

Friederike Danebrock

## The Ninth Prison

Desert Islands and no Witch in Margaret Atwood's 'Hag-Seed'

### *From Before or for After Humankind*

"Islands", Gilles Deleuze says, "are either from before or for after humankind". This is because, he says, islands – and particularly desert islands – have a way of un-grounding our very thinking and being, our way of taking our own existence for granted: "That an island is deserted must appear *philosophically* normal to us" because "[h]umans cannot live, nor live in security, unless they assume that the active struggle between earth and water is over, or at least contained. [...] They must somehow persuade themselves that a struggle of this kind does not exist, or that it has somehow ended". Even the mundane fact that "England is populated will always come as a surprise", for "humans can live on an island only by forgetting what an island represents". Yet at the same time, the "very existence of islands" blocks this necessary oblivion; is "the negation of this point of view, of this effort, this conviction".<sup>1</sup>

Islands, therefore, though part of the world that humans live in, either precede or follow upon them. We have not developed forms of inhabitation that would allow us to remember islands as islands *and* to live there, at the same time; there is a conceptual incompatibility. Habitually, at least, we cease regarding islands as islands as soon as we populate them. However, a troubling, unresolved quality remains that likewise makes (desert) islands into launch pads for utopian political thought; into occasions to envision what amounts, in Deleuze's description, into a properly poetic way of inhabiting the world:

In certain conditions which attach them to the very movement of things, humans do not put an end to desertedness, they make it sacred. Those people who come to the island indeed occupy and populate it; but in reality, were they sufficiently separate, sufficiently creative, they would give the island only a dynamic image of itself [so that] geography and the imagination would be one. To that question so dear to the old explorers – "which creatures live on deserted islands?" – one could only answer: human beings live there already, but uncommon humans, they are absolutely separate, absolute creators [...], an Idea of humanity, a prototype, a man who would almost be a god, a woman who would be a goddess, a great Amnesiac, a pure Artist, a consciousness of Earth and Ocean, an enormous hurricane, a beautiful witch, a statue from the Easter Islands[.]<sup>2</sup>

in short, "a human being who precedes itself", who does not rely on the fixity of its own form as the horizon of its being, who cares not that much about things

1 Gilles Deleuze: *Desert Islands and Other Texts*, p. 9 (original emphasis).

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 10 f.

remaining as they *are*, and is quite willing to attune itself to what they *become*.<sup>3</sup> Such a being would be unburdened by the imperative to appropriate (islands, or anything else).

In William Shakespeare's 'The Tempest', arguably, such a form of living is precisely not found. The island in the play manifests, mostly, in its relation to the political hierarchies of the mainland: serving as a kind of one-woman penal colony to which the Algerian witch Sycorax is exiled in punishment for "mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible";<sup>4</sup> it becomes a bone of contention between her son, Caliban, who lays a formal claim to it ("this island's mine by Sycorax my mother", he says),<sup>5</sup> and the exile succeeding Sycorax – the magician Prospero, usurped Duke of Milan, who exerts factual power over "this bare island" and its inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> Whether Sycorax ever understood herself as the island's owner in any formal sense, we do not know. She is an ominous figure whose omission from the plot has been much remarked upon in criticism: the "blue-eyed hag", "hither brought with child"<sup>7</sup> has no immediate place in the events that 'The Tempest' stages, and rarely receives one in reworkings of Shakespeare's material. As Irene Lara puts it quite succinctly, "it is as if her story of banishment in the text sets Sycorax on a path to future discursive banishment, marking the continuity of dominant cultures' refusal or inability to see and listen to Sycorax, a symbol of 'the' dark female, the banished woman, and the feared racialized and sexualized witch/healer".<sup>8</sup> Her absence, however, is an oscillating rather than a definitive one: "although she is dead and thus physically absent in the play, she is firmly present in the memories of Caliban and Prospero who repeatedly invoke her to forward their practical and ideological aims. Therefore [...] Sycorax's absent *presence* impacts Shakespeare's narrative, as well as has a signifying life beyond Shakespeare".<sup>9</sup> It is through the ambivalence of this absence-presence that she constitutes "a racialized *hagging* memory, haunting some of her fellow characters as well as many of 'The Tempest' readers with partially detailed, partially left to the imagination stories about her magical and 'earthy' powers and 'terrible' behaviors".<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Lara says, we can invoke Sycorax as "a metaphor of the actual racialized, sexualized women of color witch/healers largely made *absent* in discourse".<sup>11</sup>

3 Ibid.

4 William Shakespeare: The Tempest, 1.2.264.

5 Ibid., 1.2.332.

6 Ibid., Epilogue 8.

7 Ibid., 1.2.269.

8 Irene Lara: Beyond Caliban's Curses, p. 81.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 83.

11 Ibid., p. 81. As what kind of comment on colonialism we should understand the play in general is, of course, a matter of contention in criticism. It is, however, often pointed out that the mechanisms of colonial exploitation are made quite explicit in the play, for instance when Trinculo laconically points out that in England, "when they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian" (Tempest, 2.2.31-2; see also Rachel Bryant: Towards the Desertion of Sycorax's Island). On power dynamics and the political in 'The Tempest', see further John Kunat ('Play me false': Rape, Race, and Conquest in 'The Tempest'). Kunat is insightful, too, when it comes to the matter of Caliban's attempted rape of Prospero's daughter Miranda, and the ambiguity of rape in the Early Modern period between being an assault on personal vs. on patriarchal rights. All in all, 'The Tempest'

The novel 'Hag-Seed' is Margaret Atwood's 2016 adaptation of 'The Tempest'. It follows – somewhat surprisingly, given Atwood's reputation as a feminist writer – the tradition of omitting Sycorax, and does so even more thoroughly than Shakespeare because along with her person, the (witch-)craft she stands for is likewise banned from events. It is through contrasting these different nuances of exclusion that the potential of the figure of Sycorax becomes visible. For in Shakespeare, even though Sycorax receives no stage time, the magic she stands for persists in subtle ways; and thus, precisely in her uncanny status as repressed but not *entirely* invisible can she serve “the negation of this point of view, of this effort, this conviction” that the “struggle between earth and water” is ended, that history is fixed in its tracks, that we have figured out the world for good.<sup>12</sup> Her omission proper, such as it is achieved in Atwood's novel, tames Shakespeare's play and makes it into a properly appropriative text – which, in turn, only serves to highlight the relevance she and everything connected to her, including her son, and even contingency itself, have for 'The Tempest' despite her own conspicuous absence from the stage.

### ***The Hags of History***

Sycorax's (hi)story – or rather, the lack thereof – brings us to the issue of the actual processes of exclusion and their logic by which the hags of both the Old World and the New ended up placed firmly on the margins from which they haunt our centres so persistently with their 'spells'. That women's history and the history of appropriation (colonial and otherwise) are intricately entwined has been detailed by Silvia Federici in the book she has titled, after Shakespeare's 'Tempest', 'Caliban and the Witch'. Federici argues that in the process of primitive accumulation – by which she means the Early Modern transition period from feudalist to capitalist structures – the oppression of women, the exploitations of early colonialism, and class struggle all fuelled each other on in specific ways, resulting not only in the loss of the commons but equally in the strict gendered segregation of productive and reproductive spheres, with the latter ending up privatised in all the senses of the world: removed from the official world, deprived of visibility, acknowledgment, and relevance. Hunting (and burning) women as witches, Federici argues, is – alongside such measures as land enclosures or the so-called 'bloody laws' which instigated draconian punishment for petty crimes committed, more often than not, by poor people out of dire necessity – an important ingredient in this mixture of oppressive strategies. What on the surface might appear as an act of pure superstition or religious tyranny worked in effect – whether consciously intended that way or not – towards the appropriation of the female body for the production of the labour force more than anything else.

This hinges quite crucially, Federici argues, on the fact that the privatisation of land produced, not necessarily poverty as unprecedented circumstance, but new

might just be another fine instance of what Stephen Greenblatt calls Shakespeare's “theatrical opportunism” (Shakespeare Bewitched, p. 29).

12 Gilles Deleuze: Desert Islands, p. 9.

forms of poverty, and that poverty in turn became criminalised and, to a considerable degree, feminised; with waged work being less of an option for women. “The social function of the commons was especially important for women, who, having less title to land and less social power, were more dependent on them for their subsistence, autonomy, and sociality”, Federici explains. “Not only did cooperation in agricultural labour die when land was privatized and individual labor contracts replaced collective ones; economic differences among the rural population deepened, as the number of poor squatters increased who had nothing left but a cot and a cow, and no choice but to go [...] beg for a job”.<sup>13</sup> Women, more vulnerable on the road and barred from many occupations such as soldiery, could not ‘try their luck elsewhere’ quite so easily – nor could the elderly; leaving, at the bottom of the food chain, precisely the old women who, “no longer supported by their children, fell onto the poor rolls or survived by borrowing, petty theft, and delayed payments”.<sup>14</sup> “Witchcraft”, Federici argues, was in fact often simply the label that the criminalisation of poverty was conducted under in such cases where the charges were levelled against women, for the outcome of these processes of primitive accumulation was a “peasantry polarized by [...] a web of hatred and resentments that is well-documented in the records of the witch-hunt, which show that quarrels relating to requests for help, the trespassing of animals, or unpaid rents were in the background of many accusations”.<sup>15</sup>

This background is relevant because the figure of the hag such as we find it, not least, in Shakespeare, can easily be mapped onto it – think only of the (in)famous presentation of the witches in ‘Macbeth’, for instance when at the beginning of the play, the first witch reports her recent pastimes to her sisters as: “A sailor’s wife had chestnuts in her lap | And munched, and munched, and munched. | ‘Give me,’ quoth I. | ‘Aroynt thee, witch,’ the rump-fed ronyon cries”.<sup>16</sup> The Algerian witch Sycorax from ‘The Tempest’ remains, of course, a much more elusive figure than the witches in ‘Macbeth’ – and even those are, in some ways, elusive enough – but the little we learn about her makes her appear the prototypical ‘hag’ indeed. She is introduced to us as the “foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy | Was grown into a hoop”,<sup>17</sup> a “damned witch” whose “mischiefs manifold” are “terrible | To enter human hearing”.<sup>18</sup> Prospero’s derogatory descriptions evoke an abject combination of age, animality, and sexuality that quite corresponds to the image of the “lecherous old woman”<sup>19</sup> into which the idea of ‘witch’ was often translated in Early Modern Europe: her commands are “earthy” and despite her advanced years, she “litter[s]” a son on the island, “got by the devil himself”.<sup>20</sup>

Claire Waters in fact argues that we should read the famously inscrutable description “blue-eyed hag”<sup>21</sup> as ‘blew-eyed’ or ‘blear-eyed,’ which in turn would

13 Silvia Federici: *Caliban and the Witch*, pp. 71 f.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

15 *Ibid.*

16 William Shakespeare: *Tempest*, 1.3.4-6.

17 *Ibid.*, 1.2.258-9.

18 *Ibid.*, 1.2.263-5.

19 Silvia Federici: *Caliban*, p. 180.

20 William Shakespeare: *Tempest*, 1.2.320.

21 *Ibid.*, 1.2.269.

suggest an infection of the eye common in the elderly, and give us, beneath the apparent gruesomeness of the witch, the image of a rather frail old woman in a bad state of health.<sup>22</sup>

Federici unfolds a detailed account of the political, economical, and legal changes of the period (the Black Death, the price revolution, legislation regarding prostitution, land enclosures, the persecution of vagabonds and heretics, population growth and decline). It should have raised some suspicions, she argues, that “the witch-hunt occurred simultaneously with the colonization and extermination of the populations of the New World, the English enclosures, the beginning of the slave trade, the enactment of ‘bloody laws’ against vagabonds and beggars”, and that it “climaxed in that interregnum between the end of feudalism and the capitalist ‘take off’ when the peasantry in Europe reached the peak of its power but, in time, also consummated its historic defeat”. And yet, “the witch-hunt rarely appears in the history of the proletariat”; and where it is framed in the terms of a ‘panic’ or a ‘craze,’ it is removed from the context of economic-political interest and medicalised, with the side effect of “exculp[at]ing the witch hunters and depoliticiz[ing] their crimes”.<sup>23</sup>

Is Federici guilty of indirectly idealising the pre-modern societal status of women? Not necessarily: “the fact that unequal power relations existed prior to the advent of capitalism, as did a discriminating sexual division of labour does not detract from [the] assessment”, she says, that women experienced a specific form of disenfranchisement during the late medieval and Early Modern period, where not only did women lose access to any kind of common source of subsistence (as did everyone), but where “women themselves became the commons” and their labour thus appeared “as natural resource”. The bourgeois family acted as one important factor that helped the “concealment” of female everyday activity so that it did (and does) not officially figure as ‘labour,’ “defining women in terms – mothers, wives, daughters, widows – that hid their status as workers”.<sup>24</sup> The situation in the colonies – here, Federici looks specifically at the Spanish-American

22 Compare also Reginald Scot’s remark, quoted by Waters: “The most of such as are said to be witches, are women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles” (The Tempest’s Sycorax as ‘blew eye’d hag’, p. 604).

23 Silvia Federici: Caliban, pp. 163 ff. Marx’s analyses of political economy, Federici argues, are no exception: examining “primitive accumulation from the viewpoint of the waged male proletariat and the development of commodity production”; Marx neglects “the changes it introduced in the social position of women and the production of labor-power” and thus misses “(i) the development of a new sexual division of labor subjugating women’s labor and women’s reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force; (ii) the construction of a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged-work” and “(iii) the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers” (Caliban, p. 12).

24 Ibid., p. 97. John Kunat in fact reads the relationship between Miranda and Ferdinand in ‘The Tempest’ against the very backdrop of the constitution of a private, depoliticised sphere of care. He derives this reading, not from the history of capitalism, but from a revival of Aristotelian political ideas during the Renaissance, which implied the postulation of a ‘natural’ sphere both absolutely distinct and absolutely necessary for the political sphere. “In the social sphere Miranda will be given precedence; it is her domain and its tasks are vital to the proper functioning of the political. Nonetheless, these tasks require that the social be *different* absolutely from the political, even though the two are represented as mutually constitutive. The social is like the powerful queen on the chessboard, carefully protecting the impotent king, although it is only the king who matters”. The “other ‘natural’ upon the island” is, of course, Caliban (‘Play me false’, pp. 320 f.).

colonies – shares parallels with and cross-fertilises processes of appropriation in Europe. “The assumption is the continuity between the subjugation of the populations of the New World and that of people in Europe, women in particular, in the transition to capitalism. In both cases we have the forcible removal of entire communities from their land, large-scale impoverishment”, and find that “forms of repression that had been developed in the Old World were transported to the New and then re-imported into Europe”.<sup>25</sup>

Federici’s analysis thus describes a constellation entirely mirrored in ‘The Tempest’, with land appropriated by people newly arrived to it, male Indigenous work force exploited, and the ‘witch’ conspicuously dismissed from the picture. To put the plot in the vocabulary of primitive accumulation suggested by Federici: in the situation such as we encounter it in the play, the hag (Sycorax) has recently vanished from the land she was living off and been substituted by a colonial master (Prospero), who appropriates this land and sets the male inhabitants (Caliban and also, if one takes the liberty to gender him such, Ariel) to work not for their own, but for his subsistence (hauling wood) and profit (gaining revenge). In this sense, Shakespeare’s ‘Tempest’ presents a constellation emblematic – at least from a contemporary viewpoint – of the dynamics of what Federici calls (both with and in critique of Marx) “primitive accumulation”. Land as well as work force are appropriated as resources, with some exertions becoming visible as labour – however poorly recompensated – whereas others are relegated to invisibility, thus constituting a reproductive sphere sharply delineated from the productive sphere and privatised: removed from the public eye, Sycorax’ (witch-)craft and (child-bearing) labours are reported, not presented.<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Sorcerers of Today***

What happens when this material is picked up by a contemporary feminist author well-known for works such as ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ or ‘Alias Grace’? In some ways, curiously little. Alongside other novelists such as Jeanette Winterson or Anne Tyler, Margaret Atwood was commissioned by the Hogarth Press (recently revived and now an imprint of Chatto & Windus) to contribute to a series of novelistic adaptations of Shakespeare. Atwood’s 2016 novel transports the plot, appropriately enough, from an island of exile to a modern-day prison (Fletcher Correctional), where Felix Phillips, a once-successful theatre director, stages

25 Silvia Federici: *Caliban*, p. 219.

26 Curiously enough, though, it is Shakespeare’s Caliban who becomes a symbol of anti-colonial rebellion, not Sycorax – even though, Federici says, it was often women who organized resistance against colonisation: “It is ironic, then, in view of this record, that Caliban and not his mother Sycorax, the witch, should be taken by Latin American revolutionaries as a symbol of the resistance to colonization. For Caliban could only fight his master by cursing him in the language he had learned from him, thus being dependent in his rebellion on his ‘master’s tools.’ He could also be deceived into believing that his liberation could come through a rape and through the initiative of some opportunistic white proletarians transplanted in the New World whom he worshipped as gods. Sycorax, instead, [...] might have taught her son to appreciate the local powers [...] and those communal ties that, over centuries of suffering, have continued to nourish the liberation struggle to this day, and that already haunted, as a promise, Caliban’s imagination” (*Caliban*, p. 229).

Shakespeare's 'Tempest' as part of the educational "Literacy through Literature" programme he has been hired to run. The staging fulfils a double function: Felix, former artistic director of a prestigious theatre festival (Makeshiweg Festival) and now dethroned by his scheming assistant Tony, uses the opportunity to take revenge both on this assistant and on another old enemy of his, Sal O'Nally, who are now ministers of heritage and of justice, respectively, and hence scheduled to visit the prison for the staging of the 'Tempest'. Through elaborate special effects which involve, among other things, a secret double run of the play – most of the prison's inhabitants, inmates and wardens alike, watch a screened version while unbeknownst to them, Tony, Sal, and their associates are kidnapped in an actual secret live run of the play – Felix brings to fruition a plan he has been hatching for twelve years.

The reader witnesses the Fletcher Correctional Players, under Felix' guidance – or should we say, Felix' government? –, stage 'The Tempest' as a reflection on confinement and release. Felix structures the play into, all in all, nine prisons, with the nature of the ninth prison remaining a mystery until the end of the play, when it is revealed to be the play itself from which the protagonists must be set free. Felix's other "unique incarceration events"<sup>27</sup> are: Sycorax' confinement on the island; Ariel's in a pine tree; Prospero's and Miranda's in a leaky boat; Prospero and Miranda on the island; Caliban in a hole in the rocks; Ferdinand enchanted and chained; Antonio, Alonso and Sebastian stranded on the island, enchanted and driven to madness; and Stephano and Trinculo confined to a muddy pond.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Felix himself is, in a sense, confined to his own personal prison of grief: having lost his three-year old daughter to meningitis, he re-conjures her into his life as his imagined, but constant companion, adjusting her age as time moves on. However, this is really the only sense in which there is a kind of 'communitas' between him and his troupe; in other regards, he is the perfect impersonation of Prospero and hence quite firmly anchored in his role as the architect of events rather than a participant in them. This, in turn, indirectly confirms the dichotomy of confinement and freedom that Felix points out to his class: the class are made to reflect on incarceration – but ultimately, this reflection itself is more a means to an end to achieve Felix' long-developed scheme than it is a genuine chance for education and emancipation.

It is, in that sense, not for nothing that Felix assumes the last name "Duke" when he applies for the position at Fletcher Correctional. He has kept a staff and a cloak made for the 'Tempest' that he meant to stage for the Makeshiweg Festival. There and in his prison version, the role he casts himself for is, of course, that of Prospero. His early-deceased daughter is called Miranda; and in a sense, he even adopts a second Miranda during the course of the book: the actress Anne-Marie Greenland who he had cast for his Makeshiweg Festival when she was a teenager, and who he tracks down and re-hires as a grown-up woman. There is a fleeting sense that his mastery is not quite as complete as it seems: the novel begins with Felix putting on false teeth which do not fit properly. His

27 Margaret Atwood: Hag-Seed, p. 126.

28 See *ibid.*, p. 125.

idealisation of his daughter is somewhat excessive and a generous dose of patriarchal pride is mixed into his affection: he has been “entranced with her from the start”, we learn. “Once she could talk he’d even taken her to the theatre; so bright she’d been. She’d sit there, taking it all in, not wriggling or bored as a lesser two-year-old would have been”.<sup>29</sup> (And conveniently, the imaginary Miranda turns out to be, at 15, a rather dutiful housewife: she “doesn’t like it when he’s away so much, during the months when he’s giving the course. When he gets back after a heavy day they share a cup of tea together and play a game of chess, then eat some macaroni and cheese and maybe a salad. Miranda has become more health-conscious, she’s insisting on greenery, she’s making him eat kale.”)<sup>30</sup> But if Felix’ sovereignty is in any way precarious, there is no trace of it in the way things play out for the rest of the book. Everything goes according to plan – as it does for Shakespeare’s Prospero.

All the more so since Felix’ mastery is not a mastery over potentially rebellious sprites and natural forces, as Prospero’s is, but depends on more reliable technology. One of Felix’ students is a computer hacker and can therefore help out with all things digital: “one day”, that hacker is “elbows-deep in cables, the next it’s mini-cameras. After that he’s installing some tiny microphones and speakers, wireless ones: it would be contraindicated to drill holes in the walls”.<sup>31</sup> Douglas Lanier points out that in adapting ‘magic’ into ‘special effects,’ ‘Hag-Seed’ covers up some of the more marvellous, intriguing aspects of ‘The Tempest’ and integrates them into a firmly realist scenario, thus domesticating Shakespeare’s play and making it conform to conventional ideas of literariness.<sup>32</sup> It is often, he implies, precisely the curious inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies (of plot, character, setting) in Shakespearean drama that make for rich opportunities of interpretation and that make the plays resistant against smooth appropriation by any one ideology or critical paradigm. Prospero’s magic in ‘The Tempest’, while not half as murky in source as, say, the three witches’ magic in ‘Macbeth’, is still not quite as straightforward as video sampling and wifi. It does involve, after all, sprites and spirits and the interaction with a nature that, while it can be harnessed to one’s power, is still a force to be reckoned with.

And what is more, ‘The Tempest’ references a more enigmatic craft still – the witchcraft of Sycorax, Caliban’s mother, who “could control the moon, make flows and ebbs, | And deal in her command without her power”.<sup>33</sup> There’s no such murkiness in the novel – there is, simply put, no hag in ‘Hag-Seed’. The magic that there is lies in the clever arrangement of technological gadgets as

29 Ibid., p. 14.

30 Ibid., p. 62.

31 Ibid., pp. 169 f.

32 See Douglas M. Lanier: *The Hogarth Shakespeare Series*, pp. 234 f. For a detailed account on the digital technology in ‘Hag-Seed’, and quite a different judgment of it as “creatively update[ing]” Prospero’s magic, see Howells (*True Trash: Genre Fiction Revisited*, pp. 311 f.). Lanier argues: “Whereas a genre-fiction approach to adapting the Shakespeare narrative might be primarily plot driven, what marks this approach [i.e., the Hogarth Shakespeare series approach] as ‘literary’ is its dwelling on the intricacies of biography, its substitution of characterological complexity for the metaphorical density of Shakespeare’s language, and the tantalizing gaps and unarticulated motives typical of Shakespeare’s handling of character” (*Hogarth*, p. 238).

33 William Shakespeare: *Tempest*, 5.1.271–2.



well as the perceptive anticipation and deft steering of people's emotional reaction; and Prospero the magician turns into the ingenious, but entirely secular manipulator Felix that he maybe is already half laid out as in Shakespeare's play. There is, of course, little room for idealising Sycorax: there is no reason to assume that her approach to the island and its inhabitants has been any less hierarchical than Prospero's. And yet, with the vanishing of this ominous background figure and the shady craft she stands for, a crucial source of contingency – the possibility of things being different from what we think they are, or things being different in the future from what they are in the present – is exorcised from the novel. Instead, the focus is set exclusively – to put it somewhat derisively – on an old white man's grudges and their mollification. This suppression of magic in favour of a psychologised account bears resemblance is comparable in effect to removing, as Federici describes, the witch-hunts from both the history of the proletariat and colonial history by labelling it a superstitious 'craze'.<sup>34</sup> Dismissing the hag from Shakespeare's play makes a whole thematic complex – precisely that of appropriation, expropriation, colonisation, possibly the criminalisation of poverty – unavailable for discussion. It thoroughly "depoliticize[s]"<sup>35</sup> the figure of 'prison prince', quasi-coloniser Felix and, by extension, Prospero.

If Atwood's portrayal of Felix and his success, the way his prison teachings and revenge plot go down oh-so-smoothly, is ironic, the irony is hard to spot. Felix turns out to be the perfect teacher. The man who Felix replaces at Fletcher Correctional never, it is suggested, got anywhere with his students. From the administrator of the programme, Estelle, Felix learns: "The teacher who'd died had been such a fine person ... . He'd really tried, up at Fletcher; he'd accomplished [...] well, he'd done his very best, under conditions that were ... no one could go into it expecting too much".<sup>36</sup> Estelle's judgement of Felix's work, in contrast, after he's run a couple of courses in the programme, is: "You've done wonders with them!"<sup>37</sup> Where Prospero needs to rely on force to make the inhabitants of his colony to his bidding ("If thou neglect'st, or dost unwillingly | What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps"),<sup>38</sup> Felix plays the prison inmates like puppets on a string. Measuring out the ingredients of his behaviour like a chef balancing aromas, he always assesses the chemistry of action-reaction correctly.

The instance in which Felix brings his pupils round to approve of Prospero's behaviour is a good example: the class is clearly inclined to take Caliban's side; there are "frowns. Jaw-tightenings. Definite hostility toward Prospero", who they call "a slave-driver".<sup>39</sup> Felix reasons that Prospero has "the right of self-defence"<sup>40</sup>: physically speaking, Caliban is stronger than him and Miranda, and other than the young Caliban, the grown-up Caliban harbours evil intentions (raping Miranda, killing her father). In spite of "mutters" and "scowls", "most hands go

34 See Silvia Federici: *Caliban*, p. 164.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Margaret Atwood: *Hag-Seed*, p. 50 (first ellipsis mine).

37 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

38 William Shakespeare: *Tempest*, 1.2.369-70.

39 Margaret Atwood: *Hag-Seed*, p. 127.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

up, reluctantly” in a vote.<sup>41</sup> Only one of the inmates, Red Coyote, refuses and points out – quite rightly so – that self-defence and exploitation are not the same thing. When Felix argues that Prospero could act more drastically and kill Caliban, Red Coyote retorts: “Says it himself, he wants the work out of him [...]. Picking up the firewood, washing the dishes. Plus, he does the same thing to Ariel”.<sup>42</sup> Felix’ response is patchy – it doesn’t even address Caliban, or the opportunism involved in granting somebody mercy and then putting them to good use: “[Prospero] still has the right to defend himself, no? And the single way he can do that is through his magic, which is effective only as long as he has Ariel running errands for him. If tethering Ariel on a magic string – a temporary magic string – was the only weapon you had, you’d do the same. Yes?” And, through the ‘magic’ of Felix’ powers of persuasion, “there’s general agreement”.<sup>43</sup> The session ends with Felix looking “around the classroom, smiling benevolently”<sup>44</sup> as Prospero’s ploys are judged as “cool”<sup>45</sup> by the class and the goblins they will all perform as a second role as “neat”.<sup>46</sup>

The votes (two of them, actually) in which Felix lets the class decide whether they approve of Prospero are thus only mock-democratic: Felix has decades of experience in reading Shakespeare and convincing others of his own interpretation, whereas most of his pupils are entirely new to the exercise. The principle of imprisonment stays intact even in this sense, then. What looks like free choice is really a matter of coercion or, to put it a little less drastically, nudging – all the more so since the players are cast to a large extent for their crimes, that is, in their role as convicts, to begin with: in the first session of the course, Felix

[g]azes around the room, already casting the roles in his head. There’s his perfect Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, gazing at him with round, ingenuous eyes as if ready to fall in love: WonderBoy, the con artist. There’s his Ariel, unless he’s much mistaken, elemental air spirit, slender and adroit, scintillating with cool juvenile intelligence: 8Handz, genius black-hat hacker. A podgy Gonzalo, the boring, worthy councillor: Bent Pencil, the warped accountant. And Antonio, the magician Prospero’s treacherous, usurping brother: SnakeEye, the Ponzi schemer and real-estate fraudster, with his slanted left eye and lopsided mouth that make him look as if he’s sneering.<sup>47</sup>

It is therefore not only as if the events and power dynamics in ‘Hag-Seed’ do not offer much of an alternative to the dynamics of appropriation and confinement in ‘The Tempest’; in some sense, they offer even less. Felix’s perspective on the events unfolding is ineluctable for the reader; not only because there is no other narrative perspective available but also because there is not a single foothold, as it were – such as the witch in the background can, potentially, provide in readings of ‘The Tempest’ – for reading Felix’s account against the grain (besides the fact that maybe things go a little *too* well, a little *too* smoothly).

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p. 131.

45 Ibid., p. 130.

46 Ibid., p. 131.

47 Ibid., pp. 83 f.

Lanier points out, too, that “Caliban’s rebelliousness, and especially his mistreatment by Prospero and Miranda, figure rather little in Atwood’s novel”, as Felix’s Caliban, Leggs, “never disrupts Felix’s plans”, whose “ultimate benevolence and control are never in doubt”.<sup>48</sup> Lanier argues that this conveys a generalisation of the ‘Calibanic’ state of existence, in which we are all prisoners in one way or the other.<sup>49</sup> Arguably (and I read Lanier as implying the same thing), this general reflection on the human condition serves to obfuscate processes of marginalisation – imprisonment, for instance – much more directly than it serves to expose them. Lanier makes the point that overall, one of the persistent themes of the Hogarth series is redemption – and that explicitly includes the redemption of Felix-Prospero in ‘Hag-Seed’.<sup>50</sup> The “tendency to flesh out the protagonists’ psychologies” provides them with “extensive backstories and explicit chains of motivation that make their behavior plausible (and suitably complicated) for the reader well-versed in contemporary psychoanalysis”.<sup>51</sup> The effect, according to Lanier, is “to purge Shakespeare’s narrative of its ideologically retrograde aspects and thereby make it unproblematically, triumphantly redemptive in the retelling”.<sup>52</sup>

In some regards, then, Atwood’s novel is a lot less subversive than the Shakespearean play potentially is – whether or not an Early Modern audience felt that Prospero’s behaviour needed an excuse, certainly a sizeable chunk of a contemporary one does.<sup>53</sup> In some ways, Felix Phillips does atone for his/Prospero’s sins: he does point out to his class that ‘The Tempest’ ends with Prospero asking for release, even forgiveness. He does release his daughter from the ‘prison’ of his imagination at the end of the text. However, the novel equally ends with Felix-Prospero embarking on a cruise ship bound for the Caribbean, where he will give lectures on his accomplishments at Fletcher Correctional to, as he himself puts it, “old people [...] snoozing in deck chairs and doing line-dancing”.<sup>54</sup> The young hacker responsible for the special effects in the play has been granted early parole, and he will, Felix plans, “recite some of his Ariel speeches during Felix’s presentations” on the cruise.<sup>55</sup> None of this indicates an actual shift in established power dynamics. And therefore, even though through our empathy for the main character Felix, Prospero might be to some degree absolved, this circumstance clashes rather uncomfortably with the fact that for all *our* insight

48 Ibid., pp. 245 f. And further, Lanier notes that it is “striking [...] that the Hogarth Shakespeare novels that have appeared so far fall within a somewhat narrow transpositional range”. Its protagonists “hail from roughly the same social stratum; they are from the middle to upper-middle class, college-educated professionals, engaged in intellectual labor” (Hogarth, p. 234).

49 See *ibid.*, p. 246.

50 See Douglas M. Lanier’s text for similarities throughout the other Shakespeare adaptations in the Hogarth series.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 238.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

53 Regarding the issue of historicity, Philip Smith in fact argues that ‘Hag-Seed’ “is a novel-length meditation on the modern reader’s relationship with Shakespeare. Atwood seeks to challenge the recurring mythology of a prescient, essentialist, and ahistorical Shakespeare by suggesting that whenever the modern subject seeks to understand his or her experience through Shakespeare, both Shakespeare and the experience must be molded, perhaps violently, to facilitate such a confluence” (Margaret Atwood’s *Tempests*, p. 30).

54 Margaret Atwood: *Hag-Seed*, p. 282.

55 *Ibid.*

into his character, Felix-Prospero fails to approach his fellow human beings with likewise respect.

### ***The Islands of Tomorrow***

At the end of 'The Tempest', Caliban's fate is dealt with in Prospero's curious remark: "this thing of darkness I | Acknowledge mine".<sup>56</sup> One cannot help but wonder what this means, and the players in 'Hag-Seed' feel no different. For them, it can only be an indication of paternity: when, as their final exercise in the Literacy through Literature programme, they have to invent their own version of how the protagonists' lives continue after the play, this line prompts them to envision a secret affair between Sycorax and Prospero, so that Caliban turns out to be Prospero's in quite a literal sense – his son. The interpretation receives "full marks" by Felix – despite the fact that it is rather a bit too obvious.<sup>57</sup> In the students' interpretation, any ties or possessiveness between Prospero and Caliban can only be the 'natural' ties of the nuclear family (father, mother, son). Isn't this an example for the domestication that Lanier mentions, where the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies, the 'little weirdnesses' of Shakespearean drama, are covered up in favour of a smoother reading of the piece in question?

If we let Prospero's remark stand in its oddness, a more layered interpretation becomes possible, such that in the claim that Caliban is 'his', all the intricacies of the processes of appropriation and resistance that the 'monster' and the 'master' have been involved in make themselves felt. What if "to acknowledge his" here means, not paternity in the conventional sense, but another form of kinship: a realisation on Prospero's part that he has, for better or worse, appropriated Caliban and the resources (land, work force) that he came with, and that they are now "his" to deal with. This would actually indicate a much deeper sense of responsibility – or in fact even a true sense of responsibility to begin with – because this responsibility, however dubious, develops irrespective of any conventionally pre-established familial responsibility; it acknowledges ties that have formed through voluntary acts, not through naturalised connections (of race, species, class, etc.). Under the cover of paternity, such processes of appropriation remain invisible and non-addressable, eluding critique.<sup>58</sup>

It is such instances of doubt or dubiousness, such points of non-clarity that can serve – as they do in the class exercise, but only to be cut short – as the

56 Willam Shakespeare: *Tempest*, 5.1.275–6.

57 Margaret Atwood: *Hag-Seed*, p. 268.

58 Compare Bryant's reading of the phrase, who suggests that in it we see "a frustrated Prospero grappling with regret and with the difficult question of who is now responsible for what Caliban has become under his oppressive and profoundly damaging imperial order. This issue of accountability is only reinforced by the final uncertainty of Caliban's fate, and the question of whether or not he leaves the island with Prospero ultimately goes unanswered", which makes for a fundamental "ambiguity of this final scene" (*Towards the Desertion of Sycorax's Island*, p. 108). A more sinister reading is, of course, likewise possible: "The violence of slavery is abolished at a stroke and Caliban becomes just another feudal retainer whom Prospero can 'acknowledge mine' (5.1.276). This is the wish-fulfillment of the European colonist: his natural superiority voluntarily recognized" (Peter Hulme quoted in Irene Lara: *Beyond Caliban's Curses*, p. 85).

beginnings of new imaginaries. 'Hag-Seed', however – to circle back to Deleuze's essay – treats its island, that is, its prison in the spirit of the "philosophically normal": forgetting what it represents and taking the exclusions it performs and the spaces of the 'main' and the 'margin' it thereby generates for granted. The prison in 'Hag-Seed' is a stage for Felix' revenge, nothing more, nothing less; its guards are forever deferential towards him, and its inhabitants fall smoothly under his spell as teacher. All the magic there is that of digital engineering commissioned in the service of that principal objective: getting even.

On the face of it, the ending of Shakespeare's 'Tempest' is likewise one of dis-enchantment, and Prospero's magic, it might equally be argued, is not so different from clever engineering – though following a paper, not a digital rulebook. His "rough magic", Prospero says towards the end of the play, he will abjure:

[...] and when I have required  
Some heavenly music (which even now I do)  
To work mine end upon their senses that  
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,  
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
And deeper than did ever plummet sound  
I'll drown my book.<sup>59</sup>

Then again, how thorough is this disenchantment? What the play leaves us with is, after all, besides Prospero's rejection of magic, an amazement at the very possibility of being enchanted to begin with. For even though by the end of 'The Tempest', Prospero's "strength" is, by his own account, "most faint", by the very logic of the epilogue his theatrical/rhetorical power remains undiminished – the spell of the play is in place as long as the quasi-magical ritual of clapping hands remains unperformed ("Let me not [...] dwell | In this bare island by your spell; | But release me from my bands | With the help of your good hands").<sup>60</sup> Likewise, Prospero's promise that he will drown his books is accompanied by a simultaneous assertion that he was indeed quite capable of such marvellous and terrifying acts as "bedimm[ing] the noontide sun" and having graves "wak[e] their sleepers".<sup>61</sup> In other words, while Prospero himself abjures magic at the end of 'The Tempest', in no way is the possibility of enchantment itself in question.

Deleuze, for all his visions of poetic inhabitation by "dreamers" and "beautiful witches", points out that a perfect symbiosis of islands and humans, geography and imagination, matter and psyche is unachievable (maybe even undesirable?). The ultimate irreconcilability between humans and islands can, according to Deleuze, only ever be transcended – and only ever *approximately* transcended, in fact – in an act of the imagination:

[S]ince human beings, even voluntarily, are not identical to the movement that puts them on the island [...] they always encounter it from the outside, and their presence in fact spoils its desertedness. The unity of the deserted island and its inhabitant is thus not actual, only imaginary, like the idea of looking behind the curtain when one is not behind it.<sup>62</sup>

59 William Shakespeare: *Tempest*, 5.1.50–57.

60 *Ibid.*, Epilogue 5–10.

61 *Ibid.*, 5.1.41–49.

62 Gilles Deleuze: *Desert Islands*, p. 11.

Significantly, the imaginary deserted island can neither be produced by one person alone, nor can it be dreamed in private – in Federici’s terms, we might say that it needs both the commons, and it needs the witch: “it is doubtful whether the individual imagination, unaided, could raise itself up to such an admirable identity; it would require the *collective* imagination, what is most profound in it, i.e. rites and mythology”.<sup>63</sup> The ending of ‘The Tempest’ preserves, precisely, the collective imagination from disenchantment. While Prospero might abjure magic at the end, magic does not therefore vanish; and even if we read the play, as is commonly done, as Shakespeare’s farewell to the stage, theatrical magic does not therefore stop working, rather the opposite: prompts – such as Prospero’s for applause in his epilogue – keep travelling easily from the theatrical world into the ‘real’ one that is, supposedly, its master. *This* play might end, even *this* career, but the rites of the collective imagination as such are in no way diminished in power. ‘The Tempest’, then, for all its restorative tendencies – restoring political and social order in Prospero’s return and Miranda’s marriage – preserves desert islands as what they are: repositories of liberative fantasies. And this is not because ‘The Tempest’ gives us a utopian island community, far from it; but because, through the shady figures that it does not *quite* repress – Sycorax the “blue-eyed hag”; magic that can raise the dead – it gives us the very doubt that challenges the imagination towards alternatives.

In the afterlife that, in their final assignment, Felix’s class conceptualises for Caliban, the “thing of darkness” becomes a rock star. Significantly, the group does not only envision this fate, they actually perform an extra number that is tentatively intended to be the beginning of a musical. This leaves Felix somewhat uncomfortable:

Felix is intrigued: 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, feels his neck.<sup>64</sup>

A subterranean sense of threat from the earthy creatures of this world remains for Felix Phillips. Then again, those creatures are, in all probability, not allowed on cruise ships.

## References

- Atwood, Margaret: *Hag-Seed*. London: Vintage 2017.  
 Bryant, Rachel: Towards the Desertion of Sycorax’s Island: Challenging the Colonial Contract. In: *English Studies in Canada*, 4, 2013, 39, pp. 91-111.  
 Deleuze, Gilles: *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*. Los Angeles, New York: Semiotext(e) 2004.  
 Federici, Silvia: *Caliban and the Witch. Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia 2004.

63 Ibid. (my emphasis).

64 Margaret Atwood: *Hag-Seed*, p. 272.

- Greenblatt, Stephen: Shakespeare Bewitched. In: Stanley Wells (ed.): Shakespeare and Cultural Traditions: Selected Proceedings of the International Shakespeare Association World Congress, 1991. Newark: University Delaware Press 1994, pp. 17-42.
- Howells, Coral: True Trash: Genre Fiction Revisited in Margaret Atwood's *Stone Mattress*, *The Heart Goes Last* and *Hag-Seed*. In: *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 3, 2017, 11, pp. 297-315.
- Kunat, John: 'Play me false': Rape, Race, and Conquest in *The Tempest*. In: *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 3, 2014, 65, pp. 307-327.
- Lanier, Douglas M.: The Hogarth Shakespeare Series: Redeeming Shakespeare's Literariness. In: Andrew James Hartley (ed.): *Shakespeare and Millennial Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017, pp. 230-250.
- Lara, Irene: Beyond Caliban's Curses: The Decolonial Feminist Literacy of Sycorax. In: *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 1, 2007, 9, pp. 80-98.
- Shakespeare, William: *Macbeth*. In: Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (eds.): *The Arden Shakespeare*. London: Bloomsbury 2015.
- : *The Tempest*. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (eds.): *The Arden Shakespeare*, London: Bloomsbury 2012.
- Smith, Philip: Margaret Atwood's *Tempests*: Critique of Shakespearean Essentialism in *Bodily Harm* and *Hag-Seed*. In: *Margaret Atwood Studies*, 2017, 11, pp. 29-40.
- Waters, Claire: The *Tempest's* Sycorax as 'blew eye'd hag': A Note toward a Reassessment. In: *Notes and Queries*, 4, 2009, 56, pp. 604-605.