

BRAVE NEW OBJECTS: SUBVERTING SUBJECTIVITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *HAGSEED*, *THE TEMPEST RETOLD*

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Rivaling for authority: a portrait of the artist as an object

1. In the poem entitled “Three Desk Objects”, written in 1969, Canadian author Margaret Atwood articulates writerly creativity with the threat that machines represent in terms of competing productivity and sensitive existence. The light on the poet’s desk becomes “radiant”, the typewriter is fed “blood” through its cord, while the clock’s wheels have “teeth under the metal scalp” (Atwood 1990, 100). Endowed with human corporeality, these writing tools become authorities in measuring time (“What suns had to rise and set”) and organizing structure, with the last line comparing their warmth to that of skin, after a single sentence of 22 lines divided into 8 stanzas. The poem plays with moments of transmutation between the poet’s lyrical agency and the personified presence of three objects which are necessary to write the very text one is reading. These objects belonging to the writer even enter the realm of language as they are the collective addressee of the whole poem. The poetic voice expresses a desire to connect physically (“I am afraid to touch you”) and imagines a reaction normally attributed to living beings, animals or humans (“I think you will cry out in pain”). This one-sided dialogue with ordinary objects suggests that at a time when technique is summoned to write, writerly agency might be limited by such modernity.

2. Published one year later, the cycle of poems *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* introduces a similar blurring of borders between humans and things at a larger scale. This is visible for instance when the eponymous lyrical subject remembers her son, “his head a bathysphere,” and imagines his burial as a moment when she “planted him in this country /like a flag” (“Death of a Young Son by Drowning”, Atwood 1990, 72). This final free verse couplet explores notions of Canadianness (“a flag”) which are unpacked in *Survival*, the essay Atwood wrote on Canadian literature. In *Survival*, one reads the following analysis of Canadian individuals abstracted from any specific collective design and therefore, usage:

In Canada, as Frye suggests, the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ is at least partly the same as the answer to another question: ‘Where is here?’ ‘Who am I?’ is a question appropriate in countries where the environment, the ‘here’, is already well-defined, so well-defined in fact that it may threaten to

overwhelm the individual. In societies where everyone and everything has its place a person may have to struggle to separate himself from his social background, in order to keep from being just a function. (Atwood 1972, 10-11)

As opposed to the conventions associated with “well-defined” European places and the resulting attributions in terms of social positioning, Canadian space is seen here as allowing modes of being that are distinct from “just a function”. This view works against the grain of a simple interchangeability between human agency, and objects: “function” is re-cast. As a matter of fact, in both of the poems previously mentioned, objects are threatening the will of the subject but are also presented as alternative modes of existence and as potential sources of power for the same subject, as suggested by the comparison with the flag where the buried corpse remains “planted”, a source of life and renewal. The meanings lurking behind the “function” of men and objects, in Atwood’s perspective, complicate the very distinction made by centuries of European thought between people and things. More specifically, the link between objects and writers seems to be one of problematic interchangeability, porosity and exchange. This impinges upon the double authority of readerly reception and writerly intention. It also, and this is the point we will make in this article, opens a space of resistance to essentialization. The ways in which objects can be seen anew, or used differently, becomes a means of re-thinking social roles, especially in a postcolonial context at large. This is further complicated in the novels by the same author, with plays on narrative devices and viewpoints, and dense intertextuality.

3. Indeed, the exploration of the connection between objects, living presences, and writerly endeavours is further carried out in a number of novels by Margaret Atwood, with lurking threats of substitution of objects to human creativity. One could think of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, published in 1985, where the body of the narrator, Offred, is objectified in the diegesis as mere reproductive matrix; conversely, the tape cassettes which she records replace her voice as a form of expression pre-existing the transcription of the very narrative we are reading. Once again, these blurred agencies, which are partly material and partly human, are placed along a distorted timeline, the tapes having been re-assessed within the diegesis during a symposium taking place in 2195. Another example, which shall now be the focus of the present article, is *Hag-Seed*, a novel for which “there is little available criticism”¹ (Tolan 2024, 149). Borrowed from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, one of the four final “problem plays” and first performed in 1611, the title indexes the moment when, in act I, scene 2, Prospero asks Caliban to go and fetch wood, calling him “hag-

1 Tolan mentions only two pieces of criticism in addition to her own: Muñoz-Valdivieso and Smith.

seed” rather than by his name. The domination of Prospero is warranted by his books, and the role of Caliban is reduced to the delivering of fuel, an early signposting of the devastation of the environment that Europeans would cause in the Americas.² If postcolonial critique has delved into Object Studies in order to expose the link between material acquisition (Appadurai, Gosden and Knowles) and imperial domination, *Hag-Seed* makes for an ambivalent treatment of objects, which are both the curse of marginalized beings, and their potential liberation.

4. We contend in this paper that *Hag-Seed* examines the reification of colonial bodies through a re-reading of a canonical text from postcolonial margins. While authority is operating as a “technology of power centred on life” (Foucault 1976, 144) in a number of other texts by Atwood, the postcolonial rewriting operated in *Hag-Seed* introduces a reflection on the potentialities of resistance offered by authorship in the context of a literary resonance and dissonance, of imitation of Shakespeare’s plot and of transgression thereof. There is in *Hag-Seed* a gesture of deflation, of debunking, which is recognizably that of a postcolonial author hacking at a canonical European text. Objects become absurdly small, as when the tempest is staged in the “play-within-the-novel” with the use of “*a bathtub-toy sailboat, tossing up and down on a blue plastic shower curtain*” (Atwood 2016a, 211).³ Yet, objects are used in other passages as crucial tools to taking one’s revenge, as when a series of technological means are put to use in order to deceive Felix’s arch enemies, Tony and Sal.

5. Our first section therefore examines the connection between commodification and colonialism, a historical moment also corresponding to the epistemic sea change when man started being an object of knowledge as much as its own subject. Through the subversion operated in relation to a colonial model (Loomba), our analysis then reflects upon the transformative space which connects objects and beings and brings them together in a process of representation: this is the purpose of the following section about “polymorphic objects”. A further section looks at the notions of newness and renewing through an analysis of the re-interpretations of Caliban as a monster. We eventually suggest in this paper that distorted borders between characters and objects, or protagonists and props, open up a space of reflection about the powers of the author. At a time when everything has been (re-)written and when books are produced by machines, this novel asks what uses of language can still be deployed in order to re-configure man as an author and authority.

2 We are returning to the colonial dimension of the play in the concluding section.

3 All further mentions of the novel will be made as such: (*HS* page number).

Re-functioning: postcolonial objects reproduced, and texts redirected

6. The title and subtitle of the novel flaunt a postcolonial dimension, where the Canadian text is “writing back”⁴ to the Shakespearean canon. Margaret Atwood’s novel transposes the plot of the Shakespearean play onto the context of contemporary Canada. The novel takes place in Ontario, in the fictional town of Makeshiweg, a play on the actual Canadian town of Stratford, which is located in Ontario indeed, and where a major Shakespeare festival, now simply called Stratford Festival, takes place every year. The main character, Felix, finds himself evicted from the direction of the stage of Makeshiweg, a playful combination of autochthonous consonants, and Joycean re-arrangements of the English language. Felix then finds employment as a drama teacher in the equally fictional Fletcher Correctional Institute, an apparent allusion to John Fletcher, one of Shakespeare’s successors as company playwright for the King’s Men. A prominent Shakespearean director, Felix has just staged *Macbeth* and *Julius Cesar* when he finds himself directing *The Tempest* with inmates attending his course of drama and creative practices.
7. The novel clearly toys with the legacy of the most hallowed of European authors. More specifically, it interrogates the objectification of the colonial subject, with Caliban, the “hag-seed”, being reduced to “just a function” as well as to a hybrid ontology. The role played by Caliban in *The Tempest*, where he must serve Prospero, is channeled in the novel in the direction of technical objects: Felix uses computers, cameras and headsets, but also dolls and suitcases, in order to trap his arch-enemies, Toni and Sal. Like the light, the typewriter and the clock, like the flag, these devices replace human activity; they also enter a topsy-turvy world of metamorphosis where the indetermination around Caliban’s own ontology provokes a general instability between human beings, characters, objects and things. Indeed, the whole twist of the plot is constituted by the substitution of what actors are playing, with what was pre-recorded and is now shown to Tony and Sal.
8. This process of play-within-the-play-within-the-novel combines levels of fiction in vertiginous ways. Such a vortex is paralleled by a confusion between modes of existence, from the realistic characterization of the main protagonists to the degrees of pretense and mimicry, including a number of dolls, puppets, and animal-like costumes. Objects, indeed, quickly become the key to Felix’s ability to reproduce Prospero’s power, and to find reparation at the end of the novel. Still a threat to his creativity, they also parallel his agency in order to reach a return to order vastly

4 Postcolonial writings back to European versions have been placed at the center of an early theoretical text (see Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin).

different from that in *The Tempest*, but which clinches an equal amount of conclusiveness at the end of Atwood's novel.

9. The choice of *The Tempest* contributes to our understanding of the novel as a distorted and reproduced text about property and props. The very play of *The Tempest* was staging the theft of Caliban's island by Prospero. Caliban is an inhabitant of the island where the characters exiled from Milan find themselves shipwrecked, and he finds himself deprived of authority and reduced to a slave, working for nothing but abuse and violence. Shakespearean critics have re-read such a plot, and the Caliban/Prospero relation, within the work-frame of Cultural Materialism, New Historicism and most importantly, postcolonial critique. Prospero and Caliban have been re-interpreted as an early instance of the representation of a subjugated, dominated and exploited non-European (Orgel; Greenblatt; Griffiths, Loomba), and the European invader/settler. Attention was first drawn to this potentiality – and necessary political agenda – by such Caribbean authors as Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête*, 1969, Fernández Retamar's *Caliban*, 1971, or George Lamming's *Water with Berries*, 1971. *The Tempest* has long been shown as being Shakespeare's most American play, and the island as belonging to the Caribbean archipelago, the tempest being the European name for what came to be called, including in the play by Shakespeare, a hurricane.⁵
10. It is against the background of a multi-layered literary re-purposing that Margaret Atwood inscribes her own interpretation of the plot, projecting it into early twenty-first century Canada. The main character in *Hag-Seed*, Felix, is immediately recognized by the reader as corresponding to Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan. The performance becomes an opportunity for him to reveal the duplicity of his enemies in ways that are similar to Prospero's own revelation of Antonio's treacherous betrayal in the play of *The Tempest*. The two villains, Tony and Sal, bear names that are clear allusions to Shakespeare's Antonio, and the Sebastian/Alonso duo of sidekicks. Numerous aspects of the play are translated into novelistic form. For instance, the overall structure is similar, with the five parts in the novel representing the five acts in the play. Most characters in the novel have direct counterparts in the play, although Miranda, Ariel and Caliban have more than one.
11. Our discussion of the novel in terms of postcolonial re-casting authorities is mediated by the role attributed to objects and the ways in which these come to replace characters. In the fourth chapter of the novel, as Felix is about to be evicted from his role as festival director but treacherously thanked by vote for his achievements, an uncomfortably disloyal Lonnie mentions:

5 See for instance Barbara Fuchs, "Conquering Islands: Contextualizing *The Tempest*" and Peter Hulme and William Sherman (ed.), *The Tempest' and its Travels*.

“there’s a proposal for a statue, you know, like, a bust, or maybe a fountain, in your name” (HS 27). The reduction from the full-size statue to the bust introduces the homophonic term, “bust”, indicating disaster and complete destruction; the attenuations and nuances (“you know”, “like”, “or maybe”) suggest that nothing will in actual fact happen, and the substantive “name,” which replaces the more expected “honour”, certainly concludes what can be read as a conscious lie, emitted and received as such. The initiative was all about reducing a man to an object and a function, not unlike the “flag” that a corpse can become in the last line of the previously mentioned “Death of a Young Son by Drowning.”⁶ Here is a crux of how objects function in the novel: they partake in the modalities of interpretation established by master narratives but tend to disseminate, to mutate, and to resist the monumentality that they have initially been assigned.⁷

12. The gesture of postcolonial response to power relations is far from being binary, let alone Manichean. It allows indecisiveness in meanings to proliferate in the novel and extends to its connection with the initial play by Shakespeare, which is said to be “retold” here. As a Canadian, a woman and a contemporary writer who, however recognized she may be, could hardly compete with the Bard in terms of canonicity, Atwood is writing her own commodified “Shakespearean rag” (Eliot, 55).⁸ The Eliotian echo is confirmed by the title of the section from which the quote is taken, “A Game of Chess”, after the 1624 play by Middleton but also possibly after the game played by Miranda and Ferdinand in the last act of the play, sealing a return to order. *The Waste Land* is traversed by allusions to *The Tempest*. A century later, Atwood plays with a dense intertextuality, transforming Shakespeare’s masterpiece into something to unmake and remake, disassemble and reassemble, according to one’s own needs. Like the director, who was about to be replaced by an object “functioning” in his stead, the text of *The Tempest* is made to re-circulate through a number of objects. Cameras are used as a surveillance tool recalling that operated by Ariel in the play. Miranda is mediated by the silver-framed photograph of Felix’s dead daughter on a swing that he had taken of her when she was nearly three years old, “perched brightly upon [a night table], laughing with joy” (HS 39). Disney dolls are used in order to objectify Iris, Ceres and Juno from Shakespeare’s act four. Most strikingly, among the objects which recall *The Tempest* (HS 210-212), there is Shakespeare’s playbook itself, but also Atwood’s characters’ journals, scribbled notes, often

6 This poem drawn from *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is incidentally another intertextual reference to *The Waste Land*, a text which talks of garbage flowing down the River Thames, of sleds and sails and oars, playing cards, documents, currants, hair brushes: the objects of modern life.

7 We will leave aside the possible hermeneutic grid offered by theories of the simulacrum elaborated by Jean Baudrillard; the Latin term *simulacrum* from which they derive means “statue” (see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, especially “The Precession of Simulacra”, 1-42).

8 This is a reference to a popular American song written in 1912 by Gene Buck and Herman Ruby.

reproduced on the page of the novel. Chapter 34, entitled “Tempest”, reads like Felix’s own “folio”: Shakespeare’s text with Felix’s own changes to the stage directions, a new editorial intervention after those made by Shakespeare’s posthumous editors.

13. Characters in *Hag-Seed* may only play again the plot and subplots exposed by Shakespeare in *The Tempest* but such an alienation can be read as a commentary on how books are central in *The Tempest*, and become the locus of Prospero’s power and control over the island. This is the reason why the rebellious Caliban and Stephano plot in order to steal them. The volumes of Prospero’s migrating library are personified (“I’ll drown my books”, Shakespeare, V,1, 57) even as the subaltern characters are reduced to “functions” (including fetching wood), and therefore to tools, or objects. Yet, Felix is aligned with Caliban’s entrapment to the hands of books reaching his distant American shores. He finds himself reading his own relation to the world as if he had become the book of the play itself. This is corroborated by the internal focalization which nuances the third-person narration throughout the novel. The reappearance of a number of Shakespearean items and characters is an experimentation in parody which jettisons the freedom of characters, let alone that of the novelist. The instrumentalization of Caliban, but also of Stephano and Trinculo, for instance, is repeated in the encounter with the Maude family through internal focalization on Felix: “If the Maude family was anything in *The Tempest*, they were lesser elementals: a source of power, though not very much of it, he joked to himself” (HS 38). The transformation of Felix into a book turns other characters into “anything”, or mere “elementals” – they lose human substance.
14. Fiona Tolan observes that “Atwood’s writing [...] stitches together a body of antecedent works” (Tolan 110). Re-purposing the plot of betrayal and revenge in *The Tempest* is not merely a playful post-modern device which can be read with the tools elaborated by Linda Hutcheon, whose theory (Hutcheon 16-43) picks up on Gilles Deleuze’s definition of parody as “repetition that includes difference”, and arguing that parody “marks difference rather than similarity”. Far from opposing reality and fiction to an extreme, and from theorizing on levels of fiction away from reality, Atwood’s novel speaks of the instrumentalization of persons in the hand of a dominant structure, whether this is capitalistic, imperialistic, patriarchal or racially biased. This can be seen in chapter 22, entitled “The Persons of the Play”, where the reader discovers part of the “set of notes” (HS 133) made by Felix, including his own *dramatis personae*. Ariel, for instance, is described as having a “slight build” and being “very bright”, which could correspond to conventional and long-standing performances of the character, but also as having “East Indian family background” and having been convicted for “forgery”. The narration works against what simplification or signposting

can be achieved through objects. These are not a recognizable attribute, or symbolization, of this or that character. The repetitions of other artistic materialities pile up: he “was playing a benevolent Robin Hood versus the evil King John capitalists of this world” and “played Rivers in *Richard III*”. Chapter 23, for instance, describes how part of the performance staged by Felix is orchestrated through dolls. Anne-Marie, who is to play Miranda, thinks of “Disney princesses”, bought in toy stores. As in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the reader is thrown into a dystopian dimension where function over-rules but also constantly modifies any type of possible human distinctions and singularities.

15. These patterns of reproduction and re-purposing partly engage with the reproducibility of artworks analysed by Walter Benjamin in an essay entitled “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility”. As objects have started proliferating after the Industrial Revolution, so have reproductions of art works, and Benjamin famously foregrounds the advent of photography and cinema – two mediums which also figure crucially in *Hag-Seed*.⁹ The mere reproduction of texts is itself part of the plot, in *Hag-Seed*. Felix asks his students to “go through the text very carefully and make a list of all the curse words in the play” (HS 89), so that the object of Shakespeare’s text leads to the production of other texts which will in turn be used as a series of cues. This detour through Benjamin allows us to pinpoint the political dimension endowed by artistic productions once they have been modified by techniques of large-scale reproductions. Benjamin had foreseen the consequences of mass cultural production in terms of sociability: “as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (Benjamin 25). The references to Shakespeare’s play in Atwood’s novel are political in the sense that they are appropriated by diverse authorities: Felix, on the one hand, and the politicians who have evicted him from his role as director, on the other. The novel can be read as staging a whole range of male characters endeavouring to play Prospero’s role, just as they wish to dominate the others and colonize land.

16. We contend that, because they are mostly used as instruments of knowledge and tools of dominance or at least surveillance, objects partake in a postcolonial¹⁰ reading of Shakespeare’s play

9 In this, the novel makes no exception from the rest of Atwood’s production. See for instance the previously mentioned use of tapes as mediation to the novel in *The Handmaid’s Tale* – without them, the narrative would have been materially impossible.

10 In doing so, we are fully aware of the complex positioning of “CanLit” within the sphere of postcolonial literatures (see Moss). In a complex debate, we contend that this text by Atwood is fully aware that she re-writes a play by Shakespeare whose representation of colonial oppression has long been established.

which engages with the reification of subjects throughout the European colonialism of the Americas. Unlike Prospero, who dominates the island through his use of magic and exclusive possession of books, Felix enters a world of marginalized outcasts – by teaching convicts a Literacy through Literature High School Programme at the Fletcher County Correctional Institute. He uses Shakespearean texts, plot summaries and notes followed by a staging of the plays to command a reputation and be in control of his classroom. He also exerts his own type of magic through his experience and skill at being a director and interpreting texts. “You are the maestro” (HS 172). Felix exerts further control when *The Tempest* is staged in the prison through cameras, which play the role of Ariel in the play, and allow him to see beyond walls. As a director, he resorts to ski masks for his stage “goblins” and reflects: “Black ski masks, or is that too close to bank robbers and terrorists?” (HS 137). Felix also controls the timing of the performance thanks to his watch (HS 202). Felix never loses sight of his arch-enemies, Tony and Sal, who evicted him from his role. This is done through hectic computer navigating: “There they are, them and their sound bites, three hundred miles away” (HS 178). He finally controls the realm of the dead through the photograph on his night table: the distortion of internal focalization allows Miranda to escape the photograph on the night table and dialogue with Felix, “waiting by the chess set, ready to resume their lesson” (HS 166) when he comes back home. More than anything, his mastery of props allows him to cast his actors, that is to say, all characters in the novel by the time the reader discovers the final unfolding of Atwood’s revisited plot, as functions. Such reification of characters will be elucidated in the following section.

Polymorphic objects: attributes and extensions of the body

17. Drawing from Prospero’s magic tricks and the manipulative and technological powers reclaimed by Felix, the novel’s plot relies on objects that have been implanted in human bodies. Objects reveal a polymorphic nature which produces a “brave new world” (HS 276) of objects with renewed purposes and modified functions. The animate and inanimate collide and fuse, morphing into new modes of being through their “refabrication” (Brown 199). In this respect, Margaret Atwood writes a text which can be read with the tools of phenomenology, where the body is co-extensive with the rest of the world and therefore not wholly distinct from things, objects, matter, or “stuff,” to borrow from *The Tempest*: “We are such stuff as dreams are made of” (5, 1, 156-158). The word “stuff” has an etymological link with textiles from the early 1600s, recalling the link

between fabric and textuality, and therefore, authorship.

18. This confusion between human and non-human “stuff” can be read, on the part of the Canadian author, as a re-enactment of an epistemic world as it started crumbling down, and as a new “order of things” was emerging. Michel Foucault saw the turning point of classical episteme in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, a text whose two parts (1605 and 1615), which happen to have been published in Spain before and after *The Tempest* (1611), was first created in England. Foucault writes in *Order of Things* that “Cervantes’s text turns back on itself, thrusts itself back into its own density, and becomes the object of its own narrative.” (Foucault 1966, 53) This prefigures what is, according to Foucault, a pivot in the first years of the seventeenth century, a moment when man becomes the object of his own scrutiny, ranked and represented with the same continuum or “grammar”, to borrow a structuring Foucauldian metaphor. Foucault opened a new way of thinking through a blurring between subject and object, which he sees as dating back to the seventeenth century and still accurate; he also shifted our epistemic scope through going beyond the binary opposition between object and subject, and introducing power as key to processes of subjectification, and objectification. These dynamic links between matter and knowledge construction, between ontology and power, and between the world and the word, are realized in Atwood’s response to *The Tempest* through an enhanced reification of man, and therefore of character.
19. The interconnections between the fabric of the body and that of the object have been foregrounded by numerous scholars and thinkers relating the consciousness we have of our bodies with what is not our bodies – subjects, objects and places. The body can reflect our own perspective of the world and our existence or Being-in-the-world (Heidegger 137). Martin Heidegger distinguishes between corporeal things and the body, questioning whether our sense of embodied identity is confined within the limits of a corporeal body. While a corporeal body is contained by the skin, our sense of embodied selfhood may extend and reach out into the world beyond this physical boundary. Heidegger uses the example of pointing, where our sense of bodiliness does not stop at the fingertip but instead, stretches out beyond the skin to the object captured in our gaze. Maurice Merleau-Ponty constructs the notion of embodiment further in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this text, his focus shifts from embodied consciousness to that of an intercorporeal being. According to Merleau-Ponty, we are connected to others and the world through a double belonging. The material world and our body are within one another, inextricably intertwined: “the world is at the heart of our flesh [...] once a body-world relationship is recognized, there is a

ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside and my inside and its outside” (Merleau-Ponty 136).

20. This shifting and fluid outlining of corporeality creates confusion in turn as to how objects are defined and delimited. Their difference from what is animal or human¹¹ partly falls through. Whether they can even be termed as things, objects, tools, becomes equally problematic. “The story of objects asserting themselves as things then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (Brown 4). Fusional identities or bodies evolve from an intimate enmeshment of objects that transfer from the play and which are reworked into the novel. One particular object that takes on a new life, in *Hag-Seed*, is the cloak that Felix had fashioned for himself to wear for the part of Prospero when he was preparing to stage the play twelve years earlier. In yet one more postcolonial gesture of debunking, and against the background of a colonial Canada which had been coveted by Europeans for the huge profits elicited by the fur trade, the cloak is made of the fake fur of various stuffed toy animals. When Felix first retrieves the cloak from a dusty cupboard, he thinks of it as “the dead husk of his drowned self” (*HS* 63). He then corrects himself:

No, not dead, but changed. In the gloom, in the gloaming, it's been transforming itself, slowly coming alive. He pauses to consider it. There are the pelts of the plush animals, a little dusty now, striped and tawny, grizzled and black, blue and pink and green. Rich and strange. The many pearly eyes twinkle at him from the underwater darkness (*HS* 63).

The cloak is representative of his two selves – the director of the past ousted from his position as Artistic Director of the Makesiweg Theatre Festival and unable to direct his version of *The Tempest* and the director of the present who stages a performance of the play in the prison for the Fletcher Correctional Players and gets his revenge. The cloak actually represents these selves and takes on the element of “change.” It turns from mere object to agency, functioning not only like a prosthesis of a physical body (Merleau-Ponty 144) which evolves as the character of Felix develops, but also like a competing consciousness, with “many pearly eyes.” (*HS* 63) Working against the grain of Felix's reduction to a bust and therefore, a function, the cloak constitutes a personification. The reversal is pinpointed later in the novel, in a passage equally characterized by intense internal focalization: “It's like stepping back into a shed skin; as if the cloak is wearing him and not the other way around” (*HS* 179). A topsy-turvy carnivalesque reversal of functions starts

11 It falls beyond the scope of this article to address the confusion between human and animal existence in this novel, a confusion which traverses Atwood's text, as well as others. See for instance “The animals in that country”, a poem opening with the following couplet: “In that country the animals /have the faces of people” (Atwood 1976, 48).

intermingling object and subject in a world of physical sensations and illusions (“like”, “as if”).

21. Like this cloak, all props become pivots of meaning and moments of empowerment. Felix also has “an elegant Edwardian walking stick with a silver fox head on the top” which he uses in conjunction with the cloak as his costume to “become” Prospero. The fox-head cane transforms into a magic “wizard’s staff” (*HS* 63) and becomes alive once held in a human hand with magical intent: “The cane with its silver fox head leaps into his hand” (*HS* 179). The cane takes a life of its own, suggesting the newly found power of a man whose cunning is traditionally represented by the fox. The similarity of props turns the coat and the staff into objects with the function of identifying someone: they become attributes. Other protagonists in the novel manifest an even more integrated form of existence in relation to objects: they are objects first, and human presences only more vaguely. This is the case of Miranda, Felix’s deceased daughter. When he loses his position and retreats from the world, he takes few belongings with him but packs a silver-framed photograph of his daughter happily swinging that he had taken of her when she was nearly three years old. The photograph is a transitional object of grief which provides Felix with some comfort when looking at it, and keeps the memory of his daughter alive for him: “On the other side of that magical window she was still alive” (*HS* 32); “she did not exist. Or not in the usual way” (*HS* 47). This “wistful daydreaming” (*HS* 45) brings Miranda to life as an existing presence, partly human and partly framed image on a table. Again, the world of bodily illusions plays itself out: “he engaged in this non-reality as if it were real” (*HS* 45). Her presence is so powerful that she even matures and gets older over time too – so that the object, a photograph, becomes a misrepresentation of the emancipated subject that she is becoming. Although the photograph could also remain as proof of Felix’s delusional perceptions of the outside world, it outlines a mode of being which starts from being an object, to a form of emancipation.
22. In the original play, Miranda is subject to Prospero’s will just as the other *dramatis personae*, and she has often been performed and read as a submissive figure. The Miranda depicted in the novel is different. Despite the fact that she is a ghost or presence, the power relationship that existed in the play is reversed. Miranda becomes her own newly refabricated object with her own purpose. She even infiltrates the play within the novel by fusing with some earphones: “She’s infiltrated Ariel’s headphones” (*HS* 238). In doing so, Miranda and Ariel have become another hybrid and grotesque object/character. The use of the word “headphones” is in itself an interesting compound noun comprising both a body part and a material device which extends the idea further. Even the choice and use of the verb “infiltrate” as an action, and the word “filter” it is rooted in, elucidate the

fusion of objects, further emphasizing how the material world of technique, and the body, become amalgamated.

23. These repeated confusions between bodies and objects can be read as a reflection on power and exploitation. Felix gains dominance through these transformative processes, through his use of language and his ability as a director. The actor-inmates of the prison become Felix's tools for revenge: they are used, endowed with a function, moved around, reified and commodified. An example of this can be seen through how Felix convinces the prisoners to want to play the part of Ariel. Initially, none of the prisoners wanted the part, since Ariel was a sprite or fairy in the play, a definition misinterpreted by the inmates in the homophobic context of prison. Felix presents him differently – as a type of modern-day alien who has super-powers. “Murmurings of agreement. This all makes sense! An alien! Way better than a fairy” (*HS* 103): while the murmurs suggest a subdued, barely audible or distinct statement, the alienation about to be undergone – as whoever plays Ariel will now be cast as an alien – is literalized. This behaviour has a Foucauldian reminiscence of “biopower”. Michel Foucault saw the body as a text on which dominant practices could be inscribed. Being “manipulated, shaped, trained”, the docile body represents “something that can be made; out of formless clay, an inapt body [from which] the machine required can be constructed” (Foucault 1975, 135). At one point in the novel, Felix battles with himself about using the inmates at Fletcher Correctional to put in place his plans for revenge. “These are real people. They are not ciphers in your aesthetic of drama, they are not your experimental mice, they are not your playthings” (*HS* 80). In spite of his inner turmoil, however, they become and remain the dehumanized body-objects, the metaphorical tools or “playthings” that he wields to execute his plans and reach his ultimate goal. They are extensions of his will, manipulated, shaped and moulded to do his bidding.

24. Other Foucauldian parallels in the light of a model of biopower, for which the metaphor of Jeremy Bentham's iconic panopticon has been revisited, can be drawn with regards to how Felix uses a modern-day surveillance system and the inmates themselves to exert his power. This is a re-casting of how Prospero uses his magic books and Ariel in the play to watch everything and wield power over the characters. In both cases, knowledge provides power over bodily presences to achieve an end. Surveillance will be the key to Felix's revenge plan and dominates the last part of the novel. “Felix waits till she's gone. He lowers his voice. ‘What exactly do you know about surveillance systems?’ he asks. Handz smiles. ‘I'm cool,’ he says. ‘If I've got what I need; like, the tools. Something in mind?’” (*HS* 150) In this instance, the character-inmates, as well as Felix's

enemies Tony and Sal, are de-individualised and disempowered by a controlling Other that continually shifts from surveillance to the surveilled. At a physical level, bodies are being manipulated and controlled in a regulatory way through the use of technology and surveillance in order to produce not only the play that takes place within the novel, but additionally the play to take place unbeknownst to all but Felix and which will unmask the villains. The enactment of this second embedded play allows Felix to scare and punish his enemies, Tony and Sal: there are two video plays rather than the single actual performance, and Felix sits in the panopticon. Felix has “manipulated, shaped, trained” and controlled others through his mastering technical objects. Powered by the inescapable presence of the gaze provided by the surveillance cameras, the population – the bodies (Tony and Sal) – have been rendered docile, disciplined and usefully dehumanized body-objects or tools. Disciplined bodies can nevertheless metamorphosize into new objects with their own agency and discourse. We will examine in the next section how Caliban is able to re-establish agency through monstrosity. This will illustrate a vein of emancipation still represented in the novel, one which alludes to the intertextuality and authorial choices at stake.

From object to monster: Caliban as renewed mode of being

25. Shakespeare's Caliban is a character with an ambiguous ontology, partly human and partly object, as he is treated as a slave by Prospero. Not only a means to an end, he becomes an unnamed thing: “this thing of darkness”, as Prospero notoriously declares in the final act, before “acknowledging” it his in a moment both of kinship and commodification further complicated by the run-on-line between the subject and the verb (“I /acknowledge mine”, Shakespeare V, 1, 174-5). While objects have concrete properties, things are abstract and missed by language. In this instance, the term “thing” refers to something that is considered less important even than either objects or persons. The emphasis laid by Atwood on seeds is significant of such unnameability. Seeds represent indeed a form of life which is minimal, straddling the fence between the promise of something to emerge, and the achievement of a completed growth (as in *Hamlet*, where the world is described as “an unweeded garden /that grows to seed”, I, 2). The seed is both a beginning and an end, both vegetal and human. Combined with the substantive “hag” it becomes extraordinary, imaginary, and monstrous.
26. The rewritten character in Atwood patchworks together a new subject/object relationship which is both aligned, and dissonant, with the Shakespearean original. We contend in this part that

the reification of Caliban is circumscribed through the figure of the monster, an ontology which is not static but dynamic and mutable. The term “hag-seed” sustains the hybrid image of a being who was devil-born of the witch Sycorax. Other monster references which allude to the demonisation of strange and stranger protagonists can be seen in Atwood’s novel when the witches in *Macbeth* are mentioned. Felix had previously worked on Macbeth in the prison and he reflects on how it had been relatively easy to persuade the inmates to act as the female characters of the three witches, since they were deemed monstrous and less than human: “They were monsters not actual women” (HS 87). Like the weird sisters, Caliban is monstrously represented. According to Jeffrey Cohen, who reflects on how the monstrous body is constructed as a result of cultural unease and then perceived, “The monster is a powerful ally of what Foucault calls ‘the society of the panopticon’”, (Cohen 14 quoting Foucault 1975, 301) in which “polymorphous conducts [are] actually extracted from people's bodies and from their pleasures [to be] drawn out, revealed, isolated, intensified, incorporated, by multifarious power devices” (Cohen 14 quoting Foucault 1976, 47-48). This mutability of the monster makes Caliban a site of overruling reification.

27. After the play has been successfully executed, the prisoners are encouraged by Felix as a last assignment to think up alternative endings in teams for the characters in the play. The team for Caliban reports back to the other prisoner-players with their thoughts. Leggs, who is the spokesperson for the Caliban team, proffers the suggestion that Prospero is in fact Caliban’s alter-ego and able to recognise in himself the same personality traits that Caliban possesses. Here, Atwood has embodied reflective qualities in Caliban which give him yet another dimension as a monstrous being rather than a mere thing since his personality traits, foibles and experience are all fundamentally human. As noted by Cohen, monsters

ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them. (Cohen 20)

The transformations undergone by Caliban in the novel are a means to call for more fluidity in our perceptions, starting with the agencies which have been petrified into stereotypes and/or objectified. At the end of the novel, the Caliban team posits that Prospero is able to recognise himself through Caliban’s character in the same way that the inmates were able to identify themselves with facets of Caliban’s character:

They’re both angry, both name-callers, both full of revenge: they’re joined at the hip. Caliban is like his bad other self. Like father, like son. So he owns up: ‘This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.’ That’s what he says, and that’s what he means. (HS 266)

Here another fusion of bodies is operated, “joined at the hip.” A father and son become ego and alter-ego mirroring one another, underlining the fact that our bodies are more than simple biology: they are also inherently social objects, which can, as such, evolve.

28. This composite and monstrous “refabrication” (Brown 199) can be likened with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,¹² where a new body has been constructed as an object (Tolan 110). In the novel, Caliban’s figure evolves from that of the subaltern less-than-human savage servant to a more ambivalent character. The dyad between oppressed and oppressor is neatly reversed as the narrative device questions the power of the patriarchal father figure of Prospero/Felix. When Felix asks who would like to play the role of Caliban, a majority of the inmates in the prison choose him, as they are aware that they all possess something of Caliban in them: “the character of Caliban, the Hag-seed of the title (or at least one of them) is disembodied and reconstituted as a multifarious collective” (Muñoz-Valdivieso 116). Caliban, as a body-object, undergoes a type of monstrous reproductive meiosis with each newly-formed Caliban containing elements of the original and new elements embodied in the inmates: “Various Calibans, scowling and muscular: earthy, potentially violent” (*HS* 84). As an “unassimilated hybrid, a monstrous body” (Cohen 3) Caliban becomes “a double act of construction and reconstruction” (Cohen 6) since his character is pieced together in different forms, recalibrated as several component parts of new objects/subjects represented by the prisoners and Felix.

Caliban’s shape-shifting qualities also allude to tropes of the double whereby a monster is transformed into something seen as Other. Building on the original Shakespeare quote, “This thing of darkness I /acknowledge mine”, *Hag-Seed* offers a migrated trope of Other that is identifiable and acceptable to both reader and the inmates. In this way, Atwood not only creates a new object in the form of her book *Hag-seed*, but she also blends tropes which enable it to sit monstrously on top of the Shakespearian original. It becomes “a recognizable copy that is at the same time its own creature”. (Muñoz-Valdivieso 125)

Caliban becomes a site where his colonial reification in Shakespeare’s play becomes a mode of agency in Atwood’s novel, his empowerment springing from the very curse of his origins: hybridity, metamorphosis, instability. He has germinated into different versions of himself and stands as a character who has been marginalized and subjectified, but who transcends essentialism and relegation. Caliban becomes a monstrous matrix for other beings:

Now Hag-seed’s black and Hag-seed’s brown,

¹² *Frankenstein* has been mentioned implicitly or explicitly a number of times by Margaret Atwood. See for instance “Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein” in Atwood 1976, 64-69.

Hag-seed's red, don't care if you frown,
 Hag-seed's yellow and Hag-seed's trash white,
 He goes by a lotta names, he's roamin' in the night,
 You treated him bad, now he's a sackful of fright,
 Hag-seed. (HS 271)

Caliban represents a line of flight in the novel, as the prisoners give him different possible endings; he is able to transcend the confines of what had been originally dictated for him. Unlike Felix, who is recognized as and recognizes himself as Prospero, Caliban is not trapped by any book, Shakespeare's or Atwood's. The novel (and Shakespeare's play in its new form) transcends into a more powerful object which straddles the border between different ontological realms. Caliban is becoming a thing beyond corporeality, suggesting a world of endless becoming and morphing: "Caliban has escaped the play. He's escaped from Prospero, like a shadow detaching itself from his body and skulking off on its own" (HS 272). Here, authorship and therefore authority, are called into question. In *Hag-seed*, Margaret Atwood proffers alternative endings provided for by the prison inmates who suggest in one of their own rewritings of the play within the novel that Prospero is Hag-seed's father and that he can see the likeness in him.

29. The space opened up within a hallowed plot by Atwood's narrative is one which possesses traces of the past and which also turns towards the future. Caliban's reflective qualities and multitudinous incarnations are just one example of how literature can provide us with a renewed and endlessly shifting way of seeing ourselves and others:

The reader looks at the mirror and sees not the writer but himself; and behind his own image in the foreground, a reflection of the world he lives in. If a country or a culture lacks such mirrors it has no way of knowing what it looks like; it must travel blind. (Atwood 1972, 9)

When explaining the rudiments of the play to the inmates at the prison, Felix has both to introduce the future actors to the roles they might be playing, and describe the setting. He explains that the whole action takes place on an island and reaches the following conclusion at the end of his explanations: "'Maybe the island really is magic,' he says. 'Maybe it's a kind of mirror: each one sees in it a reflection of his inner self. Maybe it brings out who you really are. Maybe it's a place where you're supposed to learn something'" (HS 115). The accumulation of occurrences of the verb "to be" are contracted with the anaphora of "maybe", a derivative of that very verb with the addition of a modal suggesting potentiality. The double appearance of the adverb "really" is balanced with suggestions of unreality: "magic", "mirror", "a reflection", or of vagueness "a kind of",

“something”. Ultimately, the precision of “the island”, always possibly punned as “the I-land”, becomes “a place”, an indistinct location of mutable knowledge and empiric knowledge.

The Tempest as hyperobject

30. *Hag-Seed* presents itself as a new narrative which bounces back and forth in its borrowings from the Shakespearean original, and so do the numerous other intertextual references which traverse it. This is indicated by Atwood herself who, when talking about Shakespeare in an essay states the following: “He [Shakespeare] is also mercurial, many-layered, universal in his empathies, slippery as an eel, and a notorious shape-shifter, taking on fresh forms and variations and interpretations with every new production and in every new age” (Atwood 2016c, 300). Literary works are seen as tangible, material, realized and objectified. They are also taken as having an endless malleability; Atwood also said of Shakespeare that his works are “infinitely interpretable” (Atwood 2016 b, n/p). In rethinking boundaries and reworking old ideas into new ones, original works are created in their turn, becoming new objects which bravely expand our world views and mindscapes. They render the hybridity of our own existences, as we change and wake up every morning to slightly altered perspectives.

Both the play and the novel become “hyperobjects” because they are intrinsically linked and become elevated into an exalted status by defying their own materiality. According to Timothy Morton, “[a]n artwork cannot be reduced to its paths or materials, nor can it be reduced to its creator’s life, nor to some context however defined [...]. Art is charisma, pouring out of anything whatsoever, whether we humans consider it to be alive, or sentient or not” (Morton 2015, 189). Hyperobjects are enduring entities that transcend individual boundaries and that become embedded in the collective consciousness. They have viscosity. They encompass about everything, starting with global warming. Above all, they represent a level of ungraspability which comes after epistemic wholeness. “The more data we have about hyperobjects the less we know about them—the more we realize we can never truly know them” (Morton 2013, 180).

This definition of the text as hyperobject allows us a conclusion and a line of flight in the direction of ecocriticism. “Ecocriticism is certainly an emerging area of Canadian Shakespeare” (Makaryk and Prince 6): this is one of the conclusions drawn by Irena Makaryk and Kathryn Prince in their introduction to a collective volume focused on Shakespeare and Canada. Although the collection of essays is mostly focused on plays and performance, Atwood’s *Hag-Seed* is mentioned in this very introduction as belonging to a flurry of early twenty-first century rewritings and revisitings of the

Shakespearean corpus, most of them related to the Stratford Festival. The co-editors further argue that “Canada may continue to have a significant impact on global scholarship, resulting, perhaps, in renewed interest in Northrop Frye’s ‘green world.’” (Makaryk and Prince 6). Our introduction established the intellectual link between Frye and Atwood, who drew inspiration from his work in order to shape her own understanding of “CanLit”. While attention has been paid to the ecocritical dimension of other fictional texts, starting with *Oryx and Crake*,¹³ we eventually suggest that *Hag-Seed* interrogates the status of objects in the context of a colonial devastation of the American continent which has started with deforestation (and autochthonous Calibans fetching wood for European Prosperos). While there were human beings, animals and plants on the islands before Columbus and the following European settlers, the implementation of slavery and of the systematic exploitation of all resources led to an economy of production where commodities were the ultimate goal as well as the measure of all things. The re-interpretation of Prospero through Felix also speaks of the turn taken in the early seventeenth century concerning the world around us, which was disenchanted in order to be put to use, and to abuse. Here is how the previously mentioned fox-head cane finds itself degraded at the end of Atwood’s novel: “It’s no longer a magic staff, it’s only a wooden stick. Broken” (*HS* 283). The Canadian novelist has contributed to a re-writing of the play from the perspective of a postcolonial America burdened both with the objectification of their ancestors, and with the rules of capitalism and its current devastating waste.

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13 See for instance Rozelle 78-85.

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