

Women in
shakespeare, taymor,
and atwood: the
tempest reworked



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The practice of theatrically adapting Shakespeare's works has been popular for close to four hundred years (Fischlin and Fortier 1); the high points of appropriation were the Restoration and the second half of the twentieth century. Recent adaptations often adapt his plays to fit other mediums, such as film or the novel. Fischlin and Fortier remark that "adaptations . . . often attempt to re-contextualize Shakespeare politically" (5). According to Terence Hawkes, the meaning ascribed to a text at a certain point in time is always ideologically dependent and contextualized by history and occasion; therefore, assigning a final, context-free truth or meaning to it is impossible (1-10). Placing Hawkes' notion of the dependence of meaning on context in the area of adaptation studies suggests that every adaptation of, in this case, Shakespeare, creates its own meaning by reworking the original text in a new context. Shakespeare's works lend themselves so well for the purpose of adaptation or appropriation because of the gaps he left; his works often exclude motivations or depth of character, making it alluring for adapters to attempt and fill these gaps, often to enforce a certain perspective.

In most of Shakespeare's plays, female characters fall quite flat; their motivations are vague or non-existent, and they seem to exist solely to assist the men in reaching their goals, or act as their motivation. A curious theme seems to be the absence of mothers: "mothers are conspicuously absent from *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*. Even more striking, in the six most celebrated romantic comedies (*Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night*) no mothers appear at all" (Rose 292). The angle of feminism

or gender has been used in many adaptations; Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*, for example, re-contextualizes *Othello* to call attention to the role of women. The main and only characters that deliver dialogue and appear on stage are *Desdemona*, *Emilia* and *Bianca*, female characters that appear quite flat in the original play; *Desdemona* is *Othello*'s obedient wife, an upper-class lady; *Emilia* is her servant who is very loyal to her husband *Iago*; and *Bianca* is a prostitute. According to Fischlin and Fortier, "the society of women . . . is at best a minor element in the Shakespearean original" (234). In Vogel's play, though they occupy the same positions in society, these women are more rounded and dynamic characters; they get to express their wishes and motivations, which are in some regards opposite to those of their namesakes in Shakespeare's work: *Bianca* wants to get married and settle down, *Emilia* is a cunning but naive woman who above all longs to climb the social ladder (even if that would require the death of her husband) and *Desdemona* fills in for *Bianca* on Tuesday nights, enjoying the freedom of being a prostitute and fantasising about travelling the world. Another example of reworking a Shakespeare play to enforce a feminist perspective is *Lear's Daughters* by Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group: written as a prequel to the original play, this work attempts to explain why *Cordelia* opposes her father and *Regan* and *Gonerill* turn out to be so wicked, by describing the hardships they faced in their youth at the hands of their malicious father. Placing the blame of their development on King *Lear*'s shoulders, by turning him into an abusive, adulterous man with incestuous tendencies, justifies the future behaviour of his daughters to a certain extent. The women are moved to the foreground

of the story and given a background, a more developed personality and clear motivations for their actions.

The Tempest, one of Shakespeare's last plays, tells the story of Prospero, the former Duke of Milan. His brother Antonio envied his position and conspired with Alonso, the King of Naples, to remove Prospero, sending him and his daughter Miranda off to sea on a raft; they survive and end up on a desert island, because of the charity of Gonzalo who brings them supplies and Prospero's books of magic. They remain on the island for twelve years, time Prospero uses to enslave both a spirit called Ariel and a native by the name of Caliban. When a boat carrying his enemies and their associates appears in proximity of the island, Prospero raises a tempest to force them off the ship and strategically disperses his enemies and acquaintances over the island in order to execute his complicated plan to get his former position back. The only women that feature in the play are Miranda, Claribel and Sycorax, who are heavily outnumbered by ten males. Furthermore, the latter two of these three women appear only briefly in description, and therefore have no dialogue: Claribel is Alonso's daughter, who has recently been married to the Prince of Tunis; the sole purpose of her character is to serve as material for snide remarks towards Alonso for selling out the kingdom, as well as to explain why Alonso, Ferdinand, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo, Stephano, and Trinculo are on a boat in proximity to Prospero's island. Sycorax, a malignant witch who was banished to the island, died several years before the story of The Tempest begins. She is Caliban's mother and imprisoned Ariel in a tree; she serves as a foil character for Prospero, contrasting her dark with his white magic, and functions as a justification for Caliban to claim ownership of

the island. Prospero also constantly reminds Ariel of Sycorax's cruel treatment to maintain the spirit's service. Both women exist to motivate and justify the men's actions; Sycorax also makes Prospero and Miranda look good by comparison. Miranda has a more prominent role as the only woman with dialogue. However, she seems to be merely a piece on Prospero's political chessboard: " Like Caliban, Miranda has been " colonized and tricked" and exists only " as man's other side, his denied, abused, and hidden side. She has constantly been the embodiment of a nonculture"" (Feral qtd. in Donaldson 68). Miranda is used by her father to restore his position, by making her and Ferdinand, the Prince of Naples, fall in love: " His motivation for arranging Ferdinand and Miranda's marriage is not arranging for his daughter's happiness, but for his own safety" (Flaherty 146). Even protecting Miranda from being raped by Caliban is not an action performed out of love or care: " His primary concern as a father is to maintain Miranda's virginity intact at all costs. Only thus can he . . . sustain the prize that the desirable groom Ferdinand requires in his wife" (Sachdev 232). Caliban's motivation for his attempt at raping Miranda is " I had peopled else the isle with Calibans" (1. 2. 503-4); it seems possessing Miranda equals taking back possession of the Island. Thus, Miranda is established as a submissive territory that can be won or claimed (Flaherty 170). As in many of Shakespeare's plays, women are not fully-realised characters in *The Tempest*, ensuring a gap perfect for appropriation.

In Julie Taymor's *The Tempest*, a 2010 film adaptation of the play, the issue of female underrepresentation is addressed by casting Hellen Mirren as the female Prospera. By changing the protagonist's gender, the oppression of

Prospero/a also symbolizes female oppression and sexism: Prospera, former wife to the Duke of Milan, is accused of killing her husband using witchcraft and removed solely because she is a woman. The translation of *The Tempest* from paper to screen brings new possibilities for conveying emotions, and the film utilizes this opportunity to stage a new dynamic between Miranda and her parent. Both Prospero and Prospera claim “ I have done nothing but in care of thee, my dear one, thee, my daughter” (1. 2. 104), but considering the development of the plot Prospero does not seem to come across as genuine. Prospera’s words seem more credible due to the way she looks at Miranda whilst uttering these words, staring into her daughter’s eyes while touching the nape of her neck (Taymor). Where Prospero mostly treats Miranda as a political object he can use to get what he desires, Prospera seems to harbour genuine affection for her daughter: several times the movie shows her caressing or looking at Miranda affectionately. Taymor states Prospera “ had her whole life taken away from her because she was a woman” (Breznican), and she wants to save her daughter from the same fate. Prospera’s gender can also be interpreted as a way to make her powers seem even more impressive; a woman trapping a group of men on an island, taking her revenge and succeeding in getting her life back demands more respect than a man doing the same, especially in those times. Ariel’s part is not changed; however, the dubious nature of their gender is emphasised by blurring their genitals and showing them with and without breasts at different times. Apart from its radical change concerning Prospero’s gender, Taymor’s film stays relatively true to the original play; the dialogue mostly consists of the original lines from the play, and added lines are still in Shakespearean style. The plot undergoes some other changes, but all

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relatively minor from a feminist perspective: the masque is replaced by Ferdinand's song, and Prospero's epilogue is omitted. Taymor's adaptation attempts to stay true to the original play in many respects, and the change of gender concerning the protagonist does not carry an intended critical message towards Shakespeare: the director claims " I wanted to do it because there are actresses like Helen Mirren who never get to play these fantastic parts because they were not written for women" (Breznican). Wanting to give actresses a chance to play male parts can be interpreted as a feminist motive, but it seems it was not Taymor's direct intention to give the movie itself a feminist undertone. She previously adapted Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus to the screen in her movie Titus, which implies her appropriations are either a case of idolatry or an attempt to exploit the Bard's cultural heritage.

Margaret Atwood's Hag-Seed is far more liberal with the materials borrowed from Shakespeare: the novel is a metafictional work that contains a fictional theatre production of The Tempest as well as a plot that, to a certain extent, mimics the plot of The Tempest. The protagonist, Felix, is a well-known theatre director. His wife died after childbirth and meningitis proved fatal to his three-year old daughter Miranda, but memories of Miranda haunt him daily. Felix is planning a production of The Tempest; however, after an unsuspected act of treachery, he is removed from his position and decides to spend the rest of his life in exile. After twelve years, Felix gets the chance to teach a theatre course at a nearby prison; he takes the job under a false name, and after several years gets the opportunity to take revenge on the men who destroyed his career. Fittingly, a production of The Tempest is used

as the trap to snare his enemies in. In both layers of the plot, the figure of Miranda is singled out and elevated by Atwood. Felix's life outside of the prison theatre, which will be henceforth referred to as the main plot, features no living Miranda; instead, she lingers in his life as a spirit. Felix is consumed by grief; his first attempt at staging *The Tempest* is motivated by Miranda's untimely death: "right after the funeral . . . he'd plunged himself into *The Tempest*. It was an evasion . . . but it was also to be a kind of reincarnation. Miranda would become the daughter who had not been lost" (Atwood 15). Felix plans to play Prospero himself to complete the imagery: at least in the play, he'd be able to protect his daughter. The play becomes an unhealthy obsession for him, for "inside the charmed bubble he was creating, his Miranda would live again" (17). As his life in exile progresses Felix starts imagining Miranda as she would be aging, a practice that quickly turns into a half-belief she is actually there with him. He starts seeing her and conversing with her, but keeps reminding himself she is not actually real. Having Miranda around in this way is beneficial to Felix: "she scolded him gently when he didn't eat enough" (46), she warns him not to wear himself out, encourages him to eat more vegetables and he finds in her a conversation partner. By killing her, Atwood paradoxically gives her a greater importance in the story. The affection of Felix or Prospero in the main plot towards Miranda is emphasised. Interestingly, Atwood merges the characters of Ariel and Miranda by making her a spirit. When Felix leaves a copy of *The Tempest* lying around, Miranda finds it and insists on playing Miranda, but Felix forbids it; when she decides to understudy Ariel, however, he is supportive: "She's found the one part that will let her blend in seamlessly at rehearsals. Only he will be able to see her, from time to time. Only he will

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hear her. She'll be invisible to every eyeball else. ' My brave spirit!' he cries" (180). The use of language mimics that of Shakespeare's play: " invisible to every eyeball else" (1. 2. 443-4) and " my brave spirit!" (1. 2. 326) are literal quotes, both directed at Ariel in the original work. In the performance of the play with the prisoners, Miranda is indeed present, and her voice can be heard by others as well. She prompts her lines and progresses the action. At the end of the novel, Felix realises he has to let go of the past: " What has he been thinking – keeping her tethered to him all this time? Forcing her to do his bidding? How selfish he has been! Yes, he loves her: his dear one, his only child. But he knows what she truly wants, and what he owes her. ' To the elements be free,' he says to her. And, finally, she is" (Atwood 283). Again, a direct quote from the original play is used to set Miranda/Ariel free. Attributing Ariel's role – which is of crucial importance in Shakespeare's work – to Miranda gives her a bigger and more important part to play in Atwood's story. Miranda is placed front and centre as the key motivator of the main plot of the novel, from beginning to end. The metafictional subplot of the novel, the staging of *The Tempest* by the inmates Felix works with, also features a Miranda. The inmates who are to be the actors are all males, but Felix decides to hire an actress – Anne-Marie Greenland, the same he casted for his previous production – to play the part. Though there are some doubts about the risk of having a woman perform with convicted inmates, she manages to impress and direct them without trouble. Again, Felix casts himself in the role of Prospero. Anne-Marie has a prominent role in organising the play, she helps Felix with costumes, props, and inspires the inmates to give it their all: she even helps the people working on Caliban to add their own rap performance to the play. She seems to be the added link

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between Felix and the inmates, Prospero and the others, who ensures everything runs smoothly. Atwood “ has consistently named [Shakespeare] as one of the most important influences on her own work” (book jacket), and writes “ The Tempest is especially intriguing because of the many questions it leaves unanswered” (book jacket). This adaptation, then, seems to be a modern, complicated version of the original play, written with a sense of idolatry, which attempts to fill gaps that Shakespeare left.

Prospero’s attitude towards, and treatment of, Miranda is addressed in both of these adaptations, but in vastly different ways: Taymor leaves most of the original content of *The Tempest* intact, whereas Atwood reshapes the entire story and plot into a metafictional novel. From a feminist angle, both emphasize the dysfunctional relationship between Prospero and Miranda; by changing the gender of the main character and utilising the medium of film, Taymor creates a closer bond between parent and daughter, as well as adding a strong female character to a plot that previously did not prominently feature one. Atwood gives Miranda a more prominent role plot-wise, though she is absent physically, and enhances her role and influence by merging her character with that of Ariel. In the metafictional subplot, Miranda becomes a strong, influential female that influences the actions of the men, much like Prospera in Taymor’s film. The adaptations use different mediums but can both be seen as incorporating a feminist note in their characters, filling the gap Shakespeare left with the underrepresentation of women.

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