewest allies and the bleakest prospects in the play. Rather than a postmodern pastiche with three competing endings, their "Team Hag-Seed" report turns out to be a musical, in which Caliban breaks out of the cage Stephano and Trinculo have put him in and claims his own voice in a rap number that fuses Shakespeare's own lines with a modern idiom of protest:

> "Got outta my cage, now I'm in a rage— / No more dams I'll make for fish, / Nor fetch in firing / At requiring, / Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish; / Ain't gonna any more lick your feet / Or walk behind you on the street, / Ain't gonna get on the back of the bus, / And you can give our land right back to us! // Ban-ban, Ca-Caliban, / Don't need no master, I am not your man!" (Atwood 2016a, 270–271)

The lines "no more dams I'll make for fish" and "nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish" are lifted directly from Caliban's own vow of service-turned-rebellion in Act 2, Scene 2 of *The Tempest*; the lines that do not scan as Shakespeare at all—the refusal to "get on the back of the bus," the demand that stolen land be "right back to us"—graft the American civil rights movement and, echoing Red Coyote's own classroom complaint about Prospero the "land stealer," a specifically North American history of dispossession onto the Jacobean verse. Maria Grazia Dongu reads this scene as the novel's most explicit demonstration of a reader becoming an author: an inarticulate, marginalised character, and, by extension, the marginalised men performing him, seizes control of his own narrative, so that Caliban is no longer merely interpreted but permitted to speak in his own composite voice (Dongu 2024). Atwood's gesture here joins, rather than originates, a substantial tradition of postcolonial rewritings that hand Caliban his own voice against Prospero's naming of him: Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969) had already staged this confrontation directly, with its Caliban rejecting the name Prospero gives him outright: "Caliban isn't my name… it's the name given me by your hatred, and every time it's spoken it's an insult," demanding instead, "Call me X… you've stolen everything, even my identity!" (Césaire 2002, 20); discussed in (Balogun 2017, 43–44), in a play explicitly subtitled "adaptation for a black theatre." Vaughan and Vaughan describe this as a recurring pattern, not a singular achievement: each age has "appropriated and reshaped" Caliban to its own needs, his image proving "incredibly flexible" across four centuries of afterlife (1991, ix). What distinguishes Atwood's version is less the fact of giving Caliban voice than its staging: where Césaire rewrites Caliban once, as the settled outcome of his own adaptation, Atwood embeds the gesture inside a fiction about a workshop, performed collectively by invented inmates who fuse Shakespeare's actual lines with their own, so that the reclaiming of Caliban's voice becomes one contested reading among several, not the play's final word. This is consistent with the refusal to adjudicate between interpretations this article has already traced in Red Coyote's classroom exchanges. Taken together, these embedded exercises function as a compressed anthology of narrative modes (science fiction, realism, fantasy, political allegory, and popular musical theatre) through which Atwood demonstrates, within the body of her own novel, precisely the creative freedom her metafictional argument claims for fiction as such.

Read together, these five endings also stage, in miniature, the very argument Atwood makes about adaptation at the level of the whole novel. Each inmate-author inherits a fixed set of Shakespearean facts—a name, a handful of lines, a fate glimpsed only obliquely in the play's final scene—and is required to extend that material into a fully realised narrative of his or her own devising, under the implicit constraint that the result must still be recognisable as a continuation of Shakespeare's text rather than a repudiation of it. This is exactly the task

Atwood has set herself in writing *Hag-Seed* as a whole: to take the "given" of *The Tempest* and extend it into a new narrative that remains legible as *The Tempest* even as it becomes something else entirely. The prisoners' exercises thus function as a mise-en-abyme of the novel's own method, collapsing the distance between Atwood-as-adapter and her fictional inmates-as-adapters, and lending a further, quietly self-referential layer to a novel already saturated with self-reference.

Canadian Landscapes

The specificity of *Hag-Seed*'s setting is easy to mistake for simple national colour—Atwood writing what she knows, furnishing her novel with the wintry Ontario detail of her own biography. It is doing more exacting work than that. Felix's power reads as institutional rather than magical only because his institutions are recognisably real: a wholly invented country or festival would leave the novel floating in the same ontological no-place as Shakespeare's island, and the boards, ministries, and funding cycles that constrain him would lose their bite. The same precision serves the novel's adaptive method. Lodge's account of Atwood "advertising" her own artificiality rather than concealing it (1992, 208), and Hutcheon's description of adaptation as a "change of frame" (2006, 7–8), both describe a novel that wants its seams visible: the join between the 1611 hypotext and the 2016 rewriting kept in view. A generically vague contemporary setting would blur that join; a setting anchored to a real, checkable institution keeps it sharp. Locating Makeshiweg a half-step from the actual Stratford Festival does for the novel's geography what the embedded critical commentary does for its plot: it lets the reader hold hypotext and adaptation in the same field of vision at once.

This is most visible in the Makeshiweg Festival itself. The Makeshiweg Festival is not a free-floating fiction: in her Acknowledgements, Atwood reveals that Felix Phillips takes his surname from Robin Phillips, "long-time theatre director at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada" (Atwood 2016a), and that she attended the real Stratford Festival's own production of *The Tempest*, with Christopher Plummer as Prospero, while writing the book. The gap between the fictional Makeshiweg and its real-world original is thus deliberately thin, and readers familiar with Canadian theatrical culture are clearly meant to recognise Stratford beneath the mask—not as an Easter egg, but as a standing reminder that the novel's fiction sits directly on top of a verifiable institutional reality, exactly as Felix's fiction of the prison performance sits directly on top of the ministers' verifiable crimes.

The same logic governs the geography of Felix's exile, though here it draws on a distinctly Canadian literary-critical vocabulary rather than a single real institution. Where Prospero withdraws to an island untouched by any recognisable nation, Felix retreats to a rented shanty on a working Ontario farm, negotiated over a kitchen table with a landlady preoccupied with propane routes, alfalfa yields, and firewood deliveries (Atwood 2016a). The texture of his twelve years there is built from unglamorous, closely observed local detail: a laneway that needs ploughing after every snowfall, a car that may or may not start in the cold, a wood stove that has to be fed. This precision situates the novel within a critical tradition Atwood herself did a great deal to establish. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, she argued that English-Canadian writing has been persistently organised around the twin poles of survival and victimhood, in a landscape typically figured as hostile, indifferent, or actively malevolent toward the humans who try to settle it (Atwood

1972)—a thesis she developed in part from Northrop Frye's account, in *The Bush Garden* of a Canadian "garrison mentality" produced by small communities huddled defensively against an overwhelming natural world, a trope Frye opposes specifically to the American frontier and the British island (Frye 1971). Dana Percec has already drawn out this same triad in relation to Felix's cabin, linking it also to Atwood's own phrase for the same fear, the "malevolent North" of her later Clarendon Lectures (Percec 2018, 302–303; Atwood 1995). The further, metafictional turn the trope performs here is the concern of this article rather than hers: Felix's snowbound shanty, with its history of tenants who went "a few bricks short of a load" and its persistent rumour of haunting (Atwood 2016a), activates this vocabulary of hostile, faintly gothic rural isolation—except that Atwood inverts its usual outcome, and the inversion requires the reader to recognise the convention (hostile landscape breaks its settlers) precisely in order to register that Felix's isolation is instead made productive, turned into the incubation period for his theatrical revenge. The malevolent wilderness becomes, in effect, another version of Prospero's island: a place whose very harshness makes art and plotting possible, but one whose harshness the reader is invited to measure against a specific, named national tradition rather than take as a generic fairy-tale given.

Against this rural isolation, the novel sets a second, distinctly institutional Canadian landscape: Felix's shopping trips into Toronto for costumes, his Order of Ontario award received during his years of exile, the graduate course in Business Administration he imagines for Miranda at the University of Western Ontario, the branded ordinariness of a Canadian Tire outlet (Atwood 2016a). These markers do more than furnish local colour; they anchor the novel's institutions (arts boards, ministries, universities, retail chains) in a recognisable contemporary Canadian professional culture, supplying the concrete, checkable texture that the institutional-versus-magical argument, made above, needs in order to hold.

Finally, transplanting *The Tempest* onto Canadian soil sharpens rather than dilutes the play's colonial subtext, and it does so in a way that bears directly on the novel's argument about interpretation itself. This surfaces explicitly in the classroom debates Felix conducts with his inmates, several of whom read Prospero's treatment of Caliban through the lens of their own experience. Red Coyote, a Native Canadian inmate cast as Stephano, repeatedly presses this reading, at one point dismissing Prospero outright as a "land stealer" who "should be called Prospero Corp" (Atwood 2016a) – a gloss that recasts the play's magical usurpation in the specific idiom of resource extraction and Indigenous dispossession on the North American continent, rather than the more abstract, semi-mythical colonialism the play's Mediterranean setting allows British productions to keep at arm's length. Atwood does not resolve this reading against Felix's more sympathetic, revenge-centred interpretation of Prospero; she simply lets both stand in the same room. That refusal to adjudicate is itself the point: it dramatises, in real time and among the novel's own characters, the claim the rest of this article has made about *Hag-Seed* as a whole—that meaning is not immanent in Shakespeare's text but produced anew by whoever is doing the reading, in whatever place and circumstance they happen to be reading from. The Canadian setting does not just supply Red Coyote with a grievance; it supplies the specific, non-interchangeable location from which that grievance becomes legible, which is precisely what a metafictional novel about the situatedness of interpretation needs its setting to do.

Closing Remarks

The three concerns set out at the start of this article – the institutionally fallen artist who must reinvent himself, the prison reimagined as a site of authentic art, and the ethical exposure of a commissioned rewriting – turn out to be aspects of a single operation rather than three separate arguments. Felix's fall and recovery register as institutional rather than magical only because Atwood insists, at the level of both plot and setting, on the reality of the boards, ministries, and funding bodies that constrain him; the prison becomes a credible site of art only because the novel dramatises, in granular pedagogical detail, exactly how that art gets made, from curse-word assignments to the final creative-writing exercises; and the ethical stakes of Atwood's own commission are met head-on by a novel that, as Hutcheon's account of adaptation would predict, keeps the seams of its own transposition in view rather than hiding them (Hutcheon 2006, 7–8). The Canadian setting is not a fourth, separate concern but the mechanism that makes the other three legible: real institutions, a real literary-critical tradition of hostile landscape, and a real history of dispossession are what give Felix's islands their institutional weight, in contrast to Prospero's magical remove.

In a 2006 interview with John Freeman, later collected in *How to Read a Novelist*, Atwood reflected on what she saw as the declining authority of postmodern theory and the corresponding return of the author from the symbolic burial site Roland Barthes erected for authorship in the 1960s: "the importance of postmodern theory has waned and the authors are alive again," she remarked, "with a Cheshire-cat grin" (Atwood in Freeman 2012, 237). *Hag-Seed*, arriving on the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death, can be read through precisely this revivalist lens. In adapting Shakespeare's own meta-theatrical practices to the form of the novel, Atwood produces a work that is far from a merely reverential copy; its vividness, its structural ambition, and its persistent self-commentary all bear the unmistakable signature of an author reasserting her own authority through her engagement with the most authoritative figure the Western canon has to offer. The complexity of *Hag-Seed*'s structure and language, its dense web of intertextual reference to contemporary culture, and its constant dialogue with its Shakespearean hypotext together constitute the statement of a creator fully in control of her materials—one who seems to insist, throughout, that in the absence of such a creator, language and words alone can lay no claim to power.

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