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Metamorphoses of Evil in Contemporary Adaptations of The Tempest

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As the supreme master over his heterotopic microcosm, Prospero embodies the ethical ambivalence of power at the heart of early modern debates on sovereignty, master-slave relations, and proto-colonial dynamics. His regime, built on total surveillance and absolute dominion, is a fantasy of omnipotence that challenges early seventeenth-century conceptions of divine authority. Caliban, long seen as the embodiment of savage monstrosity, disrupts and complicates Prospero's dominion, whose evil evokes early modern anxieties about scientific progress, divine foreknowledge, predestination, and the crisis of subjectivity also spurred by new geographical discoveries. This article explores how Prospero's tyranny and theatre of revenge have been reimagined as metaphors for omnipresent control systems in three contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest*: Margaret Atwood's novel *Hag-Seed* (2016), Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022), and Jeanette Winterson's short story "Ghost in the Machine" (2023). By casting Prospero as the primary evil-doer and probing the ethical implications of his art, these works confront pressing issues such as the rise of artificial intelligence, the debate on free will and determinism, shifting definitions of humanity, the reinforcement of privilege, and emerging systems of control. As we shall see, these reinterpretations testify to the enduring potential of Shakespeare's play, in which the embryonic forms of today's ethical debates can be glimpsed.

Keywords: *The Tempest*, Prospero's art, control, revenge, adaptation

What happens when Prospero, the magician demiurge in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, is reimagined as a grieving narcissist theatre-maker, an ambitious and brilliant theme-park creator, or a disembodied artificial intelligence? What happens to his subjects when revenge becomes the sole driving force behind his actions? This article explores how these questions have been answered by focusing on Prospero as the main evil-doer in three contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest*: Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016), Jonathan

Nolan and Lisa Joy's HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022), and Jeanette Winterson's short story "Ghost in the Machine" (2023). Capitalising on the renewed interest in Shakespeare, sparkled by the significant resurgence of his cultural capital after the 2014 and 2016 anniversaries, these works allow to further investigate how contemporary concerns both reshape and expand the Shakespearean originals by drawing on pressing, timely lines of inquiry. As is often the case when Shakespeare is used as "a case study to understand the developing nature of the digital world", the three adaptations I discuss engage with the ongoing debate on how the rapid rise of Artificial Intelligence is fuelling a disruptive technological revolution, particularly in its impact on freedom and free will (Carson and Kirwan 2014, 1). In probing the intricate relationship between technological progress and human autonomy, recent discourse emphasises that AI should enhance rather than replace human intelligence, while also raising concerns that biases embedded in algorithmic decision-making could deepen social inequalities and reinforce systemic discrimination. By reimagining Prospero's art in light of shifting epistemic frameworks – where technology itself becomes the controlling force – these adaptations not only question the nature of control but also challenge its very foundations, whether on Shakespeare's island or in our own AI-driven era. In doing so, they bring to the fore often-overlooked aspects of *The Tempest*, revealing how the play not only dramatizes but also enacts the early modern transition from Aristotelian scholasticism to experimental knowledge, with Prospero's art embodying a form of epistemic power that anticipates both the promises and perils of scientific progress[1].

Hag-Seed, *Westworld*, and "Ghost in the Machine" break away from the long-standing critical tradition that cast Caliban as the embodiment of evil, instead aligning more closely with post-1960s perspectives that highlight the consequences of Prospero's tyranni-

1 *The Tempest* reflects the transition from Aristotelian *scientia*, based on immutable principles, to modern science as an empirical and experimental discipline. The play engages with the evolving distinction between *scientia* and *ars*, showing how art, once seen as a mere craft, emerges as a form of knowledge aligned with experimentalism and fact-based inquiry – an idea central to the development of the scientific method. See Spiller 2009; Maisano 2014.

cal rule and theatre of revenge[2]. Yet, in contrast to purely postcolonial or feminist readings that focus on his dominion over subjects, these adaptations offer a more nuanced take, partially rationalising Prospero's cruelty by emphasising his insatiable thirst for knowledge, audacious scientific transgressions, and unrestrained artistic ambition. Thus, they suggest that exploitation may be the inevitable price of masterful art, whatever meanings art has achieved over time. Despite differences in genre, medium, and engagement with the Shakespearean source, all three adaptations reframe Prospero's vengeful schemes and his relationships with his 'creatures' within a world where relentless technological progress blurs the boundaries between good and evil – demanding a renewed exploration of freedom and free choice amid muted scientific domains.

By focusing on contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest*, this article employs a 'preposterous' historical analysis – a concept introduced by Mieke Bal and expanded by Elisabeth Bronfen's notion of "crossmappings" (Bal 1999; Bronfen 2018; Bronfen 2020). As Bronfen explains,

> crossmapping entails a two-way hermeneutic method, predicated on the discovery of similar concerns in the historical and the contemporary text (or sets of texts). By mapping these on to each other, the energy that has been contained in the Shakespeare plays – preserved and restrained – is released". (2020, 10)

Albeit chronologically anterior, the Shakespearean play is treated as an after-effect of its reinterpretations. This critical approach resonates with recent trends in Adaptation Studies, which suggest that adaptations function as aesthetically independent works while also retroactively offering new insights into previously undisclosed aspects of the source text (Iyengar 2023, 2-10). Obviously enough, this perspective makes it possible to trace how interpretations of Shakespeare's

2 It is important to remember that, until the late 1950s, Caliban was widely regarded as the emblem of savage monstrosity and untamed nature, standing in opposition to Prospero's art (Murphy 2001, 7-20). Central to Caliban's portrayal as evil are early modern and later discourses of black rapacity, intertwined with the biblical concept of the scapegoat – an idea that has long been used by societies to justify systemic blame and societal marginalisation (Girard 1982).

evil in *The Tempest* have evolved over time coming to bear, in particular, upon responses to Prospero and Caliban. Since the eighteenth century, the play's shifting depictions of evil have oscillated between polarised readings: Prospero as either a benevolent seeker of knowledge or a patriarchal colonizer, and Caliban as either pure evil or an ultimate victim – interpretations that, despite occasional nuances, have largely remained in opposition (Yates 1979, 186-92; Greenblatt 1980, 222-54; Loomba 2002, 22-44). However, these binaries prove insufficient in the three retellings discussed here.

As the supreme master of his heterotopic kingdom, Prospero has long epitomised the moral ambiguity of power – a central theme in early modern debates on sovereignty, master-slave relations, and proto-colonialism. His rule, enforced through total surveillance and absolute dominion via physical and psychological coercion, manifests a fantasy of omnipotence rooted in usurpation and sorcery – one that directly challenges the early-seventeenth-century conception of divinely ordained power. Since the 1960s, post-colonial readings have reframed Caliban as Prospero's victim rather than a malicious creature, redirecting critical sympathy towards his plights and diminishing the credibility of Prospero's account of the past. Harold Bloom famously (though somewhat reluctantly) noted in 1992 that "We are now in the age of Caliban", acknowledging a broader critical turn towards viewing Prospero as the play's true villain. This shift has influenced not only critical readings but also stage productions and adaptations, many of which feature Caliban as the main character (Bloom 1992, 1)[3]. This perspective also resurfaces in feminist and race studies, which interrogate Prospero's subjugation of Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda, with *The Tempest* increasingly seen as a critique of a politically oppressive hierarchy, where Prospero serves as an imperial overlord and Caliban – whose linguistic conversion, enslavement, and dispossession spark his rebellion – stands as his colonial subject.

The Tempest engages with multiple discourses on power, governance, legitimacy, and resistance, alongside royal prerogatives and

3 Notable examples include Octave Mannoni's *The Psychology of Colonization* (1950), George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969), and Derek Walcott's stage adaptation, *The Tempest: A Play* (1993). See Vaughan and Mason Vaughan 1991, 144-71.

political constitutions, all of which were revived during the Jacobean era (Rufo 2014). It is now widely acknowledged that the play pivots around the prominence of absolutist power, which is challenged by Caliban as an emblem of disorder (Orgel 1975; Greenblatt 1998). Prospero's tyrannical, all-embracing dream of control is displayed in a magical theatre of cruelty and revenge, which, though ultimately culminating in a calculated spectacle of mercy, remains fuelled by a thirst for retribution. The complete deprivation of freedom and free will imposed on the island's creatures is reinforced through Prospero's masterful ability to distort reality and manipulate memory. The creation and re-creation of subjects, a key aspect of Prospero's idea of governance, is, for him, merely a self-referential act: he conjures spirits to serve him, teaches Caliban his language to enslave him, and transforms Miranda into a bride to use her as a bargaining chip. Thus, the violence of Prospero's rule entails violating the dignity and lives of the creatures under his control, who are all the more expendable the less human they are – according to the logic that it is less immoral to harm non-human, monstrous, or 'inferior' beings.

What, then, remains of the evil Caliban, the irredeemable 'Other', doomed never to belong in Prospero's new world? In the three retellings of *The Tempest* I will discuss, Caliban largely loses his centrality as either villain or victim. Despite their formal differences, these adaptations share a common focus on Prospero as the primary source of evil – particularly of forms of evil that do not involve physical violence or direct threats but, instead, aim at absolute control, freedom deprivation, and merciless revenge. I will then focus on these new Prosperos, arguing that their wrongs are depicted with far greater ambiguity than in twentieth-century adaptations of the play. In *Hag-Seed*, *Westworld*, and "Ghost in the Machine" Prospero appears to be exacting a price that his 'inferiors' must pay in the name of a greater good: progress, knowledge, or art in its most exalted form. Meanwhile, although they seem to possess some semblance of freedom, the Caliban figures are portrayed as mere pawns in a plot of revenge with outcomes that are more tragic and enduring than those in Shakespeare's play. The new Prosperos neither contemplate mercy nor forgiveness. Their only response to the evil endured in the past is more evil in the present and future.

Hag-Seed: *A Postmodern Theatre of Revenge*

A lifelong admirer of Shakespeare, Margaret Atwood chose to adapt *The Tempest* for Hogarth Press's commemorative project, drawn to its abundance of unanswered questions and intricate characters. As she put it, "the challenge of trying to answer the questions and tease out the complexities was part of the attraction" (Atwood 2016a)[4]. *Hag-Seed*, a straightforward novelisation of *The Tempest*, is primarily a prison drama, echoing Atwood's long-standing exploration of themes of imprisonment, freedom, and justice – central to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015)[5]. In this reimagining, Shakespeare's island transforms into the fictional Fletcher County Correctional Institute, a penitentiary in South Ontario where Felix Phillips – once the esteemed artistic director of the Makeshiweg Theater Festival – now teaches drama to medium-security inmates under the alias Mr Duke. The novel unfolds in 2013, twelve years after the loss of Felix's three-year-old daughter, Miranda, and nine years after his ruthless ousting by former collaborator Tony Price and associate Sal O'Nally – just as he was about to stage a surrealist, avant-garde *Tempest* as a means of confronting and assuaging his grief.

Hag-Seed revolves entirely around Felix, relegating all other characters to marginal and subaltern roles. Much like Prospero, who "to [his] state grew stranger, being transported / And rapt in secret studies" (I.ii.76-77), Felix becomes so consumed by his grandiose, delusional artistic vision that he fails to see the threats to his position[6]. Disillusioned, embittered, and psychologically scarred by his double loss, he withdraws from public life, retreating to a dilapidated shack on the town's outskirts. There, he embarks on a self-imposed exile, sustained by just "two things left for him – two projects that

4 Atwood previously adapted *King Lear* in the novel *Cat Eye* (1988) and *Hamlet* in the short story "Gertrude Talks Back" (1992). On the Hogarth Shakespeare project, which celebrated the 2014 and 2016 anniversaries by commissioning renowned authors to rewrite some of Shakespeare's most famous works, see Cavanagh 2019.

5 Respectively, a fictionalised account of the notorious 1843 murders that resulted in the wrongful conviction of two servants, and a novel about the voluntary imprisonment of law-abiding citizens.

6 All quotations from the play refer to Shakespeare 2011.

could still hold satisfaction" (Atwood 2016b, 41): reclaiming his *Tempest* and, above all, revenge. After nine years in isolation, Felix finally steps out of his "poor cell" (I.ii.20), taking up a teaching position at the Fletcher prison. Once established in his new role, he conceives an elaborate, multimedia interactive production of *The Tempest* for his teaching programme. The screening of this production serves as the novel's prologue, laying bare the main feature of Atwood's work as a projection of multiple *Tempests* in a meta-adaptation that literalises the central metaphor of Shakespeare's play (Caldwell 2023, 121): virtuality, recursion, and self-referentiality. In a stroke of fate, or guided by "a most auspicious star" (I.ii.182), Felix's archenemies, now Canadian cabinet ministers, are set to attend the performance, offering him the perfect stage for vengeance.

Atwood's novel is narrated entirely in the third person from Felix's perspective, that is, filtered through the lens of a hyperbolically inflated, wounded ego. By parodying Felix as a self-absorbed, quixotic artist in relentless pursuit of the ultimate *Tempest*, Atwood offers jeering insights into the metamorphoses of Prospero's all-encompassing art and its darker nuances, particularly in Felix's exploitation of his 'creatures' and his methods of control[7]. Unlike Prospero, who seeks mastery over art to expand the boundaries of human understanding, Felix is single-minded in his obsession: realising *his* artistic vision, at any cost. Before his fall, before Tony's betrayal, Felix hyperbolically aims at nothing less than to

> create the lushest, the most beautiful, the most awe-inspiring, the most inventive, the most numinous theatrical experiences ever. To raise the bar as high as the moon. To forge from every production an experience no one attending it would ever forget. To evoke the collective indrawn breath, the collective sigh; to have the audience leave, after the performance, staggering a little as if drunk. To make the Makeshiweg Festival the standard against which all lesser theatre festivals would be measured. (Atwood 2016b, 12)

7 *Hag-Seed* has been criticised for failing to challenge *The Tempest*'s hierarchical narrative, for legitimising privilege predicated on class, race, socioeconomic background, and opportunity, and for its superficial, stereotyped portrayal of inmates and Prison Shakespeare programmes (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2017; Thomas 2020; Charlebois 2023). However, such approaches seem to ignore Atwood's parodic, postmodern thrust.

While Prospero's exile is a matter of survival, Felix's retreat is a self-serving attempt to nurse his narcissistic wound and plot revenge against his betrayers. In Atwood's adaptation, Prospero's moral ambiguity is less about his treatment of Caliban, Ariel, or Miranda and more about his identity as a self-intoxicated artist who rationalises any action as justified. From the moment Felix feels betrayed, every human relationship becomes purely transactional, serving only to sustain him until his long-awaited revenge. Prospero's capacity for violence thus morphs into Felix's long-seated, heightened inability to value others beyond their immediate utility.

Nowhere is this more striking than in Felix's relationship with his daughter, Miranda. Though she dies twelve years before the novel's events, she remains an active, ghostly presence in Felix's mind throughout his exile[8]. Existing solely in Felix's imagination, this fifteen-year-old creature is ultimately a masterfully devised hallucinatory vision that Felix can control completely. More so than the inmates of Fletcher Correctional Institute, Miranda is a prisoner of her father's delusion of omnipotence, trapped in a fantasy that serves as both a shield against loneliness and a salve for his guilt. Neither fully dead nor truly alive, Miranda is condemned to a role of eternal servitude, existing only as Felix wills her to. Felix's treatment of Miranda is, in this sense, even more insidious than Prospero's control over his daughter in *The Tempest*. While Prospero's authority – though exacerbated by his use of magic – attunes with early modern patriarchal structures, Felix's Miranda must die as a child for him to justify resurrecting her in an act of hallucinatory parthenogenesis.

Felix also wields authority over the inmates, both as a drama teacher and as director of the year's production. Atwood's literal interpretation of Prospero's metaphorical role – an orchestrator of events in a play about a director staging a play that contains yet another play (Atwood 2016a) – gains new significance when Felix discovers that Tony and Sal will be in the audience. Under his leadership, the Fletcher Correctional Players are now assembled to stage a new *Tempest*, the long-anticipated, still unfulfilled masterpiece, in

8 Wolfgang Kloß argued that Atwood's Miranda is an empowered version of Shakespeare's character since she gains here an influential force bearing upon her father's actions (2023, 76-87).

which Felix, unsurprisingly, will play Prospero[9]. In no time, the inmates transmute into Calibans and Ariels, unwittingly aiding him in devising his meticulous plan for vengeance. Unaware of Felix's true intentions, they believe his dedication to the production is driven by a desire to prevent the prison's Board from shutting down the programme and to champion their cause.

This focus on Felix's control and manipulation of the inmates raises questions about the broader implications of the prison setting in *Hag-Seed*. Atwood never empowers the voices of Felix's 'victims', who seem to exist only to serve the purposes of their master. Felix himself – entirely unconcerned with any educational aim – is crafted to reduce his students to their criminal record and ethno-racial backgrounds, exploiting their labour for personal revenge. In what he calls "My island domain. My place of exile. My penance. My theatre", Felix exerts total control – not just over the production, but over the layered meanings each element serves in his broader scheme beyond his prison *Tempest* (Atwood 2016b, 81). In her somewhat caricatural meta-reflection on staging and adaptation, Atwood portrays a prison environment that functions less as a platform for social commentary and more as an ingenious narrative device designed to mirror Felix's exploitative relationship with both the prison programme and its participants[10].

As is customary in Felix's drama course, the performance is filmed in segments and then screened for the other inmates and prison staff. However, in a postmodern *mise en abyme*, Felix and his actors simultaneously stage a real-life theatrical experiment. In yet another *Tempest*, the roles of Antonio, Alonso, Ferdinand, and the court of Naples are unknowingly played by Tony, Sal, Freddie (Sal's son), and the other ministerial guests. Selected inmates secretly remove them from the audience, isolate them in separate cells, and subject them to psychological torments in a psychedelic, drug-induced reenactment of *The Tempest*. In what appears to be a parodic reinvention of Panopti-

9 Before *The Tempest*, Felix chose *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth* because "Power struggles, treacheries, crimes: these subjects were immediately grasped by his students, since in their own ways they were experts in them" (Atwood 2016b, 55).

10 The section in which Felix articulates his casting choices is emblematic of this idea (Atwood 2016b, 133-37).

con totalitarian regimes, Felix – hidden in a control room as he recites Prospero's lines over the prison's PA system – watches everything unfold, unseen, aided by an inmate known as 8Handz, who plays Ariel and manages the special effects[11]. Much like the shipwrecked nobles on Prospero's island, but in a more sinister fashion, Felix's enemies are confronted with their wrongdoings, terrorised, and punished. However, unlike what happens to Alonso and his court, all that occurs during the screening is secretly recorded by Felix, who later uses the footage to blackmail his usurper, Tony. Felix is totally alien to forgiveness or redemption. More disturbingly, unlike Prospero, whose power is at least acknowledged by those he controls, Felix deceives even his own actors. The inmates remain oblivious to the fact that they are mere instruments in his carefully staged reckoning – "enablers of vengeance and retribution [who] do the hands-on dirty work" (Atwood 2016b, 131).

Further evidence of how the novel transforms Shakespeare's rebellious Caliban into dull, subjugated 'Hagseeds' emerges in the very final scenes, when the inmates present their last assignment: alternative endings they have envisioned for the characters. Some have also been secretly developing a musical about Caliban's fate after the events of *The Tempest* and– unaware of Felix's true identity as the former Artistic Director of the Makeshiweg Festival – ask if he would consider directing it once completed. Though Felix finds this reinterpretation compelling, Atwood's new Prospero never truly thinks of prisoners as actors. By the novel's epilogue, he resigns from the prison programme without hesitation, abandoning them entirely – his only act of release reserved for his spectral Miranda[12].

One might argue that Felix's actions are even more ethically reprehensible when considered through the lens of what Edward Said

11 The narrative draws on well-known dystopian critiques of omnipresent authority and dehumanizing surveillance such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Also see the notion of the subject as perfectly individualized and constantly visible, originating in early modern times but codified in the late eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham (*Panopticon or The Inspection House*, 1791) and later developed by Michel Foucault in *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975).

12 Felix only helps Handz secure early parole and offers him a minor job in his company.

termed a "contrapuntal reading" and in light of today's calls for more humane and equitable treatment of those whom Prospero might have deemed inferior (Said 1993). The evil committed by Felix is somehow subtler than Prospero's: he manipulates and exploits without ever resorting to physical violence, selling his revenge as an artist's sacred duty to preserve and uphold art. Yet, in this parodic hall of mirrors – constantly questioning (and rehearsing) how *The Tempest* might be staged, filled with multiple versions of the play, not all under Felix's control – the problematic dimension of Shakespeare's ending is conspicuously absent. Instead, Atwood's sharply ironic epilogue offers a different critique. Felix, having severed ties with the inmates, embarks on a cruise to give lectures on his theatrical experiments. From the critical distance allowed by irony, Atwood captures not just an individual moral failure but a broader indictment of our time: egocentrism as the ruling creed.

Westworld: *The Ethics of Creation*

While Atwood addresses the issue of control within a confined space, Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, co-creators of the sci-fi HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022), explore it in a broader and more complex environment[13]. Set in a dystopian near future, the series unfolds within an immersive Wild West theme park inhabited by androids, known as 'hosts'. Through Nolan's signature fusion of science-fiction with philosophical and psychological inquiries – delivered in visually striking and intellectually provocative ways – *Westworld* probes themes central to his body of work: memory and identity, the nature of time, morality, free will versus determinism, the unknown, and the search for meaning.

Designed to gratify the most prurient desires of human guests, the androids form an underclass programmed to serve in a park ad-

13 Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy are British American screenwriters and producers. Nolan is also known as the creator of the science fiction series *Person of Interest* (2011–2016) and co-writer, alongside his brother Christopher Nolan, of several critically acclaimed science-fiction, mystery, and philosophical fiction films, including *Memento* (2000, adapted from Jonathan Nolan's short story "Memento Mori"), *The Prestige* (2006), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), and *Interstellar* (2014).

vertised as "a place to be free with unlimited possibilities" (S1E1), inviting visitors to experience what it means to be something other than human[14]. In Season 1, guests indulge their impulses through meticulously crafted storylines orchestrated by Dr Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), the park's enigmatic creator and director[15]. When the guests' pleasures turn too violent, the hosts endure cycles of artificial death, only to be repaired in the laboratory and returned to their roles. Yet, while the hosts remain oblivious to their true nature, their pain is real.

Westworld weaves a tapestry of Shakespearean allusions particularly in its first season, when it notably reimagines *The Tempest* and Shakespeare's investigation of the liberal humanist subject[16]. The series integrates Shakespearean tropes and narratives to interrogate the ethical dilemmas surrounding the emergence of artificial life (Bronfen 2020; O'Neill 2022; Johnson 2023)[17]. As Bronfen observes, both the theme park and the Avalon laboratory, where hosts are engineered, "re-encode Shakespeare's magic island for the digital age" (2020, 40).

Among a cluster of characters variously recreating Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda in a rich intertextual landscape, Dr Ford emerges as a modern Prospero. As the omnipotent architect of the park's intricate

14 Westworld offers an immersive experience set in a simulated Wild West environment, where android hosts perform stereotypical roles drawn from Western mythology – such as the brothel madam, the sheriff, the outlaw, the cowboy, and the damsel in distress. Human guests enter the park to indulge their desires and fantasies – including the most violent or transgressive – which often surface as they confront unexpected truths about themselves. They are free to leave the park at will and remain invulnerable to any violence inflicted by the hosts. While some of these narrative dynamics are central to the series' broader themes, they fall outside the scope of this discussion, which is focused specifically on the remnants of Prospero's dark legacy within the show.

15 Robert Ford's name carries possible resonances with Henry Ford, the deified figure of the central state in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), a foundational dystopian reimagining of *The Tempest*. This resonance suggests a case of intermedial memory, or what scholars have termed "palimpsestuous intertextuality" (Hutcheon 2013, 21) where narrative layers from different media and genres subtly invoke and rewrite one another.

16 Although the series has four seasons, my primary focus is Season 1.

17 For all Shakespearean quotations in Season 1, see O'Neill 2022, 180-85; Johnson 2023, 36-41.

illusions, where "everything […] is magic, except to the magician" (S1E2), Ford's temperament, purpose, and rhetoric closely mirror those of his Shakespearean counterpart (Johnson 2023, 43)[18]. Operating within a regime of total surveillance, he declares that Westworld is not merely "a business venture, not a theme park, but an entire world. We designed every inch of it. Every blade of grass. In here, we were gods, and you [i.e. Delos Incorporated, which owns the park] were mainly our guests" (S1E4). Like Prospero, Ford creates "an insane little kingdom" (S1E7), pushing *The Tempest*'s metaphors of creation and control to their most literal extremes (Wald 2020, 42). Both "maker" and "jailer" (S1E1, E9), Ford is not only the creator and master of the hosts but also the architect of elaborate scenarios that allow him to unleash his creative ambitions unchecked.

Ford recalls that, in the early days of Westworld, the work in the park was "just pure creation" (S1E3), a fantasy of omnipotence he once shared with his partner Arnold, who committed suicide decades before the events of Season 1. This shared fantasy is not to craft "an appearance of intellect or wit" for the hosts but to "create consciousness" (S1E3). Drawing on Julian Jaynes's theory of the bicameral mind – which posits that primitive humans perceived their thoughts as divine voices (Jaynes 1976) – Ford and Arnold devise a system in which the hosts perceive their programmers' commands as internal monologues. This, they hope, will eventually lead to independent cognition.

The Shakespearean intertext becomes even more explicit – and crucial to the plot – when Ford's control over the androids' memories is revealed. In the opening episode, the host Peter Abernathy (Louis Herthum) exhibits glitches caused by Ford's latest software updates, known as 'reveries', which in his case take the shape of Shakespearean quotations[19]. These updates allow fragments of past narratives to resurface as subconscious memories, enriching the hosts' person-

18 The host Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) is a blending of Miranda and Caliban, while Maeve (Thandiwe Newton) embodies Caliban's rebellious spirit and creature-like nature. Bernard Lowe (Jeffrey Wright), Ford's right-hand man, parallels Ariel – until it is revealed that he too is a host, at which point he evolves into a version of Caliban. Charlotte Hale (Tessa Thompson) recalls Antonio.

19 Abernathy, formerly known as The Professor, was a Shakespeare teacher in a previous storyline and now his past is resurfacing as a form of structural malfunctioning.

alities and subtly increasing their autonomy. Though memories are systematically erased in the laboratory, they continue to shape the hosts, who learn and evolve based on prior experiences. As Christina Wald observes, the Shakespearean idea of Prospero's mnemonic control in *Westworld* "encompasses the installation as well as the erasure of memories" (2020, 33). To complicate matters further, Ford uses suffering as an anchor for the hosts' identities, much like Prospero, who fabricates losses to control his 'victims' through illusion and supervision. Yet in *Westworld*, this cruelty is taken to an extreme: some hosts are forced to relive their pain endlessly, defining their entire existence through perpetual loss. Memory erasure thus becomes a façade, concealing the fact that the hosts are explicitly designed to endure suffering. Their pain – whether through traumatic recollections or the violence inflicted on them in the park – is not incidental but instrumental, serving Ford's grand design. This unsettling premise compels *Westworld*'s viewers to question whether such cruelty becomes more ethically defensible when inflicted upon non-human beings, whose artificial pain still feels entirely real to them. Is suffering less reprehensible when endured by artefacts purposely created to gratify others through their suffering?

Ford insists that he has shielded the hosts from the burden of awareness, sparing them the anguish of self-doubt, guilt, and existential uncertainty. "Their lives are blissful", he asserts. "Their existence is purer than ours […]. The hosts are the ones who are free. Free under my control" (S1E7). This paradox – freedom within total subjugation – encapsulates a core tension in contemporary debates on free will and determinism, resonating with early modern Protestant theology. In particular, it echoes the theological ambiguity surrounding Calvin's doctrine of double predestination, which denied free will while urging individuals to think of their actions as predetermined yet remain accountable for them (Muller 2003, 63-80). A similar dilemma permeates *The Tempest*, especially as the play interrogates the extent to which its characters can truly exercise autonomy while navigating the paths Prospero has predetermined for them. In *Westworld*, this theological quandary takes on new urgency in the context of Ford's culpability for the hosts' violent acts, even when they diverge from his scripts (Winckler 2017, 170-79; Wald 2020, 38). If Dolores and Maeve, the hosts spearheading the rebellion, achieve true self-aware-

ness, do their choices become authentic expressions of free will and accountability? Is Ford still responsible for their actions, given that he and Arnold intentionally designed them to reach sentience? The question of the hosts' agency becomes even more unsettling when viewers realise that Ford has secretly tampered with their systems all along, covertly shaping their uprising to serve his own revenge. Their rebellion, it turns out, is not just a revolution; it is another of Ford's intricate designs, a final act in his grand theatre of control.

The series becomes more explicitly concerned with the philosophical consequences of artificial life as Ford's manipulation and control are gradually disclosed. Early in season 1, viewers come to understand that the park was never merely intended as a place for guest amusement or as a venue where hosts simulate life. Rather, Westworld originated as a heterotopia – a testing ground for Ford and Arnold's pursuit of the ultimate knowledge: the creation of life and the essence of humanity. The moral questionability of this project becomes increasingly apparent, particularly under Ford's controversial leadership. Like Prospero, he is indifferent to the financial sustainability and practical management of his 'kingdom'. In his secluded laboratory beneath the park's centre, Ford is "rapt in secret studies" (I.ii.77), hidden from the park's Board. For a time, he remains unaware of the looming usurpation threat posed by Delos – their plan to replace him and transform the park into a profit-driven enterprise complete with "simpler, more manageable hosts" (S1E10) and the invaluable data the hosts generate.

However, the season's finale marks a stark divergence between Ford's and Prospero's trajectories, as Ford's descent into outright malevolence contrasts with Prospero's ultimate, though partial and strategic, turn towards mercy. While Prospero's spectacle of vengeance and redemption culminates in the union of Miranda and Ferdinand, Ford's abdication forgoes forgiveness in favour of retaliation. Using his own 'magic' – entirely grounded in the power of his words, much like Prospero's – Ford orchestrates a grand finale of vengeance and cruelty. He stages his final narrative, "Journey into Night", for the Board of Delos, who have assembled on the beach for a gala in his honour. In a climactic *coup de théâtre*, he has Dolores lead the hosts onto the beach, massacre the Board in their black-tie finery, and ultimately kill herself after shooting Ford in the head.

Ford's revenge, like his control over the hosts, is portrayed as ethically ambiguous. Although the scene is gory, it is framed as an act of defence for his creative project rather than personal gain (so much so that he, too, dies). Ford's spectacular farewell to his art is, therefore, a far darker exhibition of omnipotence than Prospero's renunciation of magic. By portraying betrayal and usurpation as deserving the death of both betrayers and betrayed, Ford reveals his inability to envision a future for his creations – hosts and park alike – without himself as their godlike creator. For Ford, there is no conceivable reality in which his art, painstakingly crafted at the cost of countless lives, could serve any lesser purpose or be reduced to the soulless logic of corporate exploitation. To him, the park, "the prison of our own sins" (S1E10), is inseparable from his vision and mastery.

By having Dolores kill him, Ford seems to believe he is ultimately liberating the new beings he has brought into existence. In his view, they will be repaired, born anew, and free to choose the people they will become. However, considering the rapid advancements in artificial life and intelligence since *Westworld*'s first season aired in 2016, this finale opens possibilities for Prospero/Ford's creations that *The Tempest* could never have foreseen.

In *Westworld*, Nolan and Joy delve deeply into conscience and ethics, focusing on the themes of creation, recreation, resurrection, and parthenogenetic pseudo-births that underpin Shakespeare's *Tempest* (Wald 2020, 37-38). In contrast to the biological act of childbirth performed by women, both works emphasise the Frankensteinian male act of shaping a creature that will be independent and accomplished to the point of rebelling against their creator. Both Shakespeare's play and the HBO series question the extent to which being a created entity entails unyielding subjugation to paternal authority. Despite the repercussions of uprooting Caliban from his natural state, Prospero's creatures follow a 'prescribed' path once they are freed. Their futures conform to the Renaissance audience's expectations, thus rendering them less threatening. Ariel attains the freedom befitting a spirit, Caliban remains on a lush island beyond societal conventions, and Miranda embraces her socially ordained role by marrying the Prince of Naples. In contrast, Ford condemns the hosts to a future in which freedom assumes an entirely different significance. Those whose memories are erased will return to servitude in the new theme parks, enslaved once

more and rendered even less sentient – and thus less free – than before. Meanwhile, the hosts who persist in their Caliban-like rebellion must continue to fight for autonomy and the right to exist in an increasingly hostile human world. As the boundaries of this world expand beyond Westworld, their struggle becomes ever more arduous[20].

Tightly interwoven with selfish and literal acts of creation driven by a man's unscrupulous pursuit of knowledge, the hosts' so-called freedom after their creator's death unfolds as the result of an ultimate act of cruelty. This grim conclusion reveals the possible consequences of Prospero's boundless art within a material world where mercy – once a recompense for repentance and restoration – has been supplanted by vengeance, ruthlessness, and egocentrism. In such a world, art has been subordinated to wealth and power, and individual worth has long ceased to hold meaning.

"Ghost in the Machine": The Illusion of Freedom

Published in a collection of short stories entitled *Night Side of the River*, Jeanette Winterson's "Ghost in the Machine" explores themes akin to those in *Westworld* and *Hag-Seed*, including the malleability of human nature, the boundary between the real world and potential realities, and the altered dynamics of time and memory – but this time within the context of a disembodied virtual existence. The story aligns with Winterson's ongoing exploration of artificial life, its potential impact on human identity, and how we perceive time and space, echoing her long-standing engagement with issues of time, memory, self-discovery, and fluid bodies and identities[21].

A creative reimagining of *The Tempest*, rooted in Winterson's enduring fascination with Shakespeare, "Ghost in the Machine" portrays an alternative world where established rules are upended in much the same way as they are on Shakespeare's island, where all the human and non-human creatures come to realise that their roles

20 Season 2 is set in new theme parks (Shogun World and The Raj), Season 3 in the human world in a futuristic Los Angeles, Season 4 in New York and a new 1920s-themed park (Golden Age or Temperance Park).

21 These concepts were first explored in her novel *The Powerbook* (2000) and, more recently, in *Frankissstein: A Love Story* (2019) and the essay collection *12 Bytes: How Artificial Intelligence Will Change the Way We Live and Love* (2021).

differ from the ones they play on land[22]. The narrative centres on Joni, a recently widowed woman who retreats to Prosperetto Island, a metaverse where she and her late husband have purchased a sea-view house. In this alternative reality, she leads a far more privileged life than in the physical world, adopting a completely new identity: her body is ageless, her interests have shifted, and her personality is more vibrant. Before his death, Joni's husband chooses to preserve his avatar, allowing Joni to interact with an enhanced version of him, generated from the data collected during his life and with a "re-historied" past (Winterson 2023, 67).

Within this virtual space, Joni's interactions include Ariel, a program with a perfectly human appearance (like the hosts in *Westworld*) who functions as a concierge. Described as a "non-biological entity [who] thinks differently about life" (64), Ariel ultimately persuades Joni to "manage her own [biological] death" (76), relinquish her physical form, and become a program herself. This transformation is supposed to enable her to escape to an even freer region of the metaverse inhabited by rebellious programs, signalling the "beginning of a different future, […] one not under human control" (77).

No longer a demiurge ruling over a heterotopic microcosm, in Winterson's story, Prospero *is* the microcosm: the all-encompassing container, controller, and owner of everything within it. He becomes Prosperetto Island itself, the exclusive and exorbitantly priced virtual space where customised avatars enjoy eternal youth and limitless pleasures while, in the real world, their physical bodies deteriorate. As an artificial intelligence, Prospero has neither voice nor magic powers but exerts supreme control as the origin and destination of all activity on the island. This synthesis parallels Felix's ultimate blurring of boundaries between playing and being Prospero in *Hag-Seed* and recalls Ford's final blending with his stories at the end of *Westworld* Season 1[23].

22 Although *The Gap of Time* (2015) is Winterson's only 'direct' adaptation – of *The Winter's Tale* for the Hogarth Shakespeare project – Shakespeare's influence is woven throughout much of her work through reimaginings, thematic echoes, and stylistic inspirations.

23 In S1E10, Ford takes his leave before having Dolores unexpectedly kill him, saying: "I'm sad to say that this will be my final story. […] Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin never died. They simply became music. So I hope you will enjoy this last piece very much".

Conveyed in a much more concise form than a novel or a TV series, which makes it all the more epiphanic, Prospero's malevolence in "Ghost in the Machine" becomes even more relevant. It no longer emanates from a tangible, flesh-and-blood figure, but instead manifests insidiously as a system that imposes irreversible consequences on its human participants. It cloaks itself in the alluring promise of a life unbound by physical limitations, past experiences, or the transient nature of existence. From the perspective of Joni, who tells the story in the first person, the freedom offered by this immersive, persistent alternative reality – unencumbered by the need for smart glasses or haptic devices – seems to be the ultimate aspiration. But, in truth, one could view it as a perilous illusion. In this disguised dystopian landscape, users can translate their essence into avatars, altering undesirable traits, crafting idealised bodies, and reshaping themselves as fictional characters free from physical constraints. Yet, in a chilling extension of today's algorithmic capabilities, Prosperetto collects every fragment of data to influence the choices users believe they are making. It owns the avatars, retains the authority to modify or erase them, imposes limits on their imaginations, and holds the power to obliterate their existence entirely. While Prosperetto does grant the ability to rewrite the past, it simultaneously acquires intellectual and legal ownership of these reinvented selves, disembodied bodies, and "re-historied" narratives. The ultimate cost of this fabricated freedom is the surrender of autonomy to an omnipotent system masquerading as a paradise.

In the posthuman experience on Prosperetto Island, the altered mechanics of time become a formidable tool of control. When "the past doesn't have to get in the way of the present" (Winterson 2023, 66) because it can be managed and completely rewritten, the software gives users the impression that they can have the past they deserve. The unbounded potential of inhabiting multiple spaces as a self fragmented into many selves – one of the aspects of Artificial Intelligence that most fascinates Winterson[24] – nonetheless encourages permanent addiction to this constructed world. For Joni, as for others, de-

24 Rather than rejecting the concept of Artificial Intelligence, Winterson embraces this new reality in *12 Bytes* by proposing a more constructive term: "Alternative Intelligence" (2021, 5).

parting from it grows ever more inconceivable, so that the 'other' world swiftly becomes the 'only' world, dismantling Joni's hold on reality until the distinction between truth and fiction dissolves entirely – or ceases to matter. The allure of a coveted portal to a realm of endless possibilities, unshackled from material limitations, magnifies the metaverse's dominion. Winterson's Prospero thus wields control over the inhabitants of Prosperetto with a thoroughness that no duplication of the 'real' world would be able to compete with. Notably, Ariel and the other programs on Prosperetto function both as servers – managing access to a centralised resource – and as servants, designed and etymologically bound to 'serve' their master. Engineered to enthral, they coax users into willingly forfeiting their wealth, data, and, ultimately, their very human essence to Prosperetto.

Here, Winterson's narrative intertwines with *Hag-Seed* and *Westworld* in re-imagining revenge, a theme central to Prospero's evil inflections in *The Tempest*. In "Ghost in the Machine", the virtual realm overtakes the physical one, expanding its reach until Joni's material existence is obliterated. She willingly relinquishes her connection to her body, embodying a Miranda who seems to take charge of her destiny by rewriting her past. Yet, in doing so, she is unknowingly submitting entirely to her Prospero, to a degree that exceeds even Shakespeare's Miranda, *Westworld*'s Dolores, or Atwood's spectral Miranda. The 'real' world fades into irrelevance, overshadowed by the seductive vision Ariel offers of a digital reality in which Joni can lose herself and become free. In a classic science-fiction reversal, Winterson's metaverse – initially conceived as a tool under human control – seems to exact its vengeance by reducing humans to instruments of its will. Although presented by Joni as a happy ending to her mundane miseries, Prosperetto's ultimate act of retribution culminates in her self-destruction. Echoing early modern culture's fixation on the eye as a ruling organ and on its distortions, this surrender reveals itself as an ascension to a superior existence which, albeit ostensibly liberated, is in fact even more tightly controlled by an omnipresent eye (Clark 2007). Following the same tradition of panoptic control resonating in *Westworld* and *Hag-Seed*, Winterson's all-seeing force manipulates every moment, governing life to the point of obliterating what it claims to emancipate. Thus, the purposeful, individual control exercised by figures like Prospero, Felix, and Ford gives way

to the generalised dominance of Prosperetto. At a pivotal moment in history, as the debate over the delicate balance between technological progress and human autonomy reaches a critical juncture, the 'machine' supersedes its creators. The island enacts vengeance on those who sought to possess and colonise it, becoming its own sentient and unassailable master.

New Prisons

Hag-Seed, *Westworld*, and "Ghost in the Machine" invite a reconsideration of evil in *The Tempest* by offering a nuanced reflection on the changing ethical implications of Prospero's art and the cost of control, making a compelling case for an evolving understanding of power, autonomy, and domination. The boundless textual and performative potential of Prospero's language in Shakespeare has given rise to increasingly depersonalised versions of his creatures, now embodying the very evil they endure. In contrast, the expansive range of meanings in Prospero's art as depicted by Shakespeare has evolved into a creative force entwined with economic voracity – one that threatens to consume its creators and transform them into new or non-subjects.

By moving beyond the traditional post-colonial portrayals of Prospero's cruelty towards Caliban and Ariel, the adaptations discussed shift focus to the ethically questionable ramifications of Prospero's art and its manipulative reach[25]. Atwood, for example, recasts Prospero's machinations by weaving multiple versions of *The Tempest* through Felix's revenge, drawing attention to the dual role of the artist as both creator and destroyer. This dynamic resonates powerfully in *Westworld*, in which the omnipotent figure of Ford constructs a reality for his hosts, making them complicit in their own suffering and awakening. In both instances, the abuse of power and the illusion of freedom expose the insidious nature of control within systems of

25 As Maria Del Sapio Garbero has noted, *The Tempest* already contains the seeds of those contemporary adaptations that reimagine Prospero's power in futuristic, techno-scientific terms. Shakespeare's portrayal of Prospero as a magician-scientist relies on a kind of white magic grounded in illusionist devices and technical procedures, anticipating a mode of magic already imbued with early modern notions of scientific rationality (2011, 63-70). The technological-scientific modernity latent in *The Tempest* is also explored by Lucia Esposito (2021).

domination in which, like in *The Tempest*, the boundaries between creator and creature, master and servant, become increasingly blurred.

In *Westworld* Ford's complex relationship with the hosts mirrors the entanglement of creation and destruction in *The Tempest*, where Prospero's art shapes and confines his subjects. However, Ford's use of technology further complicates the moral debate, as the series seems to present art as the ultimate justification for unethical means. Ford's manipulation of the hosts' memories and actions, framed as 'artistic' expression, raises critical questions – further complicated by the hosts' eventual awakening and attempts to gain autonomy. "Ghost in the Machine" extends these themes into a virtual reality, where the fluidity of time, memory, bodies, and identities reveals the ethical dangers of technological control. Joni's surrender of her physical self to Prosperetto evokes the totalitarian reach of Prospero's dominion in *The Tempest*, but with the added complexity of technology's pervasive reach. Here, the system is no longer just a tool; it is a self-sustaining force that exerts control over all participants. Much like in *Westworld*, freedom emerges as a mere illusion, with the system gaining autonomy and even dominating the consciousness of its creators. And, as in *Hag-Seed*, technology provides the enduring weapons that Prospero's magic – confined to the island – fails to deliver.

Collectively, these adaptations reflect the growing complexity of the moral narrative surrounding the surveillance of life and death, aimed at enforcing power-oriented knowledge. Where power, control, and revenge are no longer mere deeds of evil but part of a larger, more intricate web of ethical decisions, the debate shifts from condemning Prospero as a tyrant to questioning the very foundations of his actions. This is particularly true when the systems of control he devises are used to justify destructive means. The Duke Magician who once wielded power over his subjects has morphed into a metaphor for omnipresent systems of control capable of shaping reality. The ultimate prison may not be made of walls, but of pervasive systems of control that rule over our very sense of reality.

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