

Caliban as a Postmodern Puzzle

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Postmodernism, as conceived by literary criticism, has a particular taste for revisions, reconfigurations or reconsiderations of works belonging to a past that continues to haunt us, despite the many layers of interpretation that now mystify it. In a 2016 novel adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the much-acclaimed Canadian writer Margaret Atwood reconstructs the original plot of the play, cleverly exploiting its semantic potential for today’s audiences. While preserving some of the elements and patterns in Shakespeare’s text, the novelist introduces a series of displacements and changes at various levels. One of the most intriguing aspects of Atwood’s novel is that it is entitled *Hag-Seed* (a derogatory term used by Prospero to address Caliban in Shakespeare’s play), while there is no clearly identifiable Caliban in it. The present paper explores this puzzle, by pondering on Atwood’s narrative techniques of emphasizing and developing certain discreet but unsettling meanings whose seeds are to be traced in Shakespeare’s play.

Margaret Atwood’s novel rewriting of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* was commissioned in 2013 by Random House through its Hogarth Shakespeare Project, whose objective was to reconfigure Shakespeare’s plays for modern audiences through various writers’ visions. The Canadian author of the now famous *Handmaid’s Tale* chose to re-imagine *The Tempest* in a novel she entitled *Hag-Seed*, launched in 2016, the year of the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. Most reviews were enthusiastic, praising Atwood’s ingenious and “insanely readable” text (Groskop, 2016), while its intriguing title became a sort of a puzzle for many commentators. Atwood has kept assuring her readers that there is a reason why she has chosen this title. One way to arrive at a defensible explanation in this respect is through the study of the discursive and identity construction techniques the author uses in her text.

Like many of Atwood’s previous novels, *Hag-Seed* explores “the conflict between self and other” (Slettedahl Macpherson, 2010: 26) as it tells the story of the rise and fall of a theatre director, Felix Phillips. While acting as manager of the Canadian Makeshiweg acting festival, Felix is betrayed by his closest collaborator (Anthony Price). He loses his position after he has also lost his wife (due to post-birth problems) and his little daughter, Miranda (dead at the age of three, because of a childhood disease). Traumatized by his failure, he decides to retire from society completely, and lives anonymously and frugally in a shack for twelve years all by himself. His grudge against his former enemies (Tony and Sal O’Nally, now Heritage minister) does not dissolve with the passage of time, and his mourning for his lost Miranda takes a slightly schizoid form in imaginary dialogues with what he imagines to be her ghost that keeps him company at home. In the ninth year of his self-imposed exile, when this ghost menaces to break the boundaries of his sanity, he decides to open himself to the world again,

taking a job as acting instructor at the Fletcher County Correctional Institute where he stages various Shakespearean plays by using inmates as amateur actors. Going under the name of Mr. Duke (a clear allusion to Shakespeare's Duke of Milan), and helped by Estelle (the Lady of Fortune), an influential woman who ensures funds for the project and keeps his identity secret, Felix eventually gets his chance at revenge against his enemies.

Finding out that Tony and Sal are going to make a political visit to the prison where he works, he carefully devises a plan through which the staging of *The Tempest* turns into a staging of a revenge that punishes the villains and restores the balance of justice. Sal and Tony are trapped, frightened, blackmailed and forced to yield to Felix's demand that he should be reinstated as artistic director of the Makeshiweg festival. Tony will have to step down from his job and lose all his power. At the end, after having decided that he only wants to act as an *éminence grise*, Felix gives Freddie (Sal's son and the counterpart of Shakespeare's Ferdinand) the position of assistant manager and Anne-Marie (the actress playing Miranda in the prison play and who had originally been chosen for this role back in the past), that of chief choreographer. The two young people seem to have fallen in love with each other during the final staging of the play. Felix accepts Estelle's proposal of going on a cruise, but not before he has had a final revelation that prompts him to grant his imaginary Miranda her freedom:

What has he been thinking – keeping her tethered to him all this time? Forcing her to do his bidding? How selfish he has been! Yes, he loves her: his dear one, his only child. But he knows what she truly wants, and what he owes her.

‘To the elements be free’, he says to her.

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

The desire to be free is in fact common to most characters in this novel that develops the same themes of revenge and transformation as Shakespeare's play, whose basic structure is also preserved. In her version of what may be called an “aesthetic of confinement” (Fludernik, 2019: 628), Margaret Atwood preserves the types of relations between the Shakespearean characters, most of whom have direct counterparts: Felix/Prospero, Tony/Antonio, Sal O’Nally/Alonso, Ferdinand/Freddie, Lonnie/Gonzalo, Miranda/Anne-Marie, 8Handz/Ariel. Some of these correspondences are complicated by the presence of a third or even fourth entity: Felix is also Mr. F. Duke for the prison inmates and its employees, while Miranda is a name that designates not only Shakespeare's character, but also Felix's daughter and her ghost, to which we may add the actress Anne-Marie Greenland who plays Miranda. An even more interesting case is that of Caliban, who does not appear to have any easily identifiable counterpart in the novel, despite the fact that there are a number of narrative clues in this respect. The first tentative embodiment of the Shakespearean monster is quickly dismissed, when Felix, newly settled in his shabby cottage, decides that the family of his landlords could not possibly be cast into the significant roles from *The Tempest*:

For a time, Felix tried to amuse himself by casting Maude as the blue-eyed hag, Sycorax the witch, and Walter as Caliban the semi-human log-hauler and dishwasher (...) None of it fitted: Bert the husband wasn't the devil, and young Crystal, a podgy, stubby child, could not be imagined as the sylph-like Miranda. (Atwood, 2016: 37)

Felix concludes that they could only be imagined as the “lesser elementals” in the play: “a source of power, though not very much of it, he joked to himself” (38). The meaning of the word ‘power’ is two-fold: it designates both the abstract idea of control and the concrete notion of electricity that is provided at an exaggerated price by the Maude family. It reflects the doubleness with parodic accents cultivated by Atwood throughout her novel, poised as it is between the fictional world of *The Tempest* and the real world of its postmodern heroes.

In this real world, where the prison is an everyday experience for some, Caliban is better represented in the plural. When trying to cast his inmates-actors into fitting roles, Felix identifies “various Calibans, scowling and muscular: earthy, potentially violent” (84). However, plurality does not strengthen identity, it only complicates and dilutes it. As critics have observed, Atwood makes constant use of the double voice in “depicting characters at war with themselves and their environments. Through intertextual allusions, alterations in narrative point of view, and the use of the unconscious, Atwood shows the way in which the self is constructed from contradictory impulses, some more societally acceptable than others” (Palumbo, 2000: 73). In *Hag-Seed*, the Shakespearean mariners’ desperate cry at the beginning of *The Tempest* (“We split! We split! We split!”) acquires a new dimension where the splitting is applied to identities that are no longer to be conceived as clearly delineated. Their fragmentation and incompleteness make them overlap with, and depend on, one another. This splitting technique necessarily applies in a novel that purports both to preserve a text from the past and to recreate it in a form that should be relevant for today’s readers. As in other novels by Atwood, “duality is more than thematic (expressed in contents or subject matter) (...) Atwood is not simply rejecting duality but working with it, from it” (Grace, 1983: 4).

The doubling of the textual levels is obvious from the very first pages of the novel, which are actually written in the form of a play and which will later reappear in the text – a sort of spoiler or *in medias res* incipit meant to abruptly introduce the readers into the fictional world: “*The Tempest. By William Shakespeare. With. The Fletcher Correctional Players / ONSCREEN: A hand-printed sign, held up to the camera by Announcer, wearing a short purple velvet cloak. In his other hand, a quill*” (Atwood, 2016: 3). The present inserts itself within the past through references to a contemporary identifiable punitive institution, to an electronic device (the screen) and by modifications at the level of costumes, discourse and stage directions. The replies begin on the theatrical performance level, but then the actors’ words blend with unidentified voices from the bewildered audience and even from outside the room: “Total darkness. Confused noise from outside the room. Yelling. Shots are fired. / A VOICE FROM THE AUDIENCE: What’s going on? / VOICES, FROM OUTSIDE THE ROOM: Lockdown! Lockdown! / A VOICE FROM THE AUDIENCE: Who’s in charge here?” The scene ends with a voice from inside the room that gives the following orders: “Don’t move! Quiet! Keep your heads down! Stay right where you are” (5). This injunction also functions at the discursive level: in order to understand this first dramatic scene, we need to stay captive in the narrative loop in which the main character is kept prisoner and from which he will only be able to free himself at the end of the novel.

The beginning of the first chapter confirms the two-folded/blended ontology of the elements in the text of the novel. Felix brushes his real teeth and then puts on a set of false teeth that don’t fit very well. The false teeth become a metaphor for an illusion that is not effective. They might make him unable to utter his words perfectly during the ensuing performance, which would lead to the failing of the spell and to a sort of death. Thus, from the start, the illusion of theatre runs parallel to the implacable presence of material and

psychological reality and the narrative develops on the border between them. Escaping the trap of falsehood/empty illusion/trauma/fossilized past can only happen when the hero finds the adequate discourse/diction by means of which to express the development of his identities. Only then will he be able to perform the necessary actions in the process of healing and to arrive at a synthesis bringing together the lessons of the past and the requirements of the present.

This interpenetration of the two levels enables the author to create an effect of the real paradoxically enhanced through parody. I use the term parody here in the sense in which it was defined by Linda Hutcheon who argues that the manifestation of this literary species in postmodernism is of a much more complex type than what would suggest its definition in previous centuries, which brought it very close to satire and derisive laughter. Being closely linked with irony, parody is more adequately perceived by the Canadian critic as a “repetition with critical distance” (2000: 26) which signals difference “at the very heart of similarity”. It may have many “pragmatic positions” (34) ranging from reverence to mockery and it encodes both change and cultural continuity, being a mode of the “ex-centric” (35) that is marginalized by a dominant ideology.

In Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed*, this game between identification and distance is often illustrated by the ways in which the characters position themselves in relation to Shakespeare’s text. Shakespeare’s play acquires new life thereby: not only does it serve as a structure through which the world of the present is criticized, but it also becomes more credible when its actions, gestures and characters are mirrored, however obliquely, in the actions, gestures and characters of the present. When at the height of his career, the protagonist is obsessed with *The Tempest*, which he wants to stage in a memorable and shocking adaptation secretly meant to bring his dead Miranda back to life. Sharing with Prospero a powerful thirst for revenge, he filters his perceptions and interpretations through the patterns of Shakespeare’s play, entertaining his illusions about the power of theatre. He eventually loses his pretentious grandiosity when he comes to understand that he has condescendingly assumed a superior position in a creative process that should in fact be communal: “It’s not my play”, says Felix after he watches the impressive Caliban chant devised by Leggs together with Anne-Marie. The latter laughs at him openly: “Poor old Felix! Are we crapping up your play?” (Atwood, 2016: 176). This might as well be read as a question addressed by the irreverent present to the canonical past, by the present artists to the old bard who might answer just like Atwood’s hero: ‘It’s our play’. Yet Shakespeare’s answer would be much more vigorous than that of Felix, who tormented as he is by postmodernist contradictions and hesitations: “Does he believe it? Yes. No. Not really. Yes” (Atwood, 2016: 176).

This sort of realization is one of the moments that indicate his transformation from an artist with an inflated unsympathetic ego into a man who understands his past errors and is then able to perform redeeming cathartic actions. His capacity for self-criticism and self-parody renders him capable of opening the doors of his self-imposed exile. When he chooses to live with Miranda’s ghost in the shack from where he spies on his enemies, he is aware of his own delusion: “Call it a conceit, a whimsy, a piece of acting: he didn’t really believe it, but he engaged in this non-reality as if it were real (...) Was there a small girl listening to him? No, not really. But it was soothing to think that there was” (45). He continues to half-believe in this wistful daydreaming until, one day, he hears her voice outside the window: It wasn’t one of his whimsical yet despairing fabrications. He actually heard a voice. It was not a consolation.

Instead, it frightened him. ‘This has gone way too far,’ he told himself sternly. ‘Snap out of it, Felix. Pull yourself together. Break out of your cell. You need a real-world connection’ (47).

Parody is also manifest in the textual reconstructions of the Shakespearean play such as Caliban’s chant, or the reframing of the second scene of Act 2 by Team Antonio. The adaptation of the original text idiosyncratically blends words, structures and paradigms of the present into what appears to the inmates as a long and boring original scene. Recast as “Evil Bro Antonio”, the scene is given a rap rhythm that helps SnakeEye in his declamation:

I’m the man, I’m the Duke, I’m the Duke of Milan, You want to get pay, gotta do what I say. Wasn’t always this way, no, no, I was once this dude called Antonio/ I was no big deal and it made me feel so bad, so mad, / Got under my skin, ’cause I couldn’t ever win, / Got no respect, I was second in line, / But I just kept smilin’, just kept lyin’, said everything’s fine. (156)

It is not only the style that is adapted, localized, but also the perspective. In Shakespeare’s text it is Prospero who tells the story, but the inmates in Atwood’s novel achieve more verisimilitude by appointing Antonio as narrator. The distance between the two texts is increased by the discursive additions of the inmates who offer explanations and make judgments on what happened to Prospero who “was a fool, not cool, he didn’t look, Didn’t look around, take care of his stuff, Didn’t watch his back, stuck his head in a book” (Atwood, 2016: 157).

The parodic procedures involved in the construction of identities in Atwood’s novel emphasize how the postmodernist episteme governs the diegetic universe. This aspect is mostly involved in the manner in which Caliban is reconfigured in the text. We have already mentioned that he does not have a clear counterpart in Atwood’s novel, which is nevertheless surprisingly entitled after him, despite the fact that the main hero is in fact a Prospero. Hidden behind her protagonist’s point of view, the narrative voice apparently vacillates when trying to pinpoint a Caliban in the plot. Quickly dismissing the first identification between Caliban and his landlords’ son, Felix then moves on to the plural as he refers to the group of inmates he teaches as ‘Calibans’. The problem is that neither of them can be seen as a definite Caliban, even though they manifest various traits of the original Shakespearean character.

I believe that the narrator’s subtle suggestion is that Caliban may in fact be conceived as a shared mode of being, as a series of identity traits/ingredients unevenly distributed among a series of distinct characters. This is not at all contradictory to Shakespeare’s Caliban, whose ontology is notoriously ambiguous. When he first notices Caliban, Trinculo hesitates in his description of the strange creature:

What have we here? A man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of not of the newest Poor-John. A strange fish! (...) Legged like a man and his fins like arms! Warm o’ my troth! I do now let loose my opinion; hold it no longer: this is no fish, but an islander, that hath lately suffered by a thunderbolt. (2.1.24-27;33-36)

What Trinculo’s perception underlines here is Caliban’s most important ontological characteristic: his hybridity. In Shakespeare’s play, this hybridity is rooted in the union between a mortal (Sycorax) and a supernatural being (the devil). Yet this explanation can hardly be

accepted in a postmodernist novel like Atwood's, concerned as it is with lifelikeness and relevance for today's world. Atwood is innovative when she turns this hybridity into an identity building technique that affects all of her characters. Instead of gathering all of Caliban's contradictory traits in one identifiable character, the novelist variously bestows his traits on the other characters, whose contradictions and incongruence are thus increased. One may even say that they become more real(istic) in this way. Thus, Caliban's social inferiority and performance of humble tasks are seen not only in Walter, the log-hauler and dish-washer son of Felix's landlords, but also in the inmates. Unsurprisingly, the latter variously share Caliban's sexual appetite, resentment, unruly masculinity, earthiness, violence and foul language. What is more unexpected is that Anne-Marie, the young actress playing Miranda, is also characterized by a menacing physical strength and ability to fight, by a foul mouth and by a certain kind of malignity. Furthermore, Caliban's monstrosity is openly associated in the inmates' acting with the political figures in their audience: "You been callin' me a monster./But who's more monstrous than you?/You stole, you cheated, you bribed, you lied,/You didn't care who you kicked aside" (Atwood, 2016: 230).

Yet the most conspicuous identity penetration by Caliban at the level of the narrative may be studied in the figure of the protagonist. Despite his position as a usurped Prospero/theatre director who lives in vengeful seclusion and manages to punish his enemies in the end, Felix sometimes appears subtly encoded as a Caliban at the level of the discourse. This overlapping begins in the first chapter, when Felix looks in the mirror and, while exercising his diction through sounds that remind us of Caliban's declared inability to use language other than for cursing, he perceives his grin as "the grin of a cornered chimpanzee, part anger, part threat, part dejection" (10). He is now tormenting himself by imagining how his enemy is enjoying the benefits of his crimes, rather as Caliban resentfully refers to Prospero as a colonizing unjust master in Shakespeare's play. Later on, Felix is increasingly affected by the natural noises around him in a manner that clearly alludes to Caliban's intensely poetic "The isle is full of noises" monologue: "The silence began to get to him. Not silence, exactly. The bird songs, the chirping of the crickets, the wind in the trees. The flies, buzzing so contrapuntally in his outhouse. Melodious. Soothing" (40).

The more profound identification or resemblance between Caliban and Prospero is unequivocally stated in one of the metatextual chapters from the last section of the novel, *Team Caliban*, where the inmates describe what they imagine to be possible futures for the "thing of darkness" Prospero chooses to take with him when he leaves the island. One of the inmate actors declares that his team has come to the conclusion that Prospero and Caliban were father and son, and their connection is bound to make Prospero understand "that the bad in Caliban is pretty much the same as the bad in him, Prospero. They're both angry, both name-callers, both full of revenge: they're joined at the hip. Caliban is like his bad other self. Like father, like son" (267). Thus, Caliban figures as a catalyst in Prospero's transformation from a vengeful man into a forgiving human being who sees himself in a more appropriately modest light. In Atwood's text, this catalyst role is given prominence, as the Calibans of the plot unawaringly help and even force Felix to understand his predicament and develop into a mature man able to get out of his several prisons.

On the figurative level, Caliban functions as a semantic trait knit in the symbol of the cloak Felix had designed for his original representation of *The Tempest*, a cloak made of the furs of various stuffed toy animals, whose beady eyes begin to brighten as Felix achieves self-knowledge and is ready to play in his last performance. The cloak serves in fact as a sort of

intermediary between his former darker vengeful and infatuated self and his final liberated self. Costumes throughout the novel are indeed associated with the idea of self-mirroring and self-development. The inmates-actors learn to love themselves as they watch “the many faces watching their own faces as they pretended to be someone else” (Atwood, 2016: 58). After all, assuming a role is like becoming a clean slate on which you can draw “a new face”. “If you’re nobody, you can’t be somebody unless you’re somebody else” (61), Felix teaches his “elves”/inmate actors. This process of becoming affects Atwood’s postmodern Caliban, too. When he is played by the inmates (most of whom want to impersonate him, since they all “get him”), he is freed from the cage not only of his former language, but also of his former text.

Being asked to imagine possible futures for him, the inmates come up with three alternative life-scripts – something they don’t do for the other characters. Their phantasmic identification with Caliban releases their own creativity and reminds us that Caliban is not only a brutish beast, but also, and most significantly, a very sensitive poetic being. The hag-seed in him that gives the title of the novel and that is an insult addressed to him by Prospero is also the seed of growth, of metamorphosis, of creation. His ambiguity is the ambiguity of life that makes everything possible even while everything must remain messy, hybrid, incompletely defined. The creativity that is associated with him is therefore superior to Prospero’s/Felix’s magic, as it is able to survive on its own in the real world where he might become a music star provided he stays away from temptations like alcohol and drugs. Watching Leggs present the future possible trajectories of Caliban’s existence, Felix becomes aware that the occasional actor has gone beyond the simple playing previously planned: “He pauses. Is it a studied pause or is he chocking up? I’ve taught him too well, thinks Felix, if even I can’t tell the difference” (264).

Yet the imagination of the inmates from Team Caliban does not stop here: it becomes unpredictable, just like the magic Felix has taught them. After the acting course finishes, they are planning a musical about Caliban who they think deserves to have a “play to himself” (270). Their parody draws on the same themes of oppression, rebellion, revenge, resentment and freedom. At this moment, Felix understands that “Caliban has escaped the play. He’s escaped from Prospero, like a shadow detaching itself from its body and skulking off on its own. Now there’s no one to restrain him. Will Prospero be spared, or will retribution climb in through his window one dark night and cut his weasand? Felix wonders. Gingerly, he feels his neck” (Atwood, 2016: 272).

Shakespeare’s play ends with Prospero asking the audience to set him free. He thus crosses the border between the two ontological realms and leaves the audience baffled: why is he asking to be set free when he is in fact already free and rehabilitated? The answer may be that the thing of darkness (his obsession, vengefulness, misery) he accepts as his own still keeps him a prisoner. After all, what may follow after the play ends is going to be marked by the same human fallibility that has been manifested before. People are still going to oppress others, dispossess them, punish them or take revenge on them, as the inmates know only too well. But Margaret Atwood finds an original way of freeing her Prospero from his multiple prisons: her elusive Caliban, the imaginary being they all “get”, escapes Prospero’s world and finds a destiny of his own, by acting on his own will. He is the perpetual and unruly seed of creativity, as intractable, fluid and contradictory as life itself. He best exemplifies Atwood’s integration of

the moral and aesthetic dimensions within the context of that narrative self-consciousness that, while directing the reader’s attention to the fictive nature of the world

of the novel, will nevertheless not allow him to evade its moral implications. The reader of Atwood's novels can never be passive; he must accept responsibility for the world he is bringing to life by his act of reading. (Hutcheon, 1983: 29-30)

Finally, the title of the novel is not only an allusion to Caliban's resistance to definition, but also a challenge addressed to its readers through an ironical and subtle curse. We have to acknowledge him ours.

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