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ENG 200-021

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Protection vs. Slavery in *The Tempest*

Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* is a blatant retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Although a lot of the character relationships remain the same in the novel, the characters of Miranda and Ariel are combined into a single person, Felix's daughter Miranda. The creation of "Mir-Ariel" illuminates the similarities between Miranda and Ariel in the play. It also shows how Atwood takes the most ideal aspects of Prospero's relationship with each character and mashes them up into a seemingly perfect hybrid to form "Mir-Ariel." She does this to highlight the fact that Prospero is a father figure to both Miranda and Ariel and to expose that, in *The Tempest*, there is a fine line between fatherly protection and slavery.

The relationship between Prospero and Ariel is definitely a complicated one in *The Tempest*, but *Hag Seed* helps the readers to see just how intimate their relationship really is. Since it portrays Ariel as his daughter, it causes the reader to wonder how intimate their relationship was in the play. One of the aspects of their relationship that the novel highlights is how much respect Prospero has for Ariel and how he dotes on him like a child. In the novel, there are several instances when he dotes on Miranda. He says that she should have "what other girls her age take for granted (111)." He goes on to mention that these things include an iPhone, clothes, painting her nails, etc. In order to enjoy any of these things, she would have to be free from Felix's mind. This is similar to when Prospero is constantly telling Ariel that he will be

free. He finally realizes at the end of the play that he has to set all of the characters free, but it seems that the hardest of them all is his freeing of Ariel, since he saves it for last. During the climactic scene when we find out that Miranda is Ariel, Felix says, “My brave spirit! (185)” while talking to her. The fact that Prospero uses the pronoun “my” in this instance instantly makes us think of him as a father because he is talking to his daughter. But, when Prospero says the same phrase in the play to Ariel, the audience’s first thought is either of ownership or ambiguous endearment. This is just one of the ways that *Hag Seed* causes the reader to step back and reinterpret the way that they look at the idea of slavery in *The Tempest*.

The way Prospero addresses Ariel gives the audience a sense of protection and strict, fatherly love. For example, he calls Ariel “my tricky spirit (5-1-273)” and “my bird (4-1-206).” Although Ariel is in bondage to Prospero, Prospero is always thanking him for his service to him and telling him how great of a job he is doing. Even when he points out his servitude, he usually does so in a loving way, like when he calls Ariel “my industrious servant (4-1-36).” At the end of the novel, when Felix finally lets go of Miranda, he thinks, “What has he been thinking-keeping her tethered to him all this time? Forcing her to do his bidding? (292)” He realizes that by keeping her in his mind he has held her hostage in a childlike state in his imagination making her do whatever he thought she should do. This is similar to what Prospero does to Miranda in *The Tempest*. He is trying to maintain her innocence, and therefore, holds her hostage to his will. Because Atwood kills off Miranda, she is only a figment of Felix’s imagination. He says, “She’s been protected from the worst in human nature (172).” One of the reasons that Atwood devises “Mir-Ariel” by killing Miranda is to allow Felix to be an overprotective father to both Miranda and Ariel like Prospero without seeming cruel and tyrannical, because, in his mind, Miranda will stay young forever.

There are many ways that Prospero shows this strict, fatherly love to Miranda in *The Tempest* as well, although they are manifested very differently. This can be seen when he uses his magic to make sure Ferdinand and Miranda fall in love. After Ariel puts his commands in to place on this topic Prospero says, “At first sight they have changed eyes. Delicate Ariel, I’ll set thee free for this (1-2-529).” This shows that he does not even trust his daughter to make her own decisions about whom she loves because he wants to protect her. In the book, since in Felix’s imagination, he trusts her a lot more because she is confined to the boundaries of his mind. For example, when Felix walks into the house it says, “at first he thinks she isn’t there, and his heart plummets (171).” This makes it seem like she is actually freer in the novel than she is in the play, which again speaks to the fact that Prospero’s style of overprotective parenting enslaved Miranda as much as it did Ariel, just in different ways.

Another way that the slavery of Miranda and Ariel is similar in the play is Prospero’s use of storytelling to keep them captive. For Miranda, this involves Prospero telling their whole life story about how they got to the island. This story has a controlling power because it highlights that Prospero is all that Miranda has. He says, “I have done nothing but in care of thee (1-2-19).” He seems to be using the story to make himself look more like a loving father and endear himself to her. For Ariel, the control through storytelling is the story of how Prospero saved him from banishment by Sycorax. He uses this as blackmail to keep control over him. *Hag-Seed* takes this idea of control through storytelling to an extreme to expose this theme in *The Tempest*. It does this by making “Mir-Ariel” literally trapped inside of a story. All she is is a story in *Hag-Seed* because she died. When Felix looks at her photograph at the end of the book, he thinks, “There she is, three years old, lost in the past (291).” After Felix realizes this, he sets his Miranda free just as Prospero had to set his two child figures free.

In conclusion, the ideas of parenting and slavery seem to be very closely related in *The Tempest*, and *Hag-Seed* expounds on and interprets this theme by combining two characters that otherwise do not seem very similar. Since *Hag-Seed* makes Ariel Felix's daughter, it suggests that Prospero is a father figure to Ariel in the play as well as to Miranda. This can be seen in the way that he refers to both of the characters and how he keeps them enslaved by magic, storytelling, and pure endearment. Although Prospero's relationships with Miranda and Ariel seem to be very different, both of them are being enslaved by Prospero in the form of an overprotective, loving relationship.

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