



**The good, the bad, and the ugly
sides of revenge in *Hag-Seed*.
ATWOOD, Margaret. *Hag-Seed*.
London: Hogarth, 2016. 293p.**

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Margaret Atwood's novel *Hag-Seed* was translated into Brazilian Portuguese in 2018 as *Semente de Bruxa*. It was published by Morro Branco and translated by Heci Regina Candiani. Adding another

layer to the publishing history of Brazilian literary translations of Canadian authors, this new volume breaks the chain of Atwood's translations that up to now were being published by Rocco as pointed out in Carneiro (2018 and forthcoming). This recent addition to Atwood's translations casts us three years back to review her compelling retelling of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Before I move on, you will be pleased to know that you need not be acquainted with the original *The Tempest* to enjoy *Hag-Seed*. However, if need be, you shall find a handy synopsis of Shakespeare's play at the end of the book. Even so, some passages of the novel may become more meaningful if you are familiar with the particular phrasing of the play.

This is not the first time Atwood retells a well-known tale. As part of the *Canongate Myth Series*, a project aimed at reimagining ancient myths from various cultures, she wrote *The Penelopiad* (2005) in which she revisits Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* from the female characters' perspectives. This time, *Hag-Seed* is part of the *Hogarth Shakespeare Project* (2015) which honours the Bard of Avon's 400th anniversary by commissioning authors to reimagine his plays as prose novels to a

contemporary readership. As of 2018 the collection includes *The Gap of Time* (2015, *The Winter's Tale*) by Jeanette Winterson, *Shylock is My Name* (2016, *The Merchant of Venice*) by Howard Jacobson, *Vinegar Girl* (2016, *The Taming of the Shrew*) by Anne Tyler, *New Boy* (2017, *Othello*) by Tracy Chevalier, *Dunbar* (2017, *King Lear*) by Edward St Aubyn, *Macbeth* (2018, *Macbeth*) by Jo Nesbø, and *Hamlet* (forthcoming) by Gillian Flynn.

Atwood has sung the structures and strictures of social life in her numerous novels. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, for instance, freedom, particularly women's freedom, becomes a much coveted asset in the theocratic dictatorship it portrays. Freedom is also at stake in *The Heart Goes Last*, in which the combined collapse of a capitalist society and the greed of corporatists mislead its citizens into being voluntarily locked up in a city, a social experiment that promised to be a real boon to their lives, but that turns out to be more of a bane really (cf. XXX, 2018). Moral and ethical conundrums are also lurking between the lines of Atwood's stories, that is, how her characters and, by extension, her readers are morally and ethically implicated in their actions

and choices. No sort of black and white character is to be found in her works either, but then again, how colourful and beautiful mankind is, huh?

In *Hag-Seed*, Atwood lingers on the theme of imprisonment and liberty with a take on the morality of revenge through a retelling of Shakespeare's comedy *The Tempest*, but this time set in the innards of a slammer where inmates restage the play. She seizes readers' attention from the get-go with a tense and elliptical prologue styled as a play. Then in prose she introduces Felix Phillips, bereaved husband and father, once a big name as theater artistic director in Canada, now failed, despondent, and bent on exacting revenge. After being wronged by his co-worker Tony and his associates, he lies low for twelve years in a fairy-like hovel until the time is ripe for effecting his vengeful scheme. What goes around comes around, right?

Leaving the dark backward and abyss of time, he begins tutoring inmates of a correctional institution, where every season he and his pupils – thieves, drug dealers, embezzlers, man-slaughterers, fraudsters, con men – study a Shakespeare's play and mount a full production of

it (special effects and all), that is then recorded and broadcast in the cells' closed-circuit TVs. It is while staging *The Tempest* that Felix seizes the opportunity to avenge himself on his wrongdoers. The play also represents an outlet for Felix's remorseful feelings upon the death of his beloved three-year-old-daughter Miranda, named after Prospero's daughter.

Now, you may be thinking, how can a play possibly provide room for someone seeking revenge? It is just a fictional performance, isn't it? Well, think again, as you are well in for a surprise! Then again, the play is the thing, don't you think?

Although Atwood always keeps her ear to the ground, she does not break very new ground with this novel, as it resembles some of her other ones in form and tone, especially the preceding one, *The Heart Goes Last* (cf. CARNEIRO, 2018). Nevertheless, her ironic, playful, pacy, and humorous style makes for one of the funniest novels you are likely to come by. The very title, for instance, stems from a bunch of Shakespearean swear words, which Felix's students are required to compile while reading the play and use during rehearsals; no other usual swearing is allowed, though. It goes without saying

that this makes for some hilarious moments. Setting the humorous side apart, Felix's teaching strategy contributes to developing the inmates' literacy. As he thinks, "Your profanity, thinks Felix, has oft been your whoreson hag-born progenitor of literacy" (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 89). Not only that, the use of literature to promote literacy in a context of incarceration is a relevant issue to be considered by educators and policy-makers in the real world as it can contribute to inmates general wellbeing (cf. CANNING, 2017).

Thus, despite his vengeful feelings, manipulative tendencies, and unwholesome ends, Felix ends up doing good to other people, especially to his students. The inmates' lives are somewhat changed in the production of the play. As life in prison can be grim and gloomy, Felix gives them something to aspire to and long for. In the course of reading, rehearsing and acting the plays, he instils discipline and confidence in them, helping them hone their skills, exercise their empathy, and above all realise their self-worth, which are important concerns for those who will supposedly get a second chance at life in society. Art embodied in literature and acting is a key element in this process as the

following hopeful extracts illustrate: “the limelight shone briefly and in an obscure corner, but it shone” (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 58); “watching the many faces watching their own faces as they pretended to be someone else – Felix found that strangely moving. For once in their lives, they loved themselves” (ATWOOD, 2016, p. 58).

The dated chapters heighten the tension as the evil day for *The Tempest* performance, and Felix’s revenge, approaches. The chapters are cast as if in the grey half-light of dawn, mingled with Felix’s inner scurvy monster’s desire, the illusory presence of his deceased daughter, and the hope of a new beginning. As the inmates progress on their study of the play, creating rap lyrics for the scenes and adapting the dialogues, they are required to pinpoint nine different forms of imprisonment in it, the last one of which is held back until the end. They are also required, as a last assignment, to tell what happens to the characters they played once their act is over. In sum, they are made to interact and respond to the play in the most creative possible way, which renders their reading experience more meaningful and immersive.

Now, does Felix manage to brew the perfect storm and create the ultimate illusion to ensnare his foes? If he does, does it make him feel any the better? And, would you dismiss him altogether or give him a storm of applause? Once your revels are ended you will see that *Hag-Seed* is a veritable lead-in to thoughtful reflections on many a topic, including art, fictional immersion, literacy, the dreams you are made on, the transient nature of your endeavours, the parts you play, and the everyday prisons you put yourself into. Like Shakespeare, Atwood leaves the final reckoning to you, who should make a choice, or not, as to how worthwhile vengeance can be. As you near the end of the novel, and the staged world of the play merges with the world outside it, you cannot help but wonder how close or how far apart life is from art. After all, as the Bard has it “All the world’s a stage,/And all the men and women merely players.”

So go on, play your parts, break a leg!

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Notes

- ¹ Doutorando em Linguística e Linguística Aplicada pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Linguísticos (PPGEL), no âmbito do Instituto de Letras e Linguística (ILEEL) da Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, MG, Brasil. E-mail: raphael.olic@gmail.com