

FROM LITERACY AS PRISON TO LITERACY IN PRISON:
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST* AND MARGARET
ATWOOD'S *HAG-SEED*

DOREL-AUREL MUREȘAN*

ABSTRACT. Some authors associate literacy with power, describing the ability to read and write as an enslavement tool. Moreover, literacy has been described as a means of strengthening political discourses, of manipulating or of proliferating ideas. One interpretation of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* illustrates the theory of language as prison for the enslaved inhabitant of the island. Margaret Atwood's rewriting of the play shifts the setting from an island to a prison where the inmates participate in a literacy programs. The present paper examines the depiction of literacy in the two texts, focusing on the connection between language and power.

KEY WORDS: Shakespeare, Atwood, *The Tempest*, prison, political power

Introduction. Literacy, a Two-Faced Coin

From the beginning of time and throughout the vastness of human history, each discovery, development, or enhancement has brought with it the promise of progress and the allure of enlightenment. From fire and the wheel to the written word, the printing press to the internet, these milestones in humanity's intellectual evolution have opened doors for periods of unparalleled potential. Nonetheless, things are never as simple as they look, since beneath the surface of each advancement lies an intricate web of power dynamics, most of the times closely related to political intrigue that often remain hidden from view. The topic of literacy is nothing different, as any honest researcher can discover that even the most noble of endeavors can be misused or abused by those in positions of authority, transforming every good thing, including literacy itself, into a tool of oppression. Therefore, it would not be wrong to state that literacy has a dual nature, demonstrated by the fact that it can serve

* DOREL-AUREL MUREȘAN (PhD 2016, West University, Timișoara) is Lecturer in English and American Literature at Emanuel University of Oradea.
Email: aurel.muresan@emanuel.ro.

as both a key to emancipation and a prison of control, offering a stark reminder that knowledge is a two-faced coin in the hands of politicians and those in power.

Multiple sources attest that there is a clear connection between literacy and power, especially when one thinks of literacy as the written word. One of these sources is Rosalind Thomas' seminal work, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, in which the author connects literacy with power analysing the connection from multiple perspectives. For example, Thomas points out that magic and writing were connected, stating that "writing is often used for magical purposes" (1992: 19-20), supporting her statement with the use three major examples: firstly, the example of Buddhist monks in Tibet, who used literacy "to print prayers on water"; secondly, referring to the Old Testament and the practice of drinking the water of jealousy; and thirdly, describing how people in Somali use diluted writing to cure different illnesses using important passages from the Koran. Moreover, he points out the connection between literacy and the oppressive power of the state:

The modern state is inconceivable without its extensive recordkeeping, its administration and bureaucracy. Information for and about the population is amassed in large quantities. The collection of taxes involves enormous paperwork. Economic, social, and political decisions may be based on elaborate data collected and stored with the aid of writing. Not surprisingly, indeed, it has been said that writing is essential to the definition of the state and its power. [...] In ancient Mesopotamia, writing was indeed used from early on for bureaucracy and exploitation: in fact it was used exclusively for administrative records and lists for its first 600 years, and its role as an instrument of power and control in China and Egypt also may suggest that the development of complex state structures is at least related to, if not closely bound up with, the development of literacy. (Thomas 1992:128)

Lévi-Strauss agrees with the idea that there is a clear relationship between literacy and the state by linking the written word with the ability to build not only cities, but also empires. One supporting argument for this thesis is that literacy helps to organize society into classes based on the political systems that are functioning at a certain moment. Therefore, according to Lévi-Strauss, literacy actually creates the possibility of slavery: "The use of writing for disinterested purposes, and as a source of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, is a secondary result, and more often than not it may even be turned into a means of strengthening, justifying or concealing the other" (Lévi-Strauss 1976: 392).

According to Jack Goody (1997: 10), writing empowered the state's influence and control over greater areas since it offered an easier way of communication over longer distances. Thomas develops Goody's statement, pointing out the following: "Effectively this is singling out the potential of writing (a) to facilitate communication over long distances and therefore control over larger areas, (b) to make commands more authoritative and unchangeable, and (c) keep records of large numbers of people and taxes" (1992: 129). In addition, Thomas states that besides these administrative functions of writing, one must not forget that literacy serves an extra function, "the use of writing for display or propaganda" (1992: 129), bringing to mind totalitarian regimes that used both censorship as well as writing to control and manipulate. Moreover, Goody argues that both women and well as people who were not in positions of power suffered under the dominance of the ruling classes who managed to acquire the power of the written word. Moreover, Goody adds that "the powerful used literacy to support their position, elaborating a bureaucracy, promulgating laws, and giving expression to hegemonic ideologies" (2000: 163).

However, Thomas also states that "the relation of writing to 'power' or to the state is often left extremely vague" (1992: 128). Furthermore, the author argues that "writing turns out to be a many-edged tool, with diverse implications" (1992: 129), having the ability not only to oppress, but also to empower, to educate and to ensure order. Moreover, history demonstrates these diverse views since "for Herodotus in the middle of the fifth century, writing tends to be associated with barbarians, especially the Egyptians and Persians, or with tyrants who have a propensity to send messages which are secret and sinister" (1992: 130). Nonetheless, for the sake of space, the rest of the article focuses on literacy more as a two-edged sword, capable of life and death, empowerment and oppression, freedom and imprisonment.

Literacy and Power in *The Tempest*

There is a plethora of literary texts that deal with the connection between power and literacy and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is one such text. The Shakespearean play narrates the chronicle of Prospero, a banished Duke, and his daughter, Miranda's arrival on a mystical isle, wherein he assumes dominion by subjugating the ethereal being, Ariel, and the enigmatic entity, Caliban. Prospero experiences the help of "Providence divine", and after twelve years of exile, during which he orchestrates a tempestuous scenario with the help of magic, he brings his adversaries to the island, teaching them

important lessons of redemption and forgiveness, and eventually reasserting his legitimate rule as the Duke of Milan.

The theme of power is evident from the beginning of the play, which opens with a tempest that Poulard interprets as a power related metaphor: “the very first scene of *The Tempest* sets the tone and uncovers the most pervasive theme of the play: power relations” (2010: 1). In the same vein, for Redmond “the tempest is [...] a metaphor of political crisis” (2009: 122), while McGrail considers that “Shakespeare’s first scene lays out the central concerns of the play: legitimate and illegitimate rule and the relation of self-interest to the common interest” (2002: 118).

The connection between power and literacy surfaces in the power relations developed between Prospero and Caliban, having Prospero’s books as a central symbol. On the enchanted island, the banished Duke exercises his power from the positions of ruler, colonizer, magus, and educator. Thus, Prospero ‘offers’ the savage Caliban language, the gift of education, which the creature does not appreciate: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t/Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you,/For learning me your language” (2.1: 44).

If, from Prospero’s perspective, education is a means of confirming and maintaining his authority (Zolfagharkhani and Heshmatifar 2012: 10), Caliban has a totally different perspective, since it robbed him of his “his innocent unselfconsciousness” and gave him the ability of articulating his misery (see Colin McGinn 2006:140). Moreover, McGinn continues, “by learning language he has become susceptible to language, with all its magic and power; and this is a blessing he regards as – at best – mixed. After all, by mastering language (or it mastering him) he can now be commanded to do things, which was not possible before” (2006: 140). The dominance is recognized by Prospero, who has no problem in stating: “We cannot miss him: he does make our fire,/Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices/That profit us” (2.1: 43).

The prison metaphor can be found in George Lamming’s book, *The Pleasures of Exile*, in which the author argues that “language [...] is the very prison in which Caliban’s achievements will be realized and restricted” (Lamming 1992: 110). Sunayani Bhattacharya takes a closer look at George Lamming’s statement and explains that “Caliban is empowered because he can - and does - subvert language initially when he curses both Prospero and Miranda for misleading him with false promises and usurping his island, and then later while plotting with Stephano and Trinculo” (2009: 24). Therefore, language becomes the two-edged sword that both oppresses and empowers the former

savage. This metaphorical role of literacy is revealed in the passages that depict Caliban's plotting against Prospero with the help of Stephano and Trinculo.

Empowered to communicate with the two foreigners on the island, Caliban becomes an educator himself, teaching Stephano and Trinculo political and military tactics, and demonstrating creativity and imagination when describing multiple ways of killing Prospero: "Why, as I told thee, 'tis a custom with him/I'th'afternoon to sleep: there thou mayst brain him,/Having first seized his books; or with a log/Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,/Or cut his weazand with thy knife. Remember/First to possess his books; for without them/He's but a sot, as I am; nor hath not/One spirit to command: they all do hate him/As rootedly as I. Burn but his books" (3.2:70).

Caliban's repetition of the word "books" has a double function: on the one hand, it emphasizes the reality that literacy has the power to oppress; Prospero's books facilitated the ruler's gain of authority on the island, while also helping the magus to maintain his rule on it. On the other hand, just as the books have empowered Prospero, so have they empowered Caliban, who, from a mere creature has evolved more than the two drunkards, eventually having the quality of a great conspirator and strongly resembling Prospero's evil brother, Antonio.

From Shakespeare's Enchanted Island to Atwood's Canadian Prison

The themes of literacy, politics, imprisonment and empowerment are reiterated, obviously, in revised ways, in Margaret Atwood's rewriting, *Hag-Seed*. Part of the Hogarth project, which consisted of modern adaptations of Shakespeare's plays by famous writers for the contemporary audience, *Hag-Seed* is Atwood's re-imagining of *The Tempest*. Interestingly enough, in an interview, the Canadian author explains that William Shakespeare is her all-time favourite author and that adapting *The Tempest* was her personal choice:

People have been redoing Shakespeare for a long time, often with odd results. And I too have redone Shakespeare, also with odd results. In honour of his 400th anniversary the Hogarth Shakespeare project has invited a number of authors to choose a play and revisit it in the form of a prose novel. I chose *The Tempest*. It was my first choice, by miles. It contains a great many unanswered questions as well as several very complex characters, and the challenge of trying to answer the questions and tease out the complexities was part of the attraction. (*A Perfect Storm*)

Nonetheless, in the same interview, Atwood explains that the task of rewriting the Shakespearean play was not an easy one, especially since the rewriting needed to be as close to the original as possible, and *The Tempest* is a very complex play. After struggling to find the best possible idea by reading the play multiple times as well as reading literary critic, yet still failing at finding one, Atwood remembers doing some self-talk and trying an unusual approach, that of reading the play backwards:

Calm, calm, I told myself. I read the play again, this time backwards. The last three words Prospero says are “Set me free.” But free from what? In what has he been imprisoned?

[...]

I started counting up the prisons and imprisonments in the book. There are a lot of them. In fact, every one of the characters is constrained at some point in the play. This was suggestive. The play is about illusions: magic is the only weapon Prospero has. And it is about vengeance versus mercy, as in so many of Shakespeare’s plays. But it’s also about prisons. So I decided to set my novel in a prison. (*A Perfect Storm*)

Therefore, Atwood places most of the action of her novel in Fletcher County Correctional Institute, which Gadpaille (2016: 149) considers a bright idea, not only because it reiterates the themes of the Shakespearean play, but also because the change of setting is only one of the unexpected plot twists that Atwood surprises the readers with.

Atwood takes Shakespeare’s anonymous Mediterranean island and transforms it into southwestern Ontario, Festival country, home to theatrical festivals in communities such as Stratford, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Blyth. But just when you think you envision the cozy, community-theatre setting, it vanishes like the spirit banquet, and in its stead appears Fletcher County Correctional Institute, with its educational program for inmates. And why not? *The Tempest*, after all, is a play about skullduggery, kidnapping, drunkenness and revenge – all fine associations for a penal institution. And there are, as Felix’s prison class discovers, no fewer than nine distinct acts of imprisonment within the play itself. (Gadpaille 2016: 149)

Nonetheless, there is another important setting, the main character’s dwelling place, which is both connected to the theme of imprisonment as well as to the Canadian specificity of Atwood’s novel. In her paper, *The Canadian Tempest. Margaret Atwood and Shakespeare Retold as Hag-Seed*, Romanian scholar Dana Percec discusses the theme of imprisonment as being closely related to Atwood’s literary themes and her theoretical views on Canadian

literature. For Percec, the retreat of Felix to the Canadian wilderness brings to mind Atwood's earlier novel *Surfacing*, where the protagonist rejects modern society for a more primal existence. Moreover, Percec discusses Atwood's conceptualization of victim positions in Canadian literature and notes the trajectory of victimization in *Hag-Seed*, as Felix moves from anger to resignation, experimentation, and finally creativity. According to Percec, Felix's evolution perfectly mirrors Atwood's ideas, as the art director isolates himself in a wooden refuge, evocative of the garrison mentality in Canadian literature, which is characterized by a desire to "build walls" against the external world. In addition, the specifically Canadian garrison mentality contrasts with the American frontier myth and the British island motif. As a conclusion, Percec states that "a rewriting of Prospero's tempest on an island as a scholar's retreat in the middle of the Canadian wilderness is only a natural evolution of literary themes attached to the specificity of the two English-speaking cultures" (Percec 2016: 303).

The Canadian specificity of the novel is also observed by Gadpaille, who notices that the novel is "also full of Ontario, or the details that make the locale unmistakable: the handsome Victorian yellowbrick houses with their bed-and-breakfast signs, the carpet outlet warehouses and the grey wooden barns" (Gadpaille 2016: 152). As far as the characters are concerned, Gadpaille points out that "Atwood gives the inmate ensemble an appropriately Canadian ethnic profile." Moreover, Gadpaille mentions "the mosaic of races, classes and crimes" supporting her claim by listing a few of them: "There's a boy genius hacker, a renegade doctor and a Ponzi-scheme scammer to liven up the assortment of burglars, drug dealers and gang members. There's even a token Mennonite" (2016: 150-151).

It becomes evident that Atwood intentionally interweaves elements of Canadian identity, literary themes, and cultural details, in order to transform William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* not only into a very engaging narrative, but also into a distinctly Canadian novel.

Literacy and Power in *Hag-Seed*

For Muñoz-Valdivieso (2017: 110), the interpretation of the Shakespearean play that Margaret Atwood has chosen to create her novel around is that of "a metatheatrical text about an aged director who seems to believe in the nobleness of his enterprise as a means to an end, but also as an engrossing project in and of itself." Therefore, in her novel, the Canadian writer reimagines Prospero as Felix, the artistic director of the fictional Makeshiweg Shake-

speare Festival. This festival is a creative reconstruction of the real-life Stratford Festival in Ontario, a place Atwood has frequented throughout her life (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017: 112). The narrative unfolds as Felix, having been ousted from his directorial position by the cunning Tony Price, withdraws into solitude for twelve years. During this time, he meticulously devises a plan for revenge against those who betrayed him. Ironically enough, the former art director's pawns in his revenge scheme are the inmates of a correctional facility, transformed into actors in a prison production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Moreover, the name of the prison is also very intentional:

Atwood has significantly named the prison, in a humorous nod to Renaissance theater lovers, the Fletcher Correctional Center (and Felix's troupe of actors The Fletcher Players)—its reference to Shakespeare's collaborator John Fletcher witty shorthand for the collaborative nature of the novel at hand: Atwood and Shakespeare, Shakespeare and Atwood. (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017: 112)

In addition, according to Gadpaille, "Atwood places the emphasis here on the 'correctional' in the prison's name. For much will be corrected in the life of Felix Phillips the protagonist as well as in the lives of inmates" (2016: 149).

The main tool that opens the gate for change, correction and redemption is the "Literacy through Literature" program that Felix coordinates in prison. Therefore, literacy as well as literature become central to the plot of novel for a number of reasons. Firstly, as previously mentioned before, one facet of literacy is that of an empowerment tool. In the context of the novel, literacy becomes a means for the prisoners to gain knowledge and skills, since teaching the inmates Shakespeare and engaging them in the process of staging a play provides them with an opportunity for intellectual growth and self-improvement. Furthermore, literacy in the novel is closely connected to issues of transformation and rehabilitation, as the act of learning and participating in the production of the Shakespearean play becomes a transformative experience for the inmates. It becomes obvious that literacy serves as a catalyst for personal development and rehabilitation, allowing the characters to explore their creativity, empathy, and understanding of the human condition:

The performances were a little rough, maybe, but they were heartfelt. Felix wished he could have squeezed half that much emotion out of his professionals, back in the day. The limelight shone briefly and in an obscure corner, but it shone.

[...]

After the screening there would be a cast party, as in the real theatre —Felix insisted on that—with potato chips and ginger ale, and Felix would distribute the cigarettes, and there would be high-fives and fist bumps, and they might watch the last part of the video again, where the credits rolled. Everyone in the class—even the bit parts, even the understudies—got to see his stage name in lights. And, without prompting, they did what real actors did: they propped up one another's egos. "Hey Brutus—brutal!" "You aced it, Ritchie boy!" "Give us an eye of newt!" Grins, nods of thanks, shy smiles.

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: 59-60)

Moreover, through *Hag-Seed*, Atwood emphasizes that literacy is not only about reading and writing but also about the ability to express oneself, since through the process of staging the play, the characters use literacy as a medium for artistic expression, allowing them to convey their emotions, thoughts, and experiences. The connection to the timeless themes present in Shakespearean works functions as a catalyst for change; while the characters read, interpret and reinterpret the original text, they are faced with their own struggles and desires as well as with their own darkness, the acknowledgment of which can finally lead towards a new beginning.

However, what literacy does not stand for in the novel is the idea of escapism. Although the inmates are invited to imagine, they are not given false hopes. Faced with their interior "hag-seed", the characters are invited to change, which is not possible outside reality: there is no possibility for someone to change without realizing his need for it. The inmates are constantly aware of their limited freedom, but learn to make the most out of what they have because of their contact with literature.

What shakes the prisoners' newfound freedom and demonstrates Atwood's creativity is the connection between literacy and political power that is depicted through the rise of Felix's adversaries to influential positions in the community. Moreover, the art director's enemies supervise the prison educational program and decide to close it due to budget cuts:

The threatened budget cut is an Atwoodian masterstroke: many readers can identify with the feeling of impotent rage that follows budget cuts in our own particular domain. Those of us in Canadian Studies in Europe certainly identify; we are avid for vengeance on Felix's nemesis— the kind of politician who gets his start in the periphery of arts administration, rises to a position of political power, then turns and

skewers the arts in turn. We are ready for any dark deed, positively drooling for Felix to work his cathartic black magic on Tony and company. (Gadpaille 2016: 150)

Just as Felix was ousted for his previous position due to political machinations, so does the educational program risk to end due to the larger games of power and influence, leading to the loss of a valuable opportunity for education and personal transformation. Despite the playfulness of the Shakespearean adaptation, Atwood continues her life-long task of writing novels that are “social realism” or “social reporting” (Atwood in Tolan 2007: 2), as the Canadian writer’s interest has to do with “a larger issue: human dignity” (Atwood as quoted in Tolan 2007: 7) Therefore, Atwood openly criticizes the socio-political issues of the contemporary western culture in which collateral damages resulting from the larger political interests and machinations are generally invisible.

Nonetheless, as a retelling of *The Tempest*, Atwood’s novel ends on a positive note. Using the opportunity of the visit of his enemies to the prison to check on the educational program one last time before its termination, Felix finally stages *The Tempest* and works his magic on the politicians, getting his job back, saving the educational program and banning Tony and Sebert from their positions of political power. Moreover, Felix “sets” Miranda’s ghost “free” and ponders on the idea of a possible relationship with Estelle, while cruising with her to the Caribbean.

Conclusions

This paper explores the theme of literacy, which can be seen as a complex and dualistic force both in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as well as in Margaret Atwood’s *Hag-Seed*. It becomes clear that there is an intricate relationship between language, power, and imprisonment. From the historical contexts of literacy as a tool for political control to the examination of Shakespearean characters like Caliban and Prospero, the analysis extends into Atwood’s modern adaptation.

Hag-Seed portrays literacy within a prison setting, where the protagonist, Felix, attempts to reclaim power through a literacy program for inmates. The juxtaposition of literature as both a means of oppression and a tool for personal growth is evident, emphasizing the two-sided nature of knowledge.

Atwood’s creative reimagining confronts contemporary socio-political issues, demonstrating the potential for literacy to empower individuals while being subject to political manipulation. Nonetheless, literacy remains the

power that not only brings redemption from the personal, interior “hag-seed”, but also fights against the injustices resulted from any form of power abuse.

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