



Atwood's Recreation of Shakespeare's Miranda in *The Tempest*

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Received 27 December 2016; accepted 15 February 2017
 Published online 26 March 2017

Abstract

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare portrays Miranda as a character which follows the path designed for her by Prospero, her father. Margret Atwood, through appropriating and intertextualizing Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, reconstructs Miranda to be a motivator of action rather than a receiver of a patriarchal power. It is through recreating Shakespeare's Miranda, Atwood gives her more spaces of critical analysis rather than being critically confined to the frame of femininity. This paper argues that Atwood's *Hag-Seed*, by means of intertextuality and appropriation, recreates a new Miranda who is almost ignored by critical studies that focus mainly on reading *The Tempest* from post-colonial perspectives. As a feminist, though she claims not to be, Atwood consciously employs Shakespeare's conceptual and thematic concerns like a play within a play, revenge, usurpation, and the father-daughter relationship. These concerns, which are mainly tackled in *The Tempest*, are employed by Atwood for the sake of creating a new Miranda who would determine and motivate the whole action of *Hag-Seed*. Atwood's appropriation, this paper argues, is a feminist revision of a canonical text that limits woman's role, and presents her either with the quality of passive innocence, or with that one of the devilish witch.

Key words: Shakespeare's Miranda; Atwood's recreation; *The Tempest*

Aldoory, A. H. (2017). Atwood's Recreation of Shakespeare's Miranda in *The Tempest*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 14(3), 58-62. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/9352>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9352>

“‘To the elements be free,’ he says to her.
 And, finally, she is” (*Hag-Seed*)

Books are made of other books. In *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge argues: “There are many ways by which one text can refer to another: parody, pastiche, echo, allusion, direct quotation, structural parallelism.” (Lodge, 1993, p.98) Accordingly, appropriation is the process of creative writing by which new texts are woven, intentionally or unintentionally, from the artistic structural system of earlier texts. The new born texts are entwined with earlier texts to shape, or add resonance to, their presentation of contemporary life.” (Ibid) Appropriation and intertextuality in *Hag-Seed* are mediums that achieve the dynamic interplay between Atwood's text on the one hand, and its roots founded in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* on the other hand. Atwood, according to what Graham Allen explains in his *Intertextuality*, does not only “select words from language system, [she] select[s] [from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*] plots, generic features, aspects of characters, images, ways of narrating, even phrases and sentences...” One can never ignore the fact that earlier literary works are not the only sources from which writers borrow certain fictional or literary aspects. The social texts which are weaved from real experiences provide many writers with matrix of tales, types of characters, themes, and so forth. Accordingly, Margret Atwood believes: “I live in the society; I also put the society inside my books so that you get a box within a box effect” (Quoted in Tolan, 2007, p.1)

Hag-Seed tells the story of Felix, an artistic director of a Canadian Shakespearean festival. When he is deposed by his deceptive assistance and his long enemy Tony, Felix's production of *The Tempest* is canceled. He is possessed by the idea of reproducing this play as he believes that he would resurrect his three years dead daughter Miranda on the stage. When it is cancelled he is psychologically damaged, especially when he previously

decides on playing the role of Prospero, Miranda's father in the original version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He exiles himself in an isolated cottage in rural southern Ontario where he is accompanied only by the ghost of Miranda. Reduced to the life of exile, Felix does not give up and he determines to take revenge. After twelve years, his determination is enhanced when he takes the job of teaching a theatre course at a nearby prison. The prisoners of the Fletcher Correctional Institution, through the use of digital effects, help Felix to put on his *Tempest* and snare the traitors who destroyed him. Felix's enemies find themselves taking part in an interactive and illusion-ridden version of *The Tempest* that will change their lives forever. The novel ends with the achievement of Felix's revenge and

[h]is enemies had suffered, which had been a pleasure... Specifically, Felix has his old job back: Artistic Director of the Makeshiweg Theatre Festival. He can stage his long-lost *Tempest* of twelve years ago, if that is his pleasure... Strangely enough, he no longer wants to. The Fletcher Correctional Players version is his real *Tempest*. (Atwood, 2016, pp.287-288)

According to the basics of intertextuality and appropriation, Atwood draws heavily on *The Tempest*. Starting with the title of the novel, "Hag-Seed" is the title by which Prospero calls Caliban, the savage slave. In Atwood's novel "Hag-Seed" represents the darker side of man which is fleshed out by different characters: the prisoners in the Fletcher Correctional Institution, Felix's enemies who usurp his position, and Felix himself who is enslaved by his vengeful emotions and anger. Structurally, the two texts are divided into five parts. While *The Tempest* is divided into five acts, *Hag-Seed* is divided into five chapters. Thematically, the two texts share the main key themes which are usurpation, exclusion, revenge, and the mixture of life with dreamlike elements.

On the level of characterization, many characters in *Hag-Seed* are modeled after the characters of *The Tempest*. As a case in point, Felix is modeled after Prospero. The two share certain points of similarities and parallelism: the two are widowed fathers, the two have magical and artistic potentials, and the two are usurped, one of his kingdom and the other of his position as a director of Shakespearean theatrical festival. Moreover, both of Prospero and Felix can be approached in conjunction with Shakespeare himself. This is indirectly alluded to by Atwood when she borrows from *The Tempest* the following line: "Our revelth now have ended. Theeth our actorth...." After achieving his goal, Prospero is prepared to give up both his magic and his island: "And thence retire me to my Milan, where/every third thought shall be my grave." (Act V) Felix's achieved goal, likewise, puts an end to his struggle and "his life has had this one good result" (p.289) Shakespeare, likewise, had retired to Stratford-upon-Avon. His role as resident playwright within the King's Men had been assumed by John Fletcher, with whom Shakespeare collaborated before

his death in 1616. Accordingly, there are some clear symbolic parallels between Shakespeare, Prospero, and Felix when they are analyzed according to this context. Other additional characters are modeled after *The Tempest's* character. Antonio in the original play becomes Tony (Felix's festival partner), Ferdinand becomes Freddie, and Alonso, King of Naples becomes Sal, minister of justice.

Interestingly enough, the concept of a play within a play is clearly recognized in the two texts. The storm "tempest" in Shakespeare's play is not a real storm as it is achieved through the magical power of Prospero: "If by your art, my dearest father, you have/ Put the wild waters in this roar," (1.2. 2) Accordingly, the storm can be considered a play produced by Prospero within the original play of Shakespeare. Margret Atwood explains: "The island is many things...the island is a theatre. Prospero is a director. He's putting on a play, within which there's another play. If his magic holds and his play is successful, he'll get his heart's desire." (p.118) In *Hag-Seed*, the illusionary tempest, produced out of digital effects, is Felix's play within the original play acted by the prisoners.

There is an interrelated relationship between Margret Atwood's literary works and the theory of feminism. Tolan explains: "Atwood has repeatedly been pressured to support and endorse feminist politics and to explicitly associate her work with the movement. She has famously refused to be drawn into such an allegiance..." (Tolan, 2007, p.2). Atwood, in fact, insists that what she tackles in many of her novels is social realism and she considers feminism as part of a larger issue which is human dignity (Ibid., p.4). In analyzing her novels, one can easily recognize that Atwood is mainly concerned with womenfolk's dignity. She tries to shed light on the way women are silenced and oppressed at the hand of social laws that confine their roles within the limits of nurturing and nursering. This is clearly articulated in *A Handmaid's Tale* and *Edible Woman* in which the exploitation of the female body is her main thematic concern.

In her short story "Gertrude talks back", Atwood rewrites and recreates the character of Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which she is depicted as an epitome of passivity and immorality: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (1.2) According to Hamlet, Gertrude is morally weak and frail because her incestuous inconstancy drives her to remarry immediately after her husband's death. Atwood's reconstruction of Gertrude's character frees her (Gertrude) from the frame of the submissive character. In "Gertrude Talks Back", Atwood gives a voice to the silenced character and she enables her to defend herself against Hamlet's accusations. It is through one-sided dialogue, in which Gertrude's voice is the only one that is heard, Atwood gives her the voice and the action she lacks in the play. She does so by expressing that she is the one who murdered King Hamlet. When she confesses

the murder of her dead husband, Gertrude never feels any guilt and she never seems to have any bad conscience—a matter that may enhance the claim that Atwood writes back to the patriarchal ideology and thus she deconstructs an old version of Gertrude in order to reproduce her life and reshape it. This meets what Adrienne Rich states in her *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.... A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh. (Rich, 1972, p.18)

Tackling an old text according to a new critical vision is Atwood's contribution to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Atwood deconstructs an oppressed version of Miranda for the sake of constructing a new one that would play a crucial role in shaping her father's life, and stimulating his enthusiastic desire to reproduce *The Tempest* that would bring her back to life. Shakespeare's Miranda, on the other hand, "is deprived of any possibility of human freedom, growth or thought...[she is] forced into unwitting collusion with domination by appearing to be a beneficiary." (Leininger, 1998, pp.211-214) Miranda's inferiority is enhanced in act I when Prospero calls her "my foot." Not to express her displeasure over such abusive language confirms her acceptance of it. H. R. Coursen believes that Miranda totally agrees on the fact that she is "the foot in a family organization of which Prospero is the head." (Coursen, 2000, p.88) From a feminist point of view with special regard to what Simone de Beauvoir states in her *The Second Sex*, Miranda is "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other." Miranda's otherness is enhanced through the celestial elements out of which Shakespeare creates her. Such elements deepen her ignorance of the patriarchal order and of the conventional ways of social life. In comparing Miranda with Rosalind in *As You Like It*, one can clearly recognize that the former is created with feminine attributes while the latter is created with Amazonian attributes. The former is ready to be removed from one masculine hand to another while the latter has the spirit of the warrior who is ready to challenge and to face.

To deviate from the Shakespearian version of Miranda, Atwood weaves a plot that depends mainly upon the character of Miranda. Without Miranda in *Hag-Seed*, Felix will never have the desire to reproduce *The Tempest* and he will never have the strong determination to revenge against those who lead to the cancellation of its reproduction:

First, he needed to get his *Tempest* back. He has to stage it, somehow, somewhere. His reasons were beyond theatrical;

they had nothing to do with his reputation, his career—none of that. Quite simply, his Miranda must be released from her glass coffin; she must be given a life.... Second, he wanted revenge. He longed for it. He daydreamed about it. Tony and Sal must suffer. His present woeful situation was their doing, or a lot of it was. (p.41)

In comparing this with *The Tempest*, one can easily construct the plot without the character of Miranda. The plot can be reconstructed on the assumption that Prospero is exiled alone without Miranda and through his magical power he causes the shipwreck that will bring his enemies to his island where he can revenge upon them. Ferdinand's love story with Miranda can be replaced by another story in a sense that he can be enslaved by Prospero who would never free him unless he gets all his usurped rights. According to this context Miranda's relationship with Prospero will be of minor importance in comparison with that one of Felix and Miranda in *Hag-Seed*.

Miranda, according to Felix, "was what had kept him from sinking down into chaos," (p.15) after the death of his wife Nadia. Felix dreamt of the moment when Miranda would grow up so "they would travel together, he would show her the world, he could teach her so many things. But then, at the age of three..." (Ibid). Miranda passed away. Her death is Felix's real tempest that turns his life upside and down. Her death is "like an enormous black cloud boiling up over the horizon. No: It was like a blizzard. No: It was like nothing he could put into language." (p.15) Felix's dilemma is how to evade the fact of Miranda's death or at the very least how to enclose it. His direct solution is to transform Miranda's death into a rebirth and to incarnate her on the stage. He consequently plunges himself into *The Tempest* through which "Miranda would become the daughter who had not been lost; who'd been a protecting cherub, cheering her exiled father..." (Ibid.).

Unlike Miranda in *The Tempest*, Miranda in *Hag-Seed* is an aiding force in a sense that she helps her father to overcome the intensity of his sorrow and "after all, still alive" (p.37). Whenever Felix feels that he starts to slip down into the darkness of his sorrow and loneliness, he looks at Miranda's photo which he keeps near to him. He enjoys the idea that Miranda is still alive and for this reason he has to cook for her, read for her, and share times with her:

He returns to his habit of checking out kid's books from the Wilmot library, only now he reads them out aloud in the evenings. Partly he enjoyed it—his voice was still as good as it has ever been, it kept him in practice—but partly he was indulging his self-created illusion. Was there a small girl listening to him? No not really. But it was soothing to think that there was. (p.45)

Atwood reshapes Miranda within the frame of the surrogate mother who would watch her child and care for his food:

They began having their meals together, which was a good thing otherwise he might sometimes have forgotten about meals. She scolded him gently when he didn't eat enough. Finish what's on your plate; she would say to him...when he was sick she tiptoed around him, anxious.... (pp.46-47)

Accordingly, unlike Prospero who expects obedience from Miranda according to the patriarchal structure, Felix and Miranda shares a symbiotic relationship which is mainly based upon love.

Like a real being with real blood and real flesh, Miranda grows up in front of Felix's eyes and like a devoted father, he teaches her many skills. Playing chess is one of these skills which he teaches her to play at the age eight. Miranda is a "quick learner" and she usually wins at the end of every game she plays with her father.

Stimulated by the lack of women in *The Tempest*, Ann Thompson in her "Miranda, Where's Your Sister", wonders: "what feminist criticism can do in the face of a male-authored canonical text [*The Tempest*] which seems to exclude women to this extent" (p.339). Atwood writes back to this lack through creating four female characters in *Hag-Seed*: Miranda, Anne-Marie, Estelle, and the old lady from whom Felix rents his excluded cottage. Each of these female characters has certain role to play in the novel and each is provided with physical description when she is presented to the reader for the first time. This physical description gives each character more depth—a matter that is in contrast with what Shakespeare did in *The Tempest*. Sycorax is the absent female character in Shakespeare's text. The only physical description that the reader is provided with concerning this character is "This blue-eyed hag was hither brought with child." (1.2.269). Sycorax's absence gives Prospero the opportunity to construct her fully into a symbol of the evil woman, the opposite of himself. Atwood, on the other hand, gives each female character a lengthy description. As a case in point, Estelle is described as "forty", with "gray-blond hair, the shining earrings; the careful nails, a fashionable silver." (p.49) Interestingly enough, Estelle is a well-educated woman. She is "a professor at Guelph University and supervised the Fletcher course from a distance. She also sat on various advisory committees, for the government. [and her] grandfather was a Senator..." (Ibid).

Anne-Marie Greenland is Miranda's double in *Hag-Seed*. She is the girl whom Felix casted for his canceled *Tempest* after which she acted a few minor roles such as: "A slave girl in *Antony and Cleopatra*, a dancer in *West Side Story*, and a prostitute in *Pericles*." (p.96) When Felix decides to produce *The Tempest* at Fletcher Correctional Institution, he looks for Anne-Marie. Like Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Anne-Marie will be part of a world dominated by males: "[she goes] inside a prison with nothing in it but a lot of men criminals and do Miranda" (p.98) Unlike Shakespeare's version of Miranda, Anne has a strong, independent, and determined

personality. When the jailer offers her his help whenever she needs, Anne answers him that she can take care of herself. When she meets the prisoners with whom she will act her role in the play, she does not try to attract them by her physical appearance:

She's dressed conservatively, white shirt, black cardigan, black pants. Her hair is up in a prim honey-colored bun, in each of her ears there's only a single earring. She smiled non-committally in the direction of the rear wall...her spine is straight, her head balanced on the top end of it.... (p.151)

When Wonder Boy, a prisoner who acts the role of Ferdinand, is passionately attracted to Anne-Marie, Felix tries to take the role of the protective father. As an attempt to straighten things out, Felix tells her that he will talk to him. Yet, Anne-Marie responds that Felix is not her real dad and she can fix things by herself.

Anne Marie expresses her capability of protecting herself sexually and emotionally—an ability which Miranda of *The Tempest* completely lacks. For the sake of writing back to the silenced voice of Shakespeare's Miranda, Atwood creates the character of Anne-Marie. Miranda's voice is completely unheard when Prospero warns Ferdinand that he would condemn them if he breaks her virginity:

If thou dost break her virgin-knot before
All sanctimonious ceremonies may
With full and holy rite be minister'd,
No sweet aspiration shall the heavens let fall
To make this contract grow; but barren hate,
Sour-eyed disdain and discord shall bestrew
The union of your bed with weeds so loathly
That you shall hate it both: therefore take heed,

Miranda's silenced voice in the conversation between two male voices that represent patriarchy confirms her position as the subaltern who cannot speak.

Miranda of *Hag-Seed* is a ghost—a matter that brings her closely to Ariel, the air spirit, in *The Tempest*. This is supported by the fact that the two are visible only to Felix/Prospero. More than being invisible, Miranda and Ariel are brought together under the key word freedom, which is at the core of the-issues raised by *The Tempest*. Freedom is the very breath of life to Ariel, the spirit of the air. He is grateful to Prospero for having freed him from his torment in the cloven pine-tree where the wicked witch Sycorax had confined him. He pines for eternal liberty and keeps on reminding Prospero of his promise. When all of Ariel's labors are done to the entire satisfaction of his lord and master Prospero, he attains his freedom. Atwood, like Prospero, frees her Miranda from the limits Shakespeare imprisoned her in. In *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture*, Jyotsna G. Singh calls for new readings and rewritings of *The Tempest* since she believes that texts like Aime Cesaire's *A Tempest* fail "to address adequately the relationship

between liberation movements and the representation of sexual difference.” (Singh, 1996, p.206) In *Hag-Seed*, Atwood gives Miranda the ability, as a spirit, to move outside the house but “She [Miranda] can’t stray far. Something constrains her.” (p.62) Symbolically, the house in this case can be seen as the critical visions in which Miranda was imprisoned for a long time by Shakespeare who in this case parallels Sycorax. Due to the fact that Shakespeare confines Miranda’s role in the play, there is little to say about her. She is presented with celestial kind of innocence; however, it is a negative innocence rather than a positive one as it does not give Miranda the depth she needs as a character. Her innocence makes her a white sheet on which nothing is written. Atwood frees Miranda from the Shakespearian confinement when she gives her more space to be interpreted as an aid, as a surrogate mother, and as an independent woman: “To the element be free,.... And, finally she is.” (p.292)

To conclude, Atwood consciously appropriates Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* to give Miranda the chance to come back so as to have more important to speak out her feelings and to justify her actions. Unlike other feminist critics, Atwood does not defend Miranda directly; instead she rewrites her story in which she is presented as an aid, a surrogate mother, and an independent woman. By doing so, Atwood gives the reader the chance to reconsider the values that lie behind; she makes the reader wonder what would happen if the real story had been written like that.

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