“A Sea Change into Something Rich and Strange.”
Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed:*
A Metatextual Approach

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Abstract. Ever since it was published, Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed* (2016) has been scrutinized for its peculiar engagements with the Shakespearean pre-text at the cross-section of various discourses, from literary and media studies, through drama pedagogy, even to prison studies. Drawing on the prison metaphor from the original and recontextualizing it as a contemporary prison performance is just one of the multitudinous forms and ways in which *The Tempest* is incorporated into Atwood’s novel. Thus, though it is quite difficult to designate a sole term for what she (un)does with the classic, one striking issue anyone may encounter is its intertwining metatextuality which encapsulates many of its core interpretations as a rewriting and/or adaptation. The present paper aims at unravelling the many layers, means and functions of this particular type of metatextuality and/or metatheatricality found in the novel. We look at the polyphonic nexus of texts and contexts that defines Atwood’s novel as an experiment that reconsiders, with a gesture of metatextual homage, the prospects of rewriting – a practice Shakespeare himself was highly familiar with – in the contemporary age. Nested in the Genettean structuralist framework (Genette 1997 [1982]), our approach is meant to expand its applicability taking into consideration Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of rhizome to investigate Atwood’s rewriting as an instance of “rhizomatic metatextuality” as well as the strategies of interpretation, appropriation, and reconstruction in fan fiction rewriting (see Jenkins 1992). Placing metatextuality as the central interpretive key of the novel, we shall discuss the roles of theatre (and art,
Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, metatextuality, metatheatricality.

1. “Whereof what’s past is prologue”

1.1. Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed* – An Interpretive Hub at the Cross-Section of Various Discourses

Entering Margaret Atwood’s fictional woods of *Hag-Seed*, prompted by the commission of the Hogarth Shakespeare project on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Bard’s death, one may encounter “the difficulty of assigning a label” (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017, 108) to what she (un)does with *The Tempest* in it. Within the widespread contemporary practice of reprising literary works of the past (Maisonnat, Paccaud-Huguet, and Ramel 2009, vii) and, more precisely, within the overwhelming amount of Shakespearean reworks which “has resulted in a kind of subgenre” (Giménez Yuste 2019, 6), Atwood’s novel stands out for its peculiar engagements with the Shakespearean pre-text which gave rise to a series of contemporary discussions. Thus, the novel has been investigated through the lens of literary theory, exploring possible interpretive keys such as: debates on adaptation and appropriation, along with the versatile issue of metatextual adaptation (Bartnicka 2021) and/or (meta)theatricality (Vanhaudenarde 2019, Rarenko 2021); treating it as a neo-Shakespearean retelling (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017); proposing approaches that delve into postcolonialism and postmodernism (Puttaiah and Sowmya 2021); scrutinizing the trope of prison, also entailing concepts like Michel Foucault’s heterotopia and Victor Turner’s liminality, among others. Asserting its applicability for interdisciplinary approaches, the novel also poses issues of interart relations fruitful for film and media studies, as it may be discussed in connection with, and by references to, screen adaptations of *The Tempest*, entailing inter- and multimediality (Ciobanu 2021) or related to the global Shakespeare in prison phenomenon, involving drama pedagogy and prison education (Cavecchi 2017, Ward and Connolly 2020). In a more general framework, the novel may be a point of interest for social studies and psychology, through its incursions into overlapping issues of culture and society, precarity and creativity, anxiety and trauma processing, etc.
1.2. *Hag-Seed* as a Multilayered Metatextual Adaptation

Irrespective of the path we might choose to analyse the novel, what remains of interest is the fact that Atwood’s rewriting is not merely an adaptation of the Shakespearean play to the contemporary context but also a reconsideration of adaptation itself. While surveying the wide transgenerational and transmedial practice of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon notes that “[w]hatever the motive, from the adapter’s perspective, adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new” (2006, 20). Apart from demonstrating that the stakes of the classic are still valid in our contemporary world, Atwood challenges the practice of rewriting, customizing it to her own aesthetic fabric of art and creation. Her way of connecting with the timeless predecessor gives rise to a unique metatextuality devised as a dialogical interface between the novel and the play, through which she simultaneously reimagines the classic in a new guise and also overtly incorporates the process of its – recontextualized – interpretation. For her, the stake is prominently to freshly relate to the standards set up by the predecessors, to occasionally recharge her cells of artistry from the inexhaustible stores of literary history since “[a]ll writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you; you are also judged and held to account by them” (Atwood 2002, 178 – qtd. in Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017, 125).

What is perhaps the most striking issue in Atwood’s gesture of reimagining a classic in the contemporary scene is not as much the technicality of what she does or how she does it as a rewriting per se but rather the many layers she orchestrates. In our research, we propose to take further the possibilities of approaching her work as a “metatextual adaptation” as discussed by Bartnicka (2021, 22) or as being “self-reflexively metafictional” as Puttaiah and Sowmya argue in their analysis (2021, 334) by focusing on the manifold ways in which *The Tempest* is addressed in Atwood’s reprise. Her work stands apart by dint of resonating with the iconic text in a polyphonic, polymorphic manner, pulling several strings at once. In this overtly challenging, kaleidoscopic tour de force, “the resonances of *The Tempest* [...] are at the same time obvious and discreet, blatant and nearly invisible” (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017, 109), and thus the Shakespearean classic undergoes multiplication, incessant transformation, not as a fixed vantage point but as a mobile presence in a perpetual state of becoming. The cobweb of metatextuality devised in *Hag-Seed* combines multifarious devices of metatextuality and displays several ways in which a classic can be rewritten, and thus we can safely say that it can even be regarded as a “textbook of metatextuality,” a guidebook of what is to know about this literary “machinery.”
2. Approaches to Multilayered Metatextuality

In what follows, we propose to test the applicability of several theoretical frameworks to the ways in which Atwood operates the machinery of metatextuality in her Hogarth Shakespeare commission. As a point of departure, we regard Atwood’s novel as a polyphonic, rhizomatic nexus of texts and contexts, as an experiment that reconsiders, with a gesture of metatextual homage, multiple prospects of rewriting – a practice Shakespeare himself was highly familiar with – in the contemporary age. For this, Gérard Genette’s structuralist framework in which he outlines his typology of transtextuality provides an indispensable foundation. Nevertheless, as we will see, positioning the multilayeredness of Atwood’s rewriting practice in this frame will necessitate going beyond the Genettean framework and embracing further horizons. Therefore, the discussion of metatextuality will address Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome and, thirdly, it will be widened to its applicability to fan fiction rewriting theory. To this end, we will look at the ten strategies of interpretation, appropriation, and reconstruction elaborated by Henry Jenkins.

2.1. Hag-Seed and Transtextuality

Gérard Genette famously defines transtextuality as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette 1997, 1). In the order in which the French narratologist enlists the five types of transtextual relationships, intertextuality, that is, the actual presence of one text within another, is definitely the more salient in Atwood’s Hag-Seed. Fragments from, references to The Tempest virtually inundate Hag-Seed, and are deposited in several forms in the channel of the rewriting: in the chapter and subchapter titles (e.g. High Charms, Abysm of Time, Pearl Eyes, The Island’s Mine, Rich and Strange, etc.), in the form of overt and covert quotations, misquotations, allusions and paraphrases, deploying iconic and lesser known text passages and playfully de/recontextualizing them (e.g. “o brave new world;” “Sea-changing, you might say;” “Our revelth now have ended. Theeth our actors” [in the original: “Our revels are now ended. These our actors”]). Intertextuality does not only extend to The Tempest but to further plays by Shakespeare (when thinking about the theatre, Felix, Atwood’s Prospero, speaks about “a local habitation and a name,” a phrase borrowed from A Midsummer Night’s Dream: “The readiness is all” – he expresses himself in a Hamletian manner, getting ready for revenge) and miscellaneous literary works.¹ The adapted version of The Tempest to be performed by the Fletcher Correctional Players is a rewriting(-within-rewriting) of the original dramatic text, paraphrased in contemporary colloquial language.

¹ For further cases and examples of intertextuality, see subchapter 2.3. of this paper.
and light, playful style: “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” (Atwood 2016, 140 pdf).

Second in Genette’s line, paratextuality, implying secondary signals, or paratexts bound to the text, reveals not only the connection between Atwood’s and Shakespeare’s texts, as attested by the title – it is Prospero who calls Caliban, son of Sycorax, “hag-seed” –, subtitle – The Tempest Retold –, prologue – displaying the screened end product of the recorded performance in medias res –, and epilogue – a summary of the original play –, but also the embeddedness of Atwood’s work into a wider contemporary discourse on Shakespeare and The Tempest, including screen adaptations, theatrical and festival performances, specialist literature on theatre, Shakespeare and prison literature, listed in the Acknowledgements. All these paratexts establish a contractual force (see Philippe Lejeune’s generic contract or “pact”); in other words, there is an explicit contract which, at the very least, alerts the reader to the existence of a relationship between the novel and Shakespeare. The paratextual frame overtly establishes all possible links with the source text and its discursive contexts, thus creating a hub of “Tempest studies” that simultaneously belongs to belles-lettres and literary criticism.

The latter aspect is particularly reinforced by the third type of transtextuality, namely metatextuality, implying a critical relationship between text and metatext. The preparations for the prison performance of The Tempest occasion an enclave of metatextual commentary embedded in the body of the rewriting, focused on multiple prison-related meanings of Shakespeare’s play. It is a key moment of the rehearsals when Felix elicits the prisoners to discover references to prison in the play, Act III, scene 20 of Hag-Seed even containing a chart of prisoners, prisons, and jailers on Prospero’s island. Locating metaphorical prisons in the real context of the prison is a way for the prisoner-players to connect to the play, to seek relief and find liberation in “playing prison” via literature. Nevertheless, this metatextual insert, together with myriads of other metatextual comments scattered all over the work, displays The Tempest together with a consolidated background knowledge on Shakespeare’s dramatic universe and the afterlife of his plays (e.g. “Lavinia, Juliet, Cordelia, Perdita, Marina. All the lost daughters. But some of them had been found again. Why not his Miranda?” [Atwood 2016, 25]; “The Tempest spent the whole eighteenth century as an opera” [Atwood 2016, 129]). In this way, it is indeed safe to say that “students will learn more

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2 Throughout the article, we refer to the non-paginated pdf version of Margaret Atwood’s Hag-Seed. The Tempest Retold (London and New York: Hogarth, 2016). In what follows, the references will contain the number of the respective pdf page.
about the deeper meanings of *The Tempest* from this singular novel than from dozens of academic studies" (Bate 2016 – qtd. in Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017, 119).

The fourth category proposed by Genette, architextuality, referring to the generic status of the text, poses intriguing questions pertaining to *Hag-Seed*. Albeit being patently a narrative text with all its classic components, from exposition, through conflict and climax, to resolution, which constructs a contemporary revenge story from the bricks and stones of an old tale which undergoes prosaification, still, it preserves, or rather recreates, the classical five-act pattern, together with scenes equal in number to those in the original play. The scene titles contain concrete temporal references, from Felix’s plans to organize the Makeshiweg Festival to his packing to leave the prison and having his old job back; however, the temporal references indicate an occasionally non-chronological order, thus displaying a narrative feature. Further on, while as regards the narration–dialogue ratio the narrative parts are predominant, the sentences are short, consistently in the present, and highlight setting details and modes of acting and spelling, thus bearing striking resemblance to the enunciation mode of stage instructions (e.g. “The floor is gray, of that composition substance that wishes to look like granite but fails. It’s clean, with a slight polish. The air in the corridor is static and smells of bleach” [Atwood 2016, 75]; “He’s going to go on like that for hours,” says Tony to Sebert, *sotto voce*” [Atwood 2016, 195]). In this way, Atwood’s rewriting invents a hybrid genre, in between the novel and the play, endowing the receiver with a sense of productive indecision, never in a secure place in the relational scenario of the rewriting mode.

Finally, as concerns the fifth category, hypertextuality, i.e. “any relationship uniting a text B ([...] hypertext) to an earlier text A ([...] hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (Genette 1997, 5), Atwood’s hypertext maintains a similar indecisiveness as mentioned above in that it does not conform smoothly to either the category of “simple or direct transformation” (extracting from the hypotext a set of actions and characters and tackling them in a different style) or “imitation” (telling a different story in a style appropriated from the hypotext). As a direct transformation, *Hag-Seed* basically transposes the action of *The Tempest* to twenty-first-century Canada. Yet, in maintaining a dramatic structure and character, it may also be categorized as being a stylistic imitation, a pastiche that reinvents the form in a new guise and tries to find suitable contemporary contexts and registers. Since Atwood’s “text in the second degree” attempts at recreating *The Tempest* at several levels and layers, it integrates both options of transformation and imitation, deliberately transposing the hypotext, in a true Shakespearean spirit, into something “rich and strange.” In fact, the idea of transformation is at the core of the source text, this and countless other adaptations attesting to its adaptability to new contexts across spatial and temporal boundaries.

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3 Nevertheless, in what follows, we will call it a “novel” and its parts as “chapters.”
2.2. *Hag-Seed* as a “Rhizomatic Metatext”

For the ways in which *The Tempest* is simultaneously assigned several roles, its synergistic force permeating several levels of this rewriting assembly, we propose the term “rhizomatic metatextuality” and argue that the connections formed in the halo of these “roles” can be best conceived of as a rhizomatic structure, as famously elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari, any point of which “can be connected to anything other, and must be” (1987, 7). *The Tempest* is incorporated in *Hag-Seed* in a rhizomatic manner: 1. at the diegetic level: 1a. reproducing its “storyline” in a contemporary theatrical context; 1b. the protagonist, Felix, directing *The Tempest*; 1c. the process of performing and recording the play in prison; 1d. *The Tempest* as an end product recorded in two versions; 1d1. for the prisoners; 1d2. for the enemies, Tony and Sal, for taking revenge; 1e. *The Tempest* also being staged at a mental level by keeping Felix’s daughter, the dead Miranda alive in his imagination; 2. at a metadiegetic level: 2a. the interpretation of *The Tempest* together with the prisoners; 2b. several references to the universe of Shakespeare scattered throughout the play; 2c. metaleptic jumps in-between the mentioned levels; 3. at the textual level: intertextual references to *The Tempest* rhizomatically permeate the entire novel: 3a. in the titles of parts/acts and chapters/scenes; 3b. within the text: 3b1. in marked form; 3b2. in unmarked form; 3c. the text of the performed play is a rewriting in contemporary language registers; 4. at the medial level: 4a. *The Tempest* is staged as an instance of interactive multimedia theatre; 4b. the metatheatricality of *The Tempest* is amplified in the contemporary context; 4c. intermediality: the prison performance involves not only theatre but also music and film. What is more, by the multifarious modes of metatextual connection to the “original,” by bringing into discussion not only the Shakespearean text but also the manifold contemporary literary, cultural, social, and political discourses and practices around it, Atwood’s project dissolves the genealogical linearity of source text and adaptation and seems to smoothly fit into the conception that Douglas Lanier calls “Shakespearean rhizomatics,” in which the application of the term “rhizome” is aimed at shifting the accent from the authority of the Shakespearean text to the power of Shakespearean adaptation, that is, “the multiple, changing lines of force we and previous cultures have labelled as ‘Shakespeare,’ lines of force that have been created by and which respond to historical contingencies” (Lanier 2014, 29).

2.3. *Hag-Seed* and the Strategies of Fan Fiction Rewriting

Beyond the Genettean framework of hypertextuality and Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatics, Atwood’s novel may also be investigated through the lenses of fan fiction, relying on the strategies of fan fiction rewriting elaborated by Henry Jenkins

Although Jenkins’s book has primarily in view the rewriting practice in contemporary media and visual culture, the strategies of fan fiction rewriting assembled by him are also applicable to rewriting within the medium of literature. In fact, the strategies elaborated by Jenkins can be regarded as transmedia practices, in strong connection with the broad phenomenon of transmedia storytelling (cf. Jenkins 2006) as well as the transmedial expansion of narratology (Ryan 2006). Besides, as we have seen in the previous subchapter, Atwood’s rewriting also gets inspiration from, and makes reference to, filmmaking and multimedia practices, and thus it can be safely placed in the wide field of (trans)mediality.

On numerous occasions, Atwood explicitly or implicitly refers to herself as being Shakespeare’s fan and, as such, she engages in various strategies of interpretation, appropriation, and reconstruction of the classic play in a somewhat similar way as fan writers generally do (see Jenkins 1992, 165–182). Thus, perhaps one of the most noticeable ways in which the novel reconstructs the original piece of work is by “recontextualization.” Apart from changing its basic setting, Atwood “completes” the classic narrative with “missing scenes” meant to “fill in the gaps [of the play] and to provide additional explanations for the characters’ conduct” (Jenkins 1992, 165). Such “missing scenes” are those which tell how Felix ends up in the prison setting, for instance. While Prospero immediately finds himself on the island (i.e. his “prison”) shortly after he was embarked, his alter ego, Felix, goes through various hardships until he reaches his “island” (i.e. the prison). The novel includes additional episodes of him searching for a new life and job. There are scenes of his time spent at the farmhouse with the Maude family (see chapters *Poor Full Cell, Abysm of Time*) and scenes of him plunging into obsessive behaviour like spying on his enemies while preparing his revenge (see chapter *Rapt in Secret Studies*). These instances of him struggling before his arrival to the prison may serve as background knowledge for the character’s future actions, but they may also be set to raise the readers’ empathy towards him. As a matter of fact, throughout the novel, Felix is profoundly self-reflective, which may play upon the readers’ compassion as well.

On the other hand, the novel substantially expands the timeline of the play. Similarly to recontextualization, this strategy is also meant to exploit

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4 Or, rather, as a professional guide into the possibilities of fan fiction. What is more, the author is active on the *wattpad* online platform, where she corresponds with readers and writers and shares her ideas on the art of writing: https://www.wattpad.com/user/MargaretAtwood.
the characters’ backgrounds, which are not fully explored within the original work, expanding its “framework to encompass moments in the characters’ past” (Jenkins 1992, 167), which may explain their actions. One difference between the two approaches is that recontextualization generally refers to past events, while expanding the timeline also entails writing beyond the ending of the original. This type of addition may occur when fan writers reject the original version of the characters’ fates, often as a refusal of unpopular endings or when they try to explain controversial plot twists. “The destruction of old narrative situations opens room to explore possibilities that fall beyond the parameters of the original” work (Jenkins 1992, 169). In this sense, the Shakespearean play leaves Prospero’s fate without closure. The Tempest ends with him hovering on the stage, waiting for the audience’s approval. The novel, on the other hand, gives Felix a “happy ending,” he embarks on a cruise trip and also gets closure: he sets himself free by freeing his Miranda. Thus, there remains nothing to be solved regarding his fate. Furthermore, the timeline is expanded in the case of other characters as well, though they exist within the frame of the metatext. Thus, Felix and the inmates also discuss the “afterlife” of the Shakespearean characters. As their last assignment, the inmates create their own versions of what would happen to these characters beyond the timeline of the play. These post-play lives of the characters reflect on the many questions Shakespeare leaves his readers/audience with. In the novel, on the contrary, readers may find alternative endings. For instance, Ariel, who ultimately is an air spirit, after being freed by Prospero, starts tackling climate change and helping wherever he can; Antonio would eventually (try to) kill everyone on the way home because, being evil as he is, that’s what anybody could expect from him; Miranda, on the other hand, would (try to) save everybody on the boat; Gonzalo would go back to the island and would found his ideal republic with some other good men like him; and, lastly, as for Caliban, after a few considerations, he is found to be Prospero’s son, and with his father’s help he would become a world famous musician in Milan.

Another rewriting strategy Atwood turns to in her novel is “refocalization,” which consists of shifting the attention from the central figures and focusing rather on secondary characters. One of the outcomes this strategy may bring forth is that, by means of refocalization, rewriters may “reclaim female experiences from the margins of male-centered texts” (Jenkins 1992, 171) and develop narratives which allow women to achieve their full potential within the newly created perimeters. In this regard, Atwood’s novel seems to “empower” its female characters, compared to the male-dominated Shakespearean patriarchy. The only female character in The Tempest, Miranda, is rather passive with respect to his father’s plot of revenge. Her fate, if not predetermined, is much dependent on her father’s will. On the whole, she embodies the obedient daughter, a virtue very much appreciated in a world where power is yielded by men. Her power mainly
rests in her love for Ferdinand, which is the only reason she would raise her voice against her father while trying to ease her beloved’s hardship. Otherwise she is quiet and meek, rather a good listener. In the novel, on the contrary, Miranda’s character is split into two comparatively more vigorous and compelling, self-governed individuals. On the one hand, there is the spirit of Miranda, Felix’s projection of his deceased daughter. Although a ghost, she actively engages in her father’s plans, often scolding him for his wrongdoings or poor thoughts. Even if she exists only in Felix’s mind, nobody else being able to see her, she still manages to play an important role in his decision-making processes.

As a matter of fact, remodelling Miranda’s character is one of the major changes Atwood operates on the play. In the novel, Felix’s daughter dies at the age of three due to meningitis, but he fabricates a self-created illusion that she is still with him, only invisible. In an interview, the author herself explains her choice for Miranda’s death. According to Atwood, in modern day, it would not be possible to create a character who could live isolated from other people. A teenage girl only living with her father, with no contact with others, would not be possible to comprehend by contemporary readers. This is why she lives on only in her father’s imagination.

Anne-Marie Greenland, on the other hand, the actress who plays Miranda’s role in The Tempest, is also very energetic, independent, and self-reliant, making her own choices. She does what she wants to do, speaks freely as she wants to, sometimes irrespective of the preset rules (e.g. she curses quite often) and so on. For both of them, Felix stands as a father figure who rather gives in to their wishes.

The most extreme form of refocalization is “moral realignment.” Rewritings may “invert or question the moral universe of the primary text, taking the villains and transforming them into the protagonists of their own narratives” (Jenkins 1992, 171). These stories explore what the fictional world would look like if events were told from their perspective. Such tales blur the boundaries between good and evil, as they reverse the original narrative. Atwood’s novel does not change the vantage point of the actions, but it surely makes the readers ponder upon its characters’ moral justification. The protagonist, Felix, just like Prospero, may be regarded as a villain himself since it is questionable whether his act of revenge is morally justifiable. Similarly to the play, in the novel, all events are presented through the sole perspective of the main character, the reader/audience learns only about how he felt, how he saw and lived the things that happened to him, without absolute certainty about the reasons of the other characters, except for what the protagonist thinks they might be. This kind of narrative point of view leaves room for questioning the characters’ reliability and puts obstacles to the advocacy of their moral conduct. In a more philosophical reading, the play (and the novel) extrapolate(s) issues like righteousness, integrity, and justice: “Is extreme goodness always weak? Can a person be good only in the absence
of power? *The Tempest* asks us these questions. There is of course another kind of strength, which is the strength of goodness to resist evil; a strength that Shakespeare’s audience would have understood well” (Atwood 2016, 230).

“Genre shifting” is also popular among fan writers. Genre does not only constitute a set of textual features, but it also represents a cluster of interpretive strategies. Therefore, changing the genre may bring about changes in the balance between plot action and characterization. Selecting a certain genre may shift the primary emphasis from events that serve as background or motivation for the dominant plot to moments that define the character relationships (Jenkins 1992, 173). Though turning the play into a novel was commissioned by the Hogarth Shakespeare project, it still bears certain repercussions which are noteworthy. On the whole, both the novel form (prose) and the play (dramatic representation) may be suitable for characterization. Still, a play would rather focus on actions which are performable on stage, while the novel offers the necessary space for characters to evolve. In this regard, in the novel, the emphasis is not as much on the plot (the act of revenge) *per se* but rather on Felix’s development into letting go of his revenge. In this interpretative key, the novel may be read as Felix’s *bildungsroman*. Although Prospero also undergoes a certain transformation in the play, his self-reflective episodes are much less frequent.

Atwood’s novel occasionally blurs the boundaries between different texts leading to “cross-overs” (Jenkins 1992, 174). This type of intertextuality merges texts which share common genres or are set in the same setting or utilize common characters. In this regard, *Hag-Seed* incorporates cross-overs of Shakespearean and other literary texts. For instance, discussing Antonio’s evil nature and the possible justifications for his actions, Felix proposes a parallel between the character in *The Tempest* and Macbeth, introducing a direct quote from the latter play:

> But the more evil he did, the eviler he got; it was like Macbeth, for those of you who were in it. It was like the blood speech, right? ‘I am in blood / Stepp’d in so far that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er,’ and some of us know about that first-hand, right, because once you get going on a thing you think it’s chickenshit to back off, and you need to finish it. Get it done. Whatever it is. (Atwood 2016, 222; emphasis ours)

Breaking down the boundaries between the two texts may suggest how different characters may function the same even in radically different environments. In other cases, quotes from *The Tempest* blend into the situation in which the character of the novel finds himself or plans to carry on, suggesting that the hypertext not only coexists with the hypotext but also mirrors it, as if characters of the novel would identify themselves with the characters of the play or, in any case, as if their “real” lives would mirror the fictional lives of the characters from the play: “Ah yes. He
can see how it could unfold: Tony and Sal, surrounded by goblins. Herded by
them. Menaced by them. Reduced to a quivering jelly. *Hark, they roar*, he thinks.
*Let them be hunted soundly. At this hour / lies at my mercy all mine enemies.* He
looks around the classroom, smiling benevolently” (Atwood 2016, 119; emphasis
ours); “And how many of those were there? Dumped girlfriends?” Already she’s
sounding possessive: of an unreal actor playing Ferdinand, the facsimile of a non-
existent swain. ‘Full many a lady,’ says Felix, quoting, ‘but not a patch on you.
You’re perfect and peerless, remember?’” (Atwood 2016, 128; emphasis ours).

Other times, the (inter)textual reference is so embedded in the novel that
it is not explicitly marked, as if being part of a possible “repeated discourse”
phenomenon: “It’s all there,” she says. “From before. In my head. It was just
waiting – stored in, you know, the dark backward and abysm of time. One of
my roomie’s hearing my lines for me. I’m almost word-perfect” (Atwood 2016,
126–127; emphasis ours). But the most curious cases of textual cross-overs in the
novel are those quotations from *The Tempest* which are not used referring to or
as part of the (re)production of the play, including its metatextual instances, but
as built in the main character’s obsessed mind working:

Right next to his ear he hears his Miranda’s voice. It’s barely a whisper, but
he hears it.
*All hail, great master, grave sir, hail! I come
To answer thy best pleasure, be’t to fly,
To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride
On the curled clouds; to thy strong bidding, task
Ariel and all his quality.*
Felix drops his staff as if it’s burning him. Did that really happen? Yes, it
did! He heard it! (Atwood 2016, 162; emphasis ours)

In other cases, the quote is shortened, its ending being paraphrased:

But now she whispers, I would, sir, were I human. She’s such a tender-
hearted girl. Has 8Handz heard her? No, but Felix has. “*Hast thou,*” he
says, “*which art but air, a touch, a feeling of their afflictions, and shall not myself* be kindlier moved than thou art?” “Are we back in the play?” says
8Handz. “Am I supposed to say, ‘I would, sir, were I human’?” “No, it’s
fine,” says Felix. “Just muttering. But you’re right, that’s enough vengeance.
Not a frown further. Time to reel them in. Cue the Goblins. (Atwood 2016,
205; emphasis ours)

Apart from *The Tempest*, there are quotations from other literary works as well,
such as the reference to a seventeenth-century poet, Richard Lovelace: “Yes, it’s a
prison,’ he says. ‘Though “Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage.” But they do contribute to a cage-like ambience.’ ‘What play is that in?’ says Anne-Marie. ‘Not a play,’ he says. ‘A poem. The man who wrote it actually was in prison – he chose the wrong political side’’ (Atwood 2016, 131; emphasis ours).

Yet another strategy fan writers resort to in their rewritings is “character dislocation,” by means of which “characters are removed from their original situations and given alternative names and identities” (Jenkins 1992, 175). In this sense, there are indisputable correspondences between the characters of the play and the characters of the novel: Prospero – Felix Philips, Antonio – Anthony Price, Alonso – Sal O’Nally, Gonzalo – Lonnie Gordon. But changing the characters’ identities takes other forms too (within the fabric of the novel. For instance, Felix also assumes the nom de plume Mr. Duke (as a direct reference to the play), and the inmates who play the characters of the play also get to choose alter egos or stage names such as 8Handz (playing Ariel), Leggs (playing Caliban), WonderBoy (playing Ferdinand), Krampus (playing Alonso), Bent Pencil (playing Gonzalo), SnakeEye (playing Antonio), and so on. In fact, almost all the characters of the play have double correspondences in the novel. On the one hand, there is the correspondence based on the overt parallel that may be drawn between the play and the novel, and, on the other hand, characters have stage or acting doubles as well. For instance, Miranda is present in the novel, on the one hand, as Felix’s ghost daughter, but, on the other hand, she is also played by Anne-Marie Greenland during the performance of the play; the role of Ferdinand is initially given to WonderBoy, but he also has a correspondence in the person of Frederick, or Fred O’Nally, and so on.

Lastly, rewritings may also employ “emotional intensification” (Jenkins 1992, 178) as a reconstruction strategy. Emphasizing moments of narrative crisis in the adaptation as compared to its original may appear due to the fact that readers and, generally, the audience may place a greater importance on issues of character motivation and psychology than the writers of the original piece of work might have intended to. In this respect, there is an emotional intensification in the case of the main character of the novel, for instance. Though there is a psychological insight into Prospero’s thoughts and inner development as well, his main concerns and self-reflective manifestations in the play are still circumscribed by his plans of vengeance and, finally, his forgiveness. But while carrying out his plans, he does not doubt his moral rightness. Felix, on the other hand, is much more complex, and there is a greater focus on his emotions and thoughts in the novel. He often questions himself, struggles to justify his actions, and seeks approval from his daughter. His self-reflections include different areas from ordinary issues, like what to wear or eat, to sophisticated and, ultimately, existential ideas like freedom and art, good and evil, life and death.
As Jenkins notes, “some of these approaches to fan fiction writing expand textual boundaries, constructing histories or futures for the characters,” others resort to foregrounding marginalized characters, to reverse codes of good and evil, further ones “playfully manipulate generic boundaries, defamiliarizing stock conventions so that the same narrative may yield many different retellings” (Jenkins 1992, 180). Most commonly, fan fiction selects one particular strategy of rewriting. The fact that, to a more or less extent, Atwood resorts to almost all strategies listed by Jenkins, also attests to the ambition of her professional project that obviously transcends the limitations of fan culture, the polyperspectivity of her approach, her art of combination in a deviceful, exuberant manner and perhaps akin to the mixing principle Shakespeare himself had a penchant for as an avatar of postmodern thought.

3. The Performative Power of Metatextuality

After looking at the ways in which Atwood’s commission of reimagining Shakespeare emerges as a rhizomatic adaptation, resulting from an intricate liaison with *The Tempest* and relying on the combinatorics of rewriting strategies, in what follows, we seek possible responses to the question what this metatextual dialogue actually does, performs, in what ways it addresses and involves the contemporary reader/spectator. Due to the multiperspectivity of Atwood’s project, the possible answers may lead in several directions, perhaps beyond the confines of this argumentation. Nevertheless, besides an ample look at the challenges of metatextuality as an interpretive process, we propose to particularly take into account the metatheatrical aspect of the work, with special attention to the double layer of the intended audience within and outside the concretization of theatre to prison performance.

3.1. Metatheatricality

Constructed upon the foundations of *The Tempest* as a metatheatrical play, *Hag-Seed* virtually indulges in metatheatrical references, resonating with, but also going beyond, the Shakespearean theatrical view, rethinking the role of the theatre in a contemporary frame. Prospero’s island (also) being interpretable as a metaphor of the stage, *The Tempest* “offers a challenging meta-dramatic reflection upon the relationships between the artist, the work of art and the spectator as well as the tendency to combine different spheres of reality or illusions; it ultimately encourages actors and spectators to consider art as a means to earn one’s own freedom (metaphorical and psychological, if not literal)” (Cavecchi 2017, 2). In a live dialogue with these theatrical resonances, *Hag-Seed* recreates Prospero’s island as Felix’s Prison Shakespeare project, in a frame where freedom is the least
metaphorical and the lack of it is the most palpable life experience. Felix, like Prospero, turns up as a figure of authority who resorts to the magic power of the theatre in his “prison island.”

The reader notices perhaps the most instantly those references that remind of the Shakespearean vision of the theatre as dream, illusion, and magic: the very first chapter, Seashore, starts with Felix brushing his teeth with “the illusion of a smile. Pretense, fakery, but who’s to know?” (Atwood 2016, 20; emphasis ours). Further on in the same chapter, “Let’s make magic!” Felix exclaims, preparing for the Makeshiweg Festival (Atwood 2016, 21). Chapter 30, Some Vanity of Mine Art, starts an entire discourse of Felix’s about the mysterious nature of dreams as one of the key elements of The Tempest, spiced up with overt quotes from the play: “DREAMS, he should have written on his whiteboard. It’s surely a main keynote. My spirits as in a dream are all bound up. How many people in the play fall asleep suddenly or talk about dreaming? We are such stuff as dreams are made of. But what are dreams made of? Rounded with a sleep. Rounded. It chimes so exactly with the great globe itself” (Atwood 2016, 165).

Felix’s unconventional theatre-making experiment with the Fletcher Correctional Players – no doubt, a remake of the Shakespearean play-within-the-play – occasions reflections, on the one hand, upon the directed play, including his didactic methods used to introduce the prisoners into the meanings of the plays and the nature of its characters, while also outlining the afterlife of The Tempest. On the other hand, it contains reflections upon the theatre in general, the functions of art/theatre represented in the novel as an aesthetic and art history account. The process of rehearsals within the prison provide insight not only into the layers of interpretation of The Tempest, with special focus on references to prison, but also into directing methods with all their “accessories,” from casting, costumes, through props and setting, to special effects, of course, applied to prison conditions:

Having tweaked the text, they’d rehearse, work on the soundtrack, and finalize the props and costumes, which Felix would gather together for them outside and trundle into Fletcher. There were limits, of course: nothing sharp, nothing explosive, nothing you could smoke or inject. Potato guns were not allowed. Nor, he discovered, was fake blood: it might be mistaken for real blood, went the official reasoning, and act as an incitement. (Atwood 2016, 60)

Besides, there are references to the universe of the theatre as experienced by the actors under the authority of the all-controlling director figure (“The theatre isn’t a republic, it’s a monarchy” [Atwood 2016, 133]), and especially the hardships awaiting female actors, as reflected by the sketched storyline of Anne-

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5 Besides theatre, dream is the next most frequently recurring motif in the novel.
Marie Greenland, “one-time child gymnast” (Atwood 2016, 60), the only free and female artist involved in the project to play Miranda’s role. Special accent in the meta-theatrical discourse is laid upon the multiple roles theatre fulfils, from being an educational tool (“We’ll be showing them [the politicians] that theatre is a powerful educational tool” [Atwood 2016, 179]), through its therapeutic effects, most relevant in the prison context (“I told the Deputies it’s a really wonderful example of discipline cross-fertilization, showing the way the arts can be used as a therapeutic and educational tool, in a very creative and unexpected way!” [Atwood 2016, 70]), to its liberating, purifying powers (“It’s theatre, Felix protests now, in his head. The art of true illusions! Of course it deals in traumatic situations! It conjures up demons in order to exorcise them! Haven’t you read the Greeks? Does the word catharsis mean anything to you?” [Atwood 2016, 76]).

The magic power of theatre, transcending reality and offering alternative realities, is perhaps the most effectively suggested by Felix directing a mental play in which his long-dead daughter is still alive (“Miranda would become the daughter who had not been lost; who’d been a protecting cherub, cheering her exiled father as they’d drifted in their leaking boat over the dark sea; who hadn’t died, but had grown up into a lovely girl. What he couldn’t have in life he might still catch sight of through his art: just a glimpse, from the corner of his eye” [Atwood 2016, 25]). By keeping her alive in his mind, Felix plays God, just like Prospero, and fuels an “illusionary world as an eternal alternative to the ephemeral reality. The ending, however, shows that Felix’s projected Miranda is just as transitory as his real daughter” (Vanhaudenarde 2019, 51).

The all-encompassing view of the theatre also leaves room for (humorously) critical reflections to its sterile, idealistic place devoid of the low parts of life, evidently, with significant exceptions, thus extending the span of meta-theatrical discourse to Samuel Beckett: “It’s an omission in much literature of the theatre, Felix decides: nobody bathes or even thinks about it, nobody eats, nobody defecates. Except in Beckett, of course. You can always count on Beckett. Radishes, carrots, pissing, stinky feet: it’s all there, the entire human corpus at its most mundane and abject level” (Atwood 2016, 108). All in all, the abundance of metatheatrical references directly correspond with, but also expand, Shakespeare’s metatheatre from a contemporary perspective.

### 3.2. The Multiplied Frame of the Intended Audience

The employed “play-within-the-play” structure entails a multiplied frame as concerns the side of the receivers. “The show goes on” both within and outside the prison, the interpretation of art/theatre gaining particular overtones both at the level of the intended audience of the play inside the novel and at the level of the intended audience of the novel itself.
3.2.1. The “Insider” Perspective

The play-within-the-novel adapted to the prison context opens up the discourse of “Shakespeare in prison,” a real-life practice that carries literature behind the bars with the aim of involving inmates into creative and constructive projects with the aim of weighing down their maladaptive behaviour. Such is the Shakespeare Behind Bars programme, successfully operating in the US since 1995; according to its founder and producing director, Curt Tofteland, it has the effect of a kind of drama therapy on inmates: “[i]n exploring the motives of characters, they gain insight into their own motives; in recognizing the cause and effect with the arc of a scene, they analyse the consequences of their own choices” (qtd. in Lehmann 2014, 91). Several other works by Margaret Atwood testify her interest in the prison setting, which turns Hag-Seed into a scenery that “translates” the metaphorical layers of The Tempest into one particular concretization, an actual space that activates meanings in this direction (e.g. prison as heterotopia, liminal space, precarity, etc.).

3.2.2. The “Outsider” Perspective

With this work of hers, Atwood assumes the task of mediating The Tempest to contemporary readers. Thus, the novel provides a frame of interpretation for the play, not only as a creative recontextualization but also as an explicit metatextual commentary. The question arises: can this limited context fully reflect the richness of the Shakespearean source text? Does it not “imprison” the original? Being as playful as it is, the novel may pose “ironic nods to both Shakespearean canon(s) and contemporary culture” (Giovannelli 2018, 2). For instance, though fully aware of the fictitious nature of the plot and its characters, readers still might wonder about its reliability in the sense of a “credible” story. There might arise the question: Is the prison world too intellectualized? Or is it the intent to caricature/irony? Not only the inmates have great, sophisticated philosophical/moral ideas on the world, also playing roles like the king – though they seem rather schoolboys than troubled men with a dramatic past –, but Felix himself seems sometimes idiotic, but still an exceptional mind, skilful enough to design such a comprehensive revenge plan. This intricacy, here and there contrariety, is perhaps one of the sources of “the tempest” in the novel, if there is any. By including the interpretive commentary of The Tempest in the body of the novel, the author cannot fully avoid the traps of didacticism, with attempts to overcome it by the same rhizomatic layeredness that maintains the interest of readers who also seek textual jouissance. Atwood compensates for what may be lost by enlarging the prison reference, by introducing several other metatextual references.
4. “Gentle breath of yours my sails / Must fill, or else my project fails”

As we have seen, Atwood’s revisiting of the classical Shakespearean play gave birth to a unique experimental rewriting which challenges and, at the same time, surpasses the traditional approaches to adaptation, introducing a particular fabric of metatextuality. Its artistry also relies on mastering an unparalleled junction of “fidelity” and originality. On the one hand, the novel bears the restrictions imposed by the Hogarth frame, i.e. making sure that readers find enough clues to establish its connections to the original play. But unlike other novels commissioned by the same project (such as Edward St. Aubyn’s Dunbar, a modern retelling of King Lear, or Anne Tyler’s Vinegar Girl, a retelling of The Taming of the Shrew), in which the relations to the Shakespearean pre-text are rather implicit or, in any case, concealed in the sense that they may be fully read without necessarily drawing the parallel between them and their original, Atwood’s novel overtly thematizes the classic which has an actual presence in the novel in a way in which readers cannot be unaware of it, even if they intend to. On the other hand, beyond the “play within the play within the novel” structure, which allows readers to establish various correspondences between the two works of art, the manifold layers of metatextuality enrich the interpretive nexus of Atwood’s reprise. Thus, balancing between keeping a recognizable Shakespeare play and creating a twenty-first century work of fiction is just one of the stakes masterly achieved in the novel.

In Atwood’s conception of rewriting, the play and the novel coexist in a symbiotic manner, emerging from and building on each other. Not only the fictional world of the novel mirrors that of the play – in terms of the plot, naturally, being adjusted to its new context but keeping the mixture of comedy, tragedy, and romance –, but, in turn, the play also comes into existence (or it “rejuvenates”) for contemporary readers through the metatext found in the novel. Thus, the explicit dialogue between the characters of the novel and the source play further enhances the reading experience of contemporary readers. All the more so since the novel plays on the very meaning of literary contiguity and on readers’ expectations. As a metatext, it may be placed on a wide spectrum that “ranges from adoration to leg-pulling,” “wondering or smiling at Shakespeare, but not mocking” (Puttaiah and Sowmya 2021, 328).

As a matter of fact, “the readers of Hag-Seed might be cast as textual cooperators/liberators opening the door to the ‘circulation of social energy’ (Greenblatt 1990, 157) while finding their way through Atwood’s hypertextual maze” (Giovannelli 2018, 47). While also inviting, besides the corpus of existing interpretations, various institutional practices and socio-cultural discourses into the creative process, Atwood urges the contemporary reader to think rhizomatically – can
one not think rhizomatically? – about Shakespeare as a live heritage, which is heterogeneous and which cannot be separated from its contemporary contexts.

**Works Cited**


