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Hag-seed: The Tempest Retold

Margaret Atwood

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Revels Unending

Among our major living authors, Margaret Atwood must be one of the most obliging. Asked to participate in a literary challenge, or an experimental on-line writing exercise, she steps up to the plate and, more often than not, hits one over the literary Green Monster. Such challenges have given the world *The Penelopiad* (2005), *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), and now, *Hag-seed: The Tempest Retold* (2016).

When the Hogarth Press unleashed Atwood on Shakespeare, they may even have known the Canadian tradition of revising the tale of Prospero's island: by Robertson Davies, for instance, Audrey Thomas, or even in Haida Gwaii productions of *The Tempest* in city parks.

Atwood takes Shakespeare's anonymous Mediterranean island and transforms it into southwestern Ontario, Festival country, home to theatrical festivals in communities such as Stratford, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Blyth. But just when you think you envision the cozy, community-theatre setting, it vanishes like the spirit banquet, and in its stead appears Fletcher County Correctional Institute, with its educational program for inmates. And why not? *The Tempest*, after all, is a play about skullduggery, kidnapping, drunkenness and revenge – all fine associations for a penal institution. And there are, as Felix's prison class discovers, no fewer than nine distinct acts of imprisonment within the play itself. But Atwood places the emphasis here on the 'correctional' in the prison's name. For much will be corrected in the life of Felix Phillips the protagonist as well as in the lives of inmates.

This adaptation mirrors the plot of *The Tempest*, while also narrating the staging of the play at Fletcher Correctional, under Felix's direction. It's a play within a play, as the reader gleefully recognizes, with Prospero/Felix as sub-dramatist, just as Shakespeare made him, pulling the strings of his puppet spirits and enemies. An earlier Canadian novel, *Tempest-Tost*, by Robertson Davies (1951), took a similar approach, where the staging of *The Tempest* by the Salterton Little Theatre merges with the comic drama

of the cast's lives. But Davies' setting is more conventional, a stuffy university town, rife with class prejudice and intellectual snobbery, much of which is punctured in the course of the action.

Shakespeare's Prospero, former Duke of Milan, has more serious revenge on his mind, having been supplanted by his scheming brother Antonio. Atwood supplies a useful summary of the play's events at the end of *Hag-seed*, so that we can brush up our memories of who was whom among the Italian courtiers: Alonso, King of Naples, fellow conspirator, Ferdinand, his son, and Gonzalo the wise old counsellor. How, Felix wonders, did a man like Gonzalo keep his place at the poxy court of the usurping Antonio? Good question, but the Shakespearean answer can and must be: because the plot demands it. Atwood's Prospero figure, Felix, also seeks revenge, having been ousted from his directorship of the theatre festival by his odious underling, Tony. Felix claws himself back from total artistic exile by taking a job at Fletcher Correctional but then finds that Tony and his political ilk are planning to cut the budget for the educational program at the prison.

The threatened budget cut is an Atwoodian masterstroke: many readers can identify with the feeling of impotent rage that follows budget cuts in our own particular domain. Those of us in Canadian Studies in Europe certainly identify; we are avid for vengeance on Felix's nemesis– the kind of politician who gets his start in the periphery of arts administration, rises to a position of political power, then turns and skewers the arts in turn. We are ready for any dark deed, positively drooling for Felix to work his cathartic black magic on Tony and company. But, wait– here comes Ariel (Atwood's version of Ariel skirts the issues of gender and materiality in a clever twist that I will not reveal here) to remind us of our humanity. The magic is there, too, if one accepts that technology is magic. After all, Arthur C. Clarke's third law asserts that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, and so it proves in the production of *The Tempest* by Felix and company.

Like any adaptation, *Hag-seed* is playful, in a manner both parodic and burlesque: the theatrical tempest is done with toy boats and a shower curtain; Felix has a magic cloak made from the pelts of toy stuffed animals; the goddesses are played by Disney Princess dolls; the Bard's immortal lines re-emerge as rap lyrics; Renaissance intrigue dwindles to 21st-century professional jealousy, and home truths are dealt out with a free hand: the inmates in the Literacy Through Literature program "video each scene and then edit digitally, allowing Felix to check off 'acquired marketable skill' on the numerous forms where checking-off was required" (57).

There's a lot of checking off and checking in – Fletcher correctional is a prison after all, and Atwood gives the inmate ensemble an appropriately Canadian ethnic profile. The very PC mosaic of races, classes and crimes recalls the platoon film or the 1950s drama *Twelve Angry Men*, with their deliberate coverage of all population niches. There's a boy genius

hacker, a renegade doctor and a Ponzi-scheme scammer to liven up the assortment of burglars, drug dealers and gang members. There's even a token Mennonite.

From this group, Felix must cast his *Tempest*. The potentially touchy topic of Caliban is dealt with in a low-key manner: "Caliban should be First Nations," says Red Coyote. "It's obvious. Got his land stole" (148). However obvious, this is not the choice made by Felix or Atwood. In contrast, Atwood makes much of the adaptation of Miranda, who does not long continue as an eyelid-batting virgin, but is allowed to emerge as what could be called the "female subject." Felix wangles permission to bring an actress into the prison to play Miranda, much to the inmates' surprise – and the reader's. If you prefer your heroine to be a kick-ass gymnast and devourer of hamburgers, then this new version of Miranda will be to your taste, even though Atwood does meld her character with that of the Shakespearean character in an almost satisfying way. *Almost* because we are required to suspend a good deal of disbelief along the way.

One of the most charming details of *Hag-seed* is the way Atwood works Shakespeare's language right into her text. Although the inmates are allowed to re-write blank verse into hip-hop lines, in many places the novel echoes the verse directly and in one unexpected way: swearing. Felix has an invariable rule for his prison classroom: no swearing unless the curses are from the play being studied. So, the air is blue with *scurvy monster*, *whoreson*, *moon calf* and *pied ninny*. After several weeks of rehearsal, the inmates get so good at this that they even try some modest expletive infixation: "Way to red plague go!" says PPod. And when the resident pickpocket purrs, "Be not afeard, the isle is full of fingers" (200), the reader is treated to that svelte sense of déjà-vu that is the pleasure of any good adaptation.

Atwood saves her satirical best for an interior monologue by Felix in which he imagines all too clearly the potential critique of his acting program's "pedagogical efficacy":

> Is it really that helpful . . . to expose these damaged men –and let us tell you how very damaged they are, one way or another, many of them in childhood through abuse and neglect, and some of them would be better off in a mental institution or an asylum for recovering drug addicts, much more suitable for them that teaching them four-hundred-year-old words –is it helpful to expose these men to traumatic situations that can trigger anxiety and panic. . . or, worse, dangerous aggressive behavior? (79).

Naturally, bureaucrats clothe their imperatives as helpful suggestions; they turn humanitarian action into risk-laden adventure; they rationalize the withholding of funding, and make it the receiver's fault. You're the one who cares about these inmates – would you risk further damaging them?

However, the agenda never overcomes the illusion. The novel, like the original play, is still a place of invisibility, ventriloquism and magical sound. It's also full of Ontario, or the details that make the locale unmistakable: the handsome Victorian yellow-brick houses with their bed-and-breakfast signs, the carpet outlet warehouses and the grey wooden barns.

And the food. In *Hag-seed*, the characters are sufficiently real to eat: a banquet ranging from Felix's solitary boiled eggs in his hermit-like shack, to the grapes (spiked) and the brownies (not spiked) that make it through security into Fletcher Correctional. Atwood's fiction always features food; it grounds the action in real life, what she has called the "ordinary dirt" of our lives.[1] In the magical, spirit-haunted atmosphere of *The Tempest*, there has to be some grounding, something we can touch and taste – although tasting can be dangerous, too, when magic is around.

Moreover, food provides the occasion for much satire. Robertson Davies knew this when he included in his *Tempest-Tost* a tour-de-force of contrasting banquets – one the functional, post-rehearsal snack of fruit and cheese. The other is Mrs. Leakey's pretentious spread which is as seriously over the top as only a respectable middle-class matron could make it:

> She imprisoned little sausages in pastry and baked them. She made an elaborate ice cream, and coloured it green. She made sandwiches of the utmost difficulty, possible only to a thirty-third degree sandwich maker . . . sandwiches in which fish, mayonnaise and onion were forced into uneasy union.[2]

Davies was taking his revenge on the small-town mentality, the kind of place that harboured decided opinions: "There's a kind of nice simplicity about a Canadian that education abroad seems to destroy."[3] For the exacting of vengeance, what better vehicle than Prospero's magic staff and book? Being of its decade, Davies' novel ties up the loose ends, clears away the bunting and returns Salterton to its original condition, and the unhappy Hector/Gonzago to his senses. Atwood, in contrast, leaves the reader wondering what will happen after the last page. It's not fashionable in literary criticism to entertain such questions (too much like speculating on the number of Lady Macbeth's children), but Felix does ask his students to predict the fates of the play's characters beyond Act V. Some of the predictions are sinister, some drenched in realpolitik. This act of reading beyond the script infects our own reading of the outer plot of *Hag-seed*; seeds sprout, after all, and Atwood leaves the future crop an open and very tricky question.

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1) Margaret Atwood, "The Queen of Quinkdom,"In *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination*. Virago Press, 2011, p. 127.

2) Robertson Davies, *Tempest-Tost*. 1951. Penguin Books 1980, 163–64.

3) Ibid, 30–31.

Before I end this particular set of revels, I really must go back and revise that baseball metaphor from the opening paragraph – not because it is too American, but simply because there is a much better Canadian one available: Atwood does not "hit it over the Green Monster"; she stickhandles it behind the net. There is a satisfying sneakiness about her narrative transformations that recalls those deft Gretzky scoops that used to frustrate his hockey opponents. We don't see it coming – her ending, that is; we need to hit playback to track the movement when the plot, to the elements is free.