Adaptation Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 264–284
https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apab019
Advance Access publication 29 October 2021

Shakespeare in *The Wilds*: Experimenting with *The Tempest*

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the TV series *The Wilds* (Amazon Prime, 2020) as an adaptational experiment with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in several respects: as one of the latest complex TV shows to engage with the Shakespearean legacy, it experiments with the serialization of Shakespeare's plot. Further, being an 'unmarked' adaptation that never directly refers to Shakespeare, it tests the limits as to what is 'Shakespeare' and what is 'not Shakespeare' or 'no longer Shakespeare' in the adaptational rhizome created by *The Tempest* and its reworkings, among which *Lord of the Flies*, *Brave New World*, and the TV series *Lost* are of particular importance for *The Wilds*. Changing Shakespeare's character constellation to an all-female group of teenage castaways overseen by a female social scientist modelled on Prospero who seeks to overcome master narratives of fraternal power struggles, colonial exploitation, and patriarchal sexual oppression, *The Wilds* tests which changes the Shakespeare material can and perhaps needs to undergo to continue to have cultural meaning today. As part of this radical re-gendering, the series multiplies and collates Miranda, Ariel, and Caliban to interrogate contemporary girlhood and the future of intersectional feminism. The article concludes by assessing how the series appeals to differently knowing viewers, some of whom will feel invited to partake in the *Tempest* experiment, while others will lose Shakespeare's tracks in *The Wilds.*

KEYWORDS: *Shakespeare adaptation, complex TV, unmarked adaptation, serialization, girlhood, feminist rewriting*

The series *The Wilds*, created by Amy B. Harris and Sarah Streicher and released in December 2020 on Amazon Prime, depicts the struggle for survival of a group of nine seventeen-year-old girls who are stranded on an uninhabited island after a plane crash. The young women were supposedly headed to a female empowerment camp, a therapeutic pastoral retreat, and now instead have to deal with the anti-pastoral challenge of surviving in the wilderness. They are unaware that they are in fact used as unwitting probands of a social experiment called 'The Dawn of Eve', which is monitored closely by hidden cameras and microphones on the island as well as by two undercover informants among them. This article argues that the situation of the castaways in *The Wilds* corresponds to the shipwrecked characters of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who do not know that they are observed and guided by the magician-scientist Prospero in his own social experiment, in which he aims to make them repent how they usurped his power more than twelve years ago by carefully manipulating their feelings and thoughts.

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Even though *The Wilds* never explicitly mentions or directly quotes from Shakespeare, it shares plot elements, the character constellation, and structural features with *The Tempest*, including its opening. Like the spectacular shipwreck staged in the first scene of *The Tempest*, the first episode of *The Wilds* shows how the plane is about to crash and how the girls regain consciousness when floating in the water close to the island. As in *The Tempest*, where the opening storm is only afterwards explained to be a product of Prospero's magic, an illusion shared by the shipwrecked characters and the unknowing audience, both on and off stage, the plane crash in *The Wilds* is created by cutting, with audiences filling in the crash in their imaginations, only to learn later that it never happened. Viewers are first alerted to this manipulation in the final minutes of the pilot episode, which give insight into the cave-like control room of the experiment. Here, the girls are observed via multiple cameras whose images are brought together on a gigantic screen, in front of which Gretchen Klein, the mastermind behind the experiment, is placed as the director. Observing and steering the action on the island, the social scientist Klein, who was expelled from her university because of her transgressive methods, has parallels to Shakespeare's magician-scientist-ruler Prospero, who was banished from his dukedom. Like Prospero, Gretchen aims to compensate for her loss of power, but she is more radical than Prospero in her ambition: her plan is not the recuperation of a previous state, but the revolution of human social organization. Through her experiment, Gretchen aims to prove that a group of girls isolated from civilization will develop 'a peaceful, female-driven form of governance' 'entirely without conflict' (1.7.30), which ought to replace 'male domination, which has turned this planet into a war-torn money-hungry fireball' (1.7.47).

THE WILDS AS ADAPTATIONAL EXPERIMENT

The Wilds not only depicts a risky experiment, but also can itself be regarded as an adaptational experiment in several respects: as serialization, as an unmarked adaptation, and as a re-gendering of *The Tempest*. As the latest addition to a group of complex TV serials which have engaged with the Shakespearean legacy,[1] it continues the dramaturgical test as to how Shakespeare's plots can be remediated in a serialized form. *The Wilds* draws on the dramaturgical models of previous serializations of *The Tempest*, chiefly on the series *Lost* (ABC, 2004–10) and *Westworld* (HBO, 2016–present), which directly allude to *The Tempest* and have been amply discussed as its adaptation.[2] In contrast to these explicit serializations, *The Wilds* never directly mentions *The Tempest* or quotes from it. It belongs to the 'found adaptations' (Cartmell and Whelehan 18), 'unmarked adaptations' (Lanier, 'Afterword' 300), or 'non-adaptations' (Mallin) that have become a methodological test case for adaptation studies, raising the question of what constitutes an adaptation: Are direct intertextual references essential, or comments by writers/creators, or other sources that prove the producers' familiarity with Shakespeare's plays? Or should we allow for an indirect cultural impact of Shakespeare's oeuvre on the current phenomenon of complex TV? In discussing the science-fiction film *Forbidden Planet* as an unintentional *Tempest* adaptation, Judith Buchanan has argued that Shakespeare's plays contain narrative archetypes that can be adopted unknowingly ('*Forbidden Planet*' 153). Similarly, Eric S. Mallin's study of unmarked revisions of Shakespeare's plays in recent movies has reaffirmed that the 'vastness of Shakespeare's cultural influence

cannot be overstated, because few screenwriters, directors, actors could possibly be unfamiliar with his best-known works. The thought of Shakespeare is already present, nearly unavoidable in part or in whole when certain themes or ideas are entertained' (237).[3] In this light, for a series like *The Wilds* about a group brought to an island by an orchestrated wreck and observed by a scientist figure, *The Tempest* and its reworkings through the centuries are potential adaptational intertexts both for the artistic team and for particular audiences. As Christy Desmet reminds us, intertextual links are formed by audiences as much as producers, so that '[i]n Shakespeare sightings of all kinds, what matters is less what the author intended than how a connection to Shakespeare is recognized' (55). As part of a group of recent films and series that test the limits of what we still call a Shakespearean adaptation, *The Wilds* renegotiates the border between what is 'Shakespeare' and what is 'not Shakespeare' or 'no longer Shakespeare' in the adaptational rhizome created by *The Tempest*, its theatrical productions, its literary and filmic revisions, and all allusions to and interpretations of the play (Desmet et al.; Lanier, 'Rhizomatics' 29).

The Wilds can be placed in the adaptational *Tempest* network through its links to particular literary, film, and TV versions of the *Tempest*. It shares the re-gendering of the Prospero figure with Julie Taymor's 2010 film version of *The Tempest*,[4] where Prospera was exiled after a witch hunt because she transgressed her role as the duke's wife by conducting scientific research and magical experiments. Just like Gretchen Klein, Taymor's Prospera pursues for herself as well as for the next generation a 'resolute enactment of the decision to redirect the future in defiance of a cruelly misogynistic past' (Buchanan, 'Not Sycorax' 342). Like *The Wilds*, *Lost* depicts the struggle for survival of a group of people on an island after a plane crash, and it reconfigures Shakespeare's play by a multiplication of and porosity between Shakespearean characters (Hatchuel and Laist 4). *Lost* can also be regarded as a model for the temporal structure of *The Wilds*, which presents its action on three interwoven temporal levels: the events on the island, the prehistory of the girls that is recounted in flashbacks, and scenes set in the project's control centre where the girls are examined and questioned after they are rescued from the island. This tripartite structure takes *The Tempest*'s own temporal complexity further, since Shakespeare's action on the island is interspersed with unusually frequent verbal accounts of the characters' prehistory and ends with an epilogue that starts after the action on the island is completed.

In comparison to the *Tempest* adaptations *Frankenstein*, *Brave New World* (which was adapted as a series on Peacock in 2020), *Forbidden Planet*, *Blade Runner*, *Westworld*, and *Machines Like Me*, *The Wilds* offers a particular form of science fiction. Instead of developing a scenario of future technological innovation, its fictional scientific experiment is grounded in the present and interested in returning a civilization gone awry to nature, both in the environmental sense, by leaving the girls stranded in the wilderness, and in terms of recovering what Gretchen considers 'the nature' of femininity. The series makes clear, however, that Gretchen's exploitation of the young girls as unwitting probands for the sake of feminist empowerment is deeply problematic, also because it its financed by venture capitalist funds. Her surveillance and manipulation of the girls in a human experiment that involves some drug taking brings her closer to 'our Ford'/'our Freud' in *Brave New World* than to a benign feminist Prospera. What is

more, the outcome of the experiment remains ambiguous because the girls' behaviour is not entirely peaceful and hence questions Gretchen's essentialist understanding of sex and gender.

The oscillation of the island setting between pastoral paradise and anti-pastoral underworld as well as the tension between Gretchen's utopian desire and her oppressive, manipulative methods connects *The Wilds* to the island narratives modelled on *The Tempest*, most prominently to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and its film versions.[5] Also in its choice of genre, as a series addressed to young adults, *The Wilds* can be seen as successor to *The Lord of the Flies*, which founded 'the genre of adolescent writing' with a focus on teenage solitude (Singh 211). As Virginia Richter has argued about twentieth-century narratives of isolation for which *Lord of the Flies* set the model, '[t]he remote island has ceased to work as a utopian – or even eutopian – site; however, it has not ceased to function as a vanishing point of desire, as a heterotopic place that is set up, and fails, as an alternative to globalized consumer society' (274). *The Wilds* takes up this heritage and portrays its island as an ambiguous space that offers liberation as well as captivity, an experience of untamed nature as well as technological surveillance, a new sense of community as well as the loneliness of separation, a societal alternative as well as the continuation of social pressures. The link to *Lord of the Flies* is central to the series' second adaptational experiment, namely its change from a predominantly male to a predominantly female dramatis personae, which makes the series one of the most pronounced additions to the study of girls in *The Tempest*'s adaptational network (Williams). In contrast to the group of boys in *Lord of the Flies* who fight each other and come to represent patriarchal societies at war, the girls do not divide up into rival groups and do not descent into lethal violence against each other. Thus, *The Wilds* puts patriarchal master narratives as epitomized in *The Tempest* and its reworkings to the test: What happens to a plot of fraternal rivalry and violence if orchestrated by a female scientist for an isolated all-female group? Will the characters indeed, as Gretchen anticipates, develop non-violent, collaborative forms of social organization? Will her essentialist notion of femininity be proven or complicated? These questions also concern the connection of gender and genre: Will the tragic potential of *The Tempest* that was expanded in twentieth-century dystopian adaptations be redeemed in this all-female restaging? Is *The Wilds* in this respect in line with twenty-first-century young adult fiction that has non-tragic developments for Shakespeare's tragic protagonists (Balizet 98)? Or is the elimination of the tragic not desirable, as it is a sign of anaesthetized, preconditioned, frictionless societies as depicted in *Brave New World*, where Shakespeare's works are forbidden and his tragedies met with incomprehension (Huxley 193–4)?

Viewed as an adaptational experiment that examines the narrative archetypes of *The Tempest*, the survival drama of *The Wilds* concerns the material of *The Tempest* itself, as it tests which changes the Shakespeare material can and perhaps needs to undergo to have cultural meaning today (cf. Zabus, *Tempests* 265–6). Making Gretchen aim at transforming sibling rivalry, male violence, and colonial exploitation into a template of peaceful female governance, the series probes the transformative potential of its cultural template. In this respect, *The Wilds* can be considered a 'reenactment in the Shakespeare aftermath' (Cartelli 26). The notion of the 'aftermath' emphasizes that current adaptations refer not only to The *Tempest* itself but also to the play's adaptation

history and the sociopolitical discourses connected to it, such as (post-)colonial, gender, and scientific discourses. For Thomas Cartelli, a re-enactment is 'both a redoing and an *un*doing, above all doing *differently* what has been repeatedly enacted in the name of Shakespeare over the last 430-odd years, and which continues to be enacted in the concurrent production line of the Shakespeare afterlife' (26). Gretchen aims at redoing and undoing what she perceives as the endgame of millennia of patriarchy characterized by violence and exploitation—even if, as an unmarked adaptation, *The Wilds* does not explicitly undertake this experiment 'in the name of Shakespeare'.

A MALE MAGICIAN'S RESTITUTION VS A FEMALE SCIENTIST'S REVOLUTION

Transforming *The Tempest*'s male magician and erstwhile political ruler into a female scientist with the misleading telling name 'Gretchen Klein',[6] who plans a revolution in political rule by giving all power to women, *The Wilds* focuses on the scientific aspects of Prospero's 'art' while upholding its moral ambivalence and expanding on its political relevance. The flashbacks to the girls' lives prior to the plane crash prove that Gretchen's project addresses an urgent need for social change because patriarchal structures, racism, and neo-liberal self-improvement expectations have harmed all the girls. They have experienced oppression and exploitation, including childhood sexual abuse, filmed molestation followed by public humiliation, eating disorders, homophobic, sexist, and racist discrimination, obsessive paternal control, and parental negligence. As Leah puts it in the first episode, their experiences on the island are not as traumatic as their lives before: 'I remember not being enough, I remember wanting to be more, I remember the dark moods, the violent moods, moods that nobody had any patience for'; 'I remember the ridiculous expectations they had for us'; 'being a teenage girl in normal-ass America – that was the real living hell' (1.1.3-6). As reviewers have noted, by this early emphasis on the suffering involved in 'normal' adolescence, the series places itself in a group of young adult films and series since the 1990s with similar concerns (see Busis), continued recently in the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* (2017–20) and *Sex Education* (2019–present), as well as HBO's *Euphoria* (2019–present).

By emphasizing the 'ridiculous expectations' that the girls are faced with, *The Wilds* refers to a 'recent discourse of girlhood, that of alpha girl and empowerment, [which] has emerged in US popular literature with claims that adolescent girls are uniquely positioned to become the new economic, cultural and social winners of the twenty-first century' (Bettis et al. 163). Dan Kindlon's bestselling psychological study *Alpha Girls: Understanding the American Girl and How She is Changing the World* (2006) has been particularly prominent in this discourse. Critics have pointed out that this 'new mantra of girlhood' not only co-opts feminism with neo-liberalism, but also overlooks the complexities and complications that characterize specific teenage lives, for instance in sexist, non-middle class, and racist contexts (Bettis et al. 164 and 178). *The Wilds* problematizes the idea of self-confident, capable, self-determined 'alpha girls' by focusing on nine girls who grow up in dissimilar circumstances and embody various femininities. For instance, Toni has to deal with careless step-families because her single mother suffers from addiction problems, and Dorothy takes care of her terminally ill father in difficult economic circumstances which have little to do with the alpha girl ideal. The series also

shows the dark underside of the 'alpha girls' discourse, which puts some of the talented middle-to-upper-class girls under more pressure than they can bear. On the island, the girls have the opportunity to form and reform their community anew and to break free from gender expectations that shaped their lives and that are materialized in some of the clothes and beauty products that wash up on the beach, where they appear bizarrely inappropriate. The series takes pleasure in depicting the process of physical transformation of the girls, whose clothes, hairstyles, and bodily appearance grow increasingly wild (albeit not too wild: the actors still wear make-up and do not display body hair).

The adaptational rhizome into which *The Wilds* can be placed also includes a public debate regarding the nexus of gender and politics that emerged three years before its release, caused by Warner Bros.'s plans to produce an all-female Hollywood movie of *Lord of the Flies*, co-written and directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel. Several critics argued that the novel's toxic masculinity would not play out with an all-female cast and that a rewriting for girls should not be carried out by male writers. For instance, the author Roxane Gay stated on Twitter that '[a]n all women remake of *Lord of the Flies* makes no sense because… the plot of the book wouldn't happen with all women' (qtd in Harmon) and Yohana Desta stated in *Vanity Fair* that 'not every story makes sense to gender-flip. Particularly if that story is William Golding's classic *Lord of the Flies*, a vicious tale about a barbaric boy-made society' (Desta), which in turn prompted arguments about the cruelties of teenage girls (Wilhelm). The project was eventually abandoned and Warner Bros. now plans a new movie version of *Lord of the Flies* with the usual group of boys. Instead, the female creators of *The Wilds* adapted *Lord of the Flies* for an all-female cast, as almost all reviews noted (Berlatsky; Busis; Mangan; Sarner; Sharma). *The Wilds*'s social experiment regarding the recovery of peaceful 'female nature' offers a counter version to *Lord of the Flies*, which Golding called a thought experiment in which he explored what he perceived as the fixed nature of 'man'[7] (as well as a counter-example to the island experiment reported in *Brave New World*, where a group consisting only of the most intelligent class, the Alphas, descended into civil war that killed almost all of them; see Huxley 197). However, the series shows how the girls' behaviour on the island does not fully conform to Gretchen's anticipation. In the shelter building competition of Episode 4, quarrels between the girls threaten to escalate. When Leah reproaches Fatin for her laziness and negligence of group needs, she accidentally injures Fatin's leg. In response, Fatin smears the blood from her wound across Leah's war-painted face, thus reinforcing the iconography of savage war adopted from *Lord of the Flies*, where Jack rubs blood over Maurice's face (Golding 168), and its film version directed by Harry Hook, which is cited in the red and black war paint (Figs 1 and 2). *The Wilds* here refers to the moment in Hook's movie directly after Piggy is killed by the rival group in an attack that is both fight and accident. Not only is *The Wilds*' accident during a fight much more harmless than the homicide in *Lord of the Flies*, the girls' reaction is also significant: unlike *Lord of the Flies*, where the conflict escalates further after Piggy's death, Leah walks away from the group, takes off her clothes, and cleans herself in the sea. Her wading into the water, anxiously watched by the other girls, is shown in its full length, and underwater shots show how the blood and paint wash off her face, slowly dissolving in the water (Figs 3 and 4). The mise-en-scène gives the bath a sense of ritualistic cleansing—not only from the paint and blood, but more

Figure 1. Still from *The Wilds*, Season 1, Episode 4 (27:50).

Figure 2. Still from *Lord of the Flies*, dir. by Harry Hook (01:14:13).

generally, from the violence that was about to escalate. Thus, the series remains ambivalent about Gretchen's essentialist claims about gender, both confirming and contradicting her vision of peaceful femininity—a strategy of complication that is typical of complex TV, which requires the audience's own judgement (and due to this interpretative openness is marketable to heterogeneous audiences).

Making Gretchen the spokesperson of a feminism that sees women as the more peaceful, cooperative, and reasonable sex, but not fully endorsing her view, the series invites audiences to question current and future gender politics. Throughout the first season, the series increasingly reveals that in seeking to establish female rule, Gretchen pursues a rather stereotypical form of white, middle-class second-wave feminism co-opted by neo-liberalism that lacks the nuances of current intersectional feminist critique, has not absorbed constructivist gender theories, and risks simply inverting gendered power asymmetries. Therefore, *The Wilds*' feminist critique is located between the poles of patriarchal master narratives and Gretchen's striving for peaceful matriarchy, inviting audiences to develop their own view on the question of how sex and gender (ought to) shape political contexts. Taking Shakespeare to what counts as 'the wilds' today to test the 'nature of femininity', which Gretchen appears to regard as a globally applicably concept, also raises the question of how an early modern, colonial fantasy of the new world plays out in a postcolonial, globalized present tense. *The Wilds*' ethnically diverse group reflects the history of colonialization, enslavement, and migration:

Figure 3. Still from *The Wilds*, Season 1, Episode 4 (28:05).

Figure 4. Still from *The Wilds*, Season 1, Episode 4 (28:22).

three of the girls are white—Leah Rilke, Dorothy Campbell, and Shelby Goodkind—, the twins Rachel and Nora Reid have an African American mother and a white father, Martha Blackburn is Native American, Linh Bach is an Australian Asian graduate student who plays the role of Jeanette Dao, whose parents immigrated to the USA from China, Fatin Jadmani's family apparently immigrated to the USA from an unspecified Muslim Asian country generations ago, and Toni Shalifoe's ethnicity remains unspecified (some reviewers have read her as Native American, too, see e.g. Manshel and Miller). The girls are acutely aware of the history of colonial exploitation, genocide, and deportation as well as of racism; they are careful in their behaviour towards each other and react in a sensitive manner whenever a potentially insulting remark has been made. They also stand together to defend Toni against homophobic insults from Shelby. Even though the circumstances of their upbringing differ, the first episode emphasizes their shared sense of having been overburdened by the societal expectations

placed on young women in the USA, demonstrated through quick cross-cuts between flashbacks to their lives. Therefore, Gretchen tests a group of young girls that comes from a specific society to prove her general claims about the sexes. Moreover, it is significant that none of the probands is genderqueer, non-binary, or transgender. In contrast to young adult series like *Euphoria* or *Hamlet the Dame*, which feature transgender characters,[8] *The Wilds* thus only partly revises 'the aesthetic of girlishness widely promoted by most Shakespearean adaptation', which 'marginalizes non-white, queer, and trans girls; nonbinary and agender youth […]; girls who identify as fat or disabled; and girls whose racial, ethnic, or religious identity is in the minority' (Balizet 9). Including a non-binary or transgender young adult in Gretchen's experiment would question its foundational assumptions about innate differences between the sexes; in this regard, too, the selection of candidates for her projects is shaped by her essentialist assumptions.

The series eventually reveals that Gretchen has not only professional, but also personal reasons for her endeavour, since her own son accidentally caused the death of a young man in a university fraternity hazing ritual and was imprisoned after she persuaded him to plead guilty. In her account, given in the final episode, her 'sweet-hearted kid' was 'caught up in the perpetual churn' of 'patriarchy and its institutions' that destroyed him and others (1.10.38-39). Perceiving her son's eagerness to fit into a male group and his aggressive behaviour as a personal failure after she tried to educate him as a careful, non-violent, feminist young man, Gretchen replaces him with nine girls whom she handpicks, observes, and re-educates in her social experiment that aims to prove the advantages of 'gynotopia in action' (1.7.46). Like Prospero, she seeks to undo the negative consequences of the past in a repetition of previous events that grants her more control over the situation. Just as Prospero restages scenes of usurpation in order to subdue the usurpers, Gretchen educates her new children on an island where she can restrict harmful social influences. The revelation that Gretchen's scientific and political revolt stems from maternal mourning for a lost son associates her with Shakespeare's 'Gretchen' character Queen Margaret, whose 'public grief' is also a 'civic grievance' (Goodland 32). As critics have pointed out, female characters in the history plays voice fairly outspoken criticism of patriarchy, and Margaret does so most powerfully when she expresses her fury in *Richard III*. Like Margaret, Gretchen belongs to a group of 'elite women' and the loss of her son is connected to her loss of professional power (DiGangi 431); like Margaret, she is 'using the rhetoric of maternity to assert social and political authority in the face of loss' (438). Both Margaret and Gretchen are difficult characters for feminist recuperation. For an exploration of the feminist ethics in *Richard III*, Cristina León Alfar has described Margaret in a way that also fits Gretchen Klein: 'Not only is Margaret guilty of outrageous self-glorification but she is also tedious in her willful imposition of herself on others' (803). As Alfar points out, seen as 'practitioners of feminist ethics', the characters 'speak from positions of authority that are deeply implicated in the ethical dilemmas of their plays' (803). *The Wilds* raises the same fundamental question of whether Gretchen can indeed achieve a 'radical game change' (1.7.46), whether she does not in fact reproduce many of the power dynamics that she ostensibly fights, whether audiences can sympathize with her political goal even if they condemn her methods, or whether they disagree also with her fundamental assumption about essentialist differences between the sexes and her aim of establishing an exclusively female rule.

Structurally, the angry, bereaved women have parallels, too, as Margaret in *Richard III* is often in the position of an observer who is distanced from the action, sometimes 'hiding in the wings' (Miner 41), and often directly addresses the audience in asides (Mirabella 188), just as Gretchen looks at the island action from her control centre located nearby, where she directly speaks to the camera when she rehearses for a talk on 'The Dawn of Eve' to the project's supporters. Speaking directly to the camera, she invites judgement of the series' audience in a manner comparable to Prospero's epilogue. Will their 'indulgence' 'set [Gretchen] free' (Epilogue 20) or will they deem the project an irresponsible crime, for which she deserves to be 'confined' (4)? Complex TV has used the direct audience address predominantly for morally dubious characters who make audiences their accomplices, most famously in Frank Underwood's asides in *House of Cards*—a technique that the series adopted from its Shakespearean source *Richard III* and Richard Loncraine's 1995 film version starring Ian McKellen, where the villainous protagonist makes ample use of direct audience address. Therefore, the stylistic device of direct camera address further questions Gretchen's moral reliability. The series remains ambivalent regarding the legitimacy and the success of Gretchen's experiment and postpones a more definite answer, as typical of complex TV, to the next season.

MULTIPLE MIRANDAS AND THE ARIEL IDENTIFICATION PUZZLE: COMPLICATING GENDER AND RACE

The Wild's complication of questions of gender and race is amplified by its revision of Shakespeare's character constellation. As with other current serial adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, *The Wilds* multiplies Shakespearean characters and thus takes further Shakespeare's own tendency for duplication when he strands two usurping brothers on Prospero's island: Antonio, Prospero's own brother, and Sebastian, brother of the King of Naples. Likewise, there are two pairs of siblings in Gretchen's *dramatis personae*, the twins Rachel and Nora, as well as the 'chosen sisters' Toni and Martha. In *The Wilds*, the position of Miranda is shared between all the girls stranded on the island, which enriches the representation of femininity beyond *The Tempest*'s 'obsession with themes of chastity and fertility' in the depiction of the white virgin princess (Thompson 158). Two Mirandas in *The Wilds* in particular revise Shakespeare's white, heterosexual, obedient girl. Martha adopts Miranda's naivety and represses all negative experiences, including her traumatic past sexual abuse. Instead, she continues to believe in the good nature of everyone she meets. When she declares that she desires to be transformed into 'a brand-new woman' (1.4.3), this might be an echo of Miranda's admiration for a 'brave new world' (5.1.186)—even if Leah argues that 'they only say that in old shampoo commercials' (1.4.3). The fact that the Native American Martha—with the almost parodically expressive surname 'Blackburn'—adopts the role of Miranda, the European colonizer's daughter, further enriches *The Tempest*'s narrow representation of femininity. It is part of this complication that Martha's backstory of child sexual abuse by a white authority figure inverts the racialized perpetrator-victim dynamic of Caliban's sexual assault on Miranda, which Prospero invokes to justify his enslavement of this 'thing of darkness' (5.1.275). The series closely associates Martha's working through of her repressed traumatization with Martha's Native American heritage. In

a prolonged engagement with a goat that keeps following her, as if, in Martha's view, it was offering itself as a sacrifice for the starving girls, she eventually kills the goat as a stand-in for her abuser, turning it into the scapegoat typical of tragedy's (literally, 'goat song's') sacrifice. The rituality of this killing is emphasized by cross-cuts that blend reality, memory, and imagination: the scene switches between Martha in her island clothes preparing the attack, flashbacks to her abuser and to her participation in an Anishinabe dance competition, and non-real shots of Martha in her traditional Native American jingle dress eventually killing the goat (Figs 5 and 6). The differences of this scapegoat revenge on Martha's male abuser from the corresponding scene in *Lord of the Flies* are striking: here, the boys hunt down and kill a sow in a violent act that is described in sexualized terms as a group rape, as the boys were 'wedded to her in lust' (Golding 167): 'The spear moved forward inch by inch and the terrified squealing became a high-pitched scream. The sow collapsed under them and they were heavy and fulfilled upon her' (168). Martha's association with tragic sacrifice is continued until the Season 1 finale, which indicates that Martha may have sacrificed herself in an attempt to save another girl from a shark attack. Unlike Shakespeare's romance heroine who leaves the island for a royal wedding, Martha, who dreamt of her romantic future throughout the series, may not have survived the island.

In addition to the ethnic diversification of Miranda, *The Wilds* offers a sexual diversification via Shelby Goodkind, an evangelical Miss Texas whose surname signals her determination to obey her parents. She lives, as Miranda does, in a close father–daughter relationship and tries to meet the expectations of her strict Christian father but eventually betrays him when she can no longer suppress her homosexual desire. Like Miranda, she is a former princess—in her case a pageant princess—who now has to survive in the wilderness; as Shelby emphasizes, she is 'not just some delicate indoor princess' (1.1.31), but has a thorough knowledge of hunting and hut building. On the island, Shelby falls in love with Toni Shalifoe, who openly lives her homosexuality and acts as a same-sex Ferdinand for this Miranda. Shelby is introduced as an ambivalent character who has a secret side; this duplicity is epitomized in dentures which she secretly takes out whenever they have to be cleaned. Her visual transformation from a

Figure 5. Still from *The Wilds*, Season 1, Episode 9 (35:29).

Figure 6. Still from *The Wilds*, Season 1, Episode 9 (35:25).

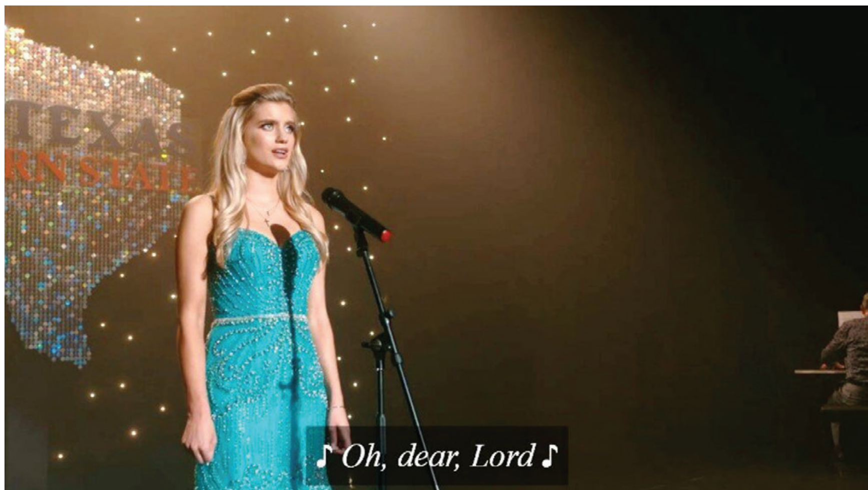

Figure 7. Still from *The Wilds*, Season 1, Episode 8 (46:23).

beauty queen who repeatedly won the talent competition of the Miss Texas pageant, as the flashbacks show (Fig. 7), into a 'freak', as she calls herself when she first reveals her dentures to Toni (1.7.15; Fig. 8), hints at her capacity for transformation. Later in the series, Shelby cuts her long blonde hair and freely takes off her dentures to provoke the others. In the control centre after the girls are extracted from the island, she self-confidently confronts the investigators, now with a shaved head, again takes off her dentures, and teams up with Leah to rebel against their detention (Fig. 9). The psychologist who works for Gretchen explains her behaviour as dissociative identity disorder, pathologizing her potential for duplicity and transformation. Shelby is thus placed ambivalently between Miranda, the obliging princess daughter, and Caliban, the 'freak' who rebels against Prospero's rule. Collating the two figures, *The Wilds* continues a trend in *Tempest* adaptations from the 1960s to the 1990s, namely 'a remote kinship between Caliban and Miranda, both considered as under the double yoke of colonialist Prosperity' (Zabus, 'Prospero's Progeny' 116).

Figure 8. Still from *The Wilds*, Season 1, Episode 7 (16:19).

Figure 9. Still from *The Wilds*, Season 1, Episode 8 (48:55).

As part of the multiplication and amalgamation of the Shakespearean characters in *The Wilds*, two of the Mirandas also function as Ariels because the scientific team has placed two informants among the girls who secretly assist Gretchen. Like Ariel, Gretchen's graduate student Linh proves to be an impressively skilled shape-shifter in her role as teenage Jeanette. While audiences realize in Episode 2, after Jeanette's accidental death, that she was Gretchen's collaborator, viewers are left in the dark as to who the other assistant is. Adopting genre features of mystery, thriller, and detective fiction, *The Wilds* invites speculation and makes audiences search for cues in this Ariel identification puzzle. By doing so, the series expands on the enigmatic aspects of *The Tempest*, which critics have described as 'an extraordinarily secretive work of art' (Righter 13), which, 'like an iceberg […] conceals most of its bulk beneath the surface' (14). As in the interviews conducted in *The Wilds* that use flashback scenes, the accounts of the past in *The Tempest* remain 'fragmentary in a way that seems to be deliberately tantalizing' (16). *The Tempest* therefore activates audiences' speculation in a manner comparable to the 'forensic fandom' (Mittell 52) triggered by *The Wilds*, as mysteries created by the series are discussed in fan forums and wikis.[9] As part of this activation of audiences, the series offers misleading cues for the hermeneutic task of identifying the secret collaborator, for instance revealing that Dorothy, who takes over responsibility for the group, had met

Gretchen before the enterprise. Audiences find out in the penultimate episode that it is Nora, the caring twin, who works for Gretchen, deceiving her sister and the other girls because she hopes for the social change brought about by the experiment.

Like Gretchen, Nora is motivated by personal loss, as she was in a relationship with Quinn, the young man killed by Gretchen's son. The fact that Nora is repeatedly shown to be suffering from her collaboration, berating herself for the misery of the other girls, in particular her sister, raises the question of to what degree she is Gretchen's 'slave' in the tradition of Caliban, the islander enslaved by a proto-colonial Prospero. In this regard, it might be no coincidence that Gretchen's two collaborators among the girls are non-white, namely Asian Australian and African American, which presents the scientist in an even more dubious light. Accordingly, in an essay for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Hannah Manshel and Margaret A. Miller have read Gretchen as the embodiment of a white feminism's settler colonial fantasy, concluding that '[p]atriarchy is not the only villain in this show; the combative and defensive second-wave white feminist who looks the other way at intersectionality, colonialism, and anti-racist movements, poses a particular threat to the teenage girls' (Manshel and Miller). Even though Manshel and Miller do not evoke Shakespeare, their argument fits an interpretation of Gretchen as a white, feminist, postcolonial Prospera whose manipulative, neo-liberal social research continues the racial oppression committed by her ancestors. However, once again, the series remains ambivalent about the degree of Gretchen's villainy and about the true nature of her relationship to Nora. While some hints invite a reading of Gretchen that associates her with Prospero as slave master, others bring her closer to a more benign reading that takes seriously Prospero's claim to have acted as a well-meaning replacement parent for Caliban and Ariel. A possibly more caring interpretation of Gretchen is further supported if we follow the intertextual link to *Richard III* discussed above because the meeting in which Gretchen recruits Nora has echoes of the community of bereaved women in *Richard III* who 'join together in sorrow, in suffering' (Miner 48) to fight Richard's tyranny. When Nora plans to confront Quinn's murderer, she meets Gretchen in the waiting area of the prison. As in the scenes with Margaret, Anne, and Elizabeth in *Richard III*, the women who at first meet on hostile terms bond over their losses and unite against what they perceive as the source of their misery, namely destructive patriarchy. Nora and Gretchen's relationship has an ambivalence that oscillates between female bonding and psychological manipulation to the point of 'enslavement'; the same is true for Gretchen's relationship with Linh, for whom she appears to feel genuine affection and admiration, just as Linh venerates the self-confident scientist. This psychological complexity contributes to the suspense created by the series and complicates an unambiguous reading of racialized master-slave dynamics in this postcolonial *Tempest* reworking.

SHAKESPEARE—LOST IN *THE WILDS*?

Like all unmarked adaptations, *The Wilds* makes Linda Hutcheon's observation that '[d]ifferently knowing audiences bring different information to their interpretations of adaptations' (125) even more pertinent: many viewers will watch *The Wilds* as unrelated to Shakespeare's play, while others will be aware of links to some of the *Tempest* reworkings discussed above—e.g. *Brave New World*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Lost*—and some

might perceive links to *The Tempest* itself. In all cases, their prior knowledge will guide both their interpretation of *The Wilds* and will transform their view of the respective intertext(s). By using the teenage characters as stand-ins for recipients with varying literary, medial, and cultural knowledge, *The Wilds* sometimes explicitly reflects on this heterogeneity of 'differently knowing audiences'. For example, the series explores the creative and therapeutic potential of fragmentary, uninformed reading strategies when Shelby in melodramatic fashion performs a monologue from *The Death of a Salesman* unaware of its actual context, as she did not 'exactly read the whole play' (1.4.20): 'Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? […] [A]ll I want is out there, waiting for me, the minute I say I know who I am?' (1.4.20). While she thinks that the speech is 'so powerful' (1.4.20) because young Biff addresses his boss when he confesses that he can no longer live a life that does not suit his personality, Biff actually argues with his father, rejecting his belief in the American dream of material fulfilment. Bookish Nora (with the telling surname 'Reid') explains this context to Shelby and via Shelby to young adult viewers who might know as little as or less of Arthur Miller's play as Shelby. The series thereby invites its entire audience to a comparative, intertextual reception strategy, to what Hutcheon has called the 'palimpsestic doubleness that comes with knowing' the adapted texts (127). Even though *The Wilds* never makes its links to *The Tempest* equally explicit, for viewers interested in the *Wilds–Tempest* link, Nora's polite description of Shelby's performance as 'an avant-garde take' (1.4.20) can be read as a comment on *The Wild's* fragmentation, multiplication, and re-gendering of characters taken from a dramatic classic that it is at the same time possibly fully or partly unaware of.

The brief exchange between Nora and Shelby also raises the question of which emotional 'truths' literary fragments that are taken out of contexts may carry for unknowing audiences: while Shelby's understanding of the monologue is inaccurate, she nonetheless performs a moment that has acute emotional relevance for her, as it articulates her repressed anger with her father and her desire to live a life independent of his rigid beliefs. Thus, her rapport with Miller's dramatic classic, regardless of her lack of knowledge, responds to the affective potential of the generational conflict dramatized in *Death of a Salesman*. Beforehand, she told Nora that the theatre has helped her as an outlet for her anger, an emotion that she is expected to overcome in favour of charity: 'I don't do anger. The Lord expects us to be instruments of love' (1.4.19). In this vein, after Nora's clarification, Shelby can no longer identify with Biff 'if he's disrespecting a parent' (1.4.21) and declares that she will have to find a different monologue to work on. The dialogue also raises the possibility that Shelby knew the quotation's context much better than she admitted, and that her unknowingness is part of the pose of naivety and parental obedience that she has cultivated as part of her façade. This complication of what constitutes adaptational knowledge (professed knowledge? conscious knowledge? repressed knowledge? concealed knowledge? half-forgotten or fragmentary knowledge? tacit knowledge?) and the possibility that several states of knowledge may exist side by side in a character who has been diagnosed with a split personality disorder makes Shelby a particularly productive stand-in for the 'differently knowing audiences' of *The Wilds* as a rhizomatic *Tempest* adaptation.

In a similarly complex manner, the next scene evokes a wealth of potential intertexts and cultural knowledge, including Shakespearean models, which could serve as a

hermeneutic and potentially therapeutic pattern to understand a moment of personal crisis. Here, as discussed above, Leah starts to go into the ocean naked after a fight, and some of the other girls watch her from the beach. When Leah disappears in the water, Rachel comments, 'That is some serious Virginia Woolf type shit', Dorothy answers, 'I don't even know what that means', and Fatin explains, 'It means that bitch is crazy' (1.4.28). The dialogue here opens up a spectrum of reading strategies that range from a potentially deep-seated engagement with Woolf's work and biography via the vulgarizing in blatant contemporary terms—Woolf as a shorthand for craziness—to a lack of any knowledge about Woolf. For viewers interested in pursuing Leah's association with the nexus of modernist literature and mental illness, the series offers further material: Leah, whose surname is 'Rilke', will later develop a paranoid mania and attempt to drown herself, so that once more, a reference to 'high' culture is used as prophetic foreshadowing. The spectre of drowning also evokes the iconography of Ophelia's death as crucially shaped by John Everett Millais' Pre-Raphaelite painting (which has been used to picture Woolf's death, too, in the film version of *The Hours*).[10] Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams' observations that Ophelia paradoxically becomes a reference that heightens authenticity, that '[w]e demand and re-create authenticity in a fictional character and build notions of our own authentic selves upon her floating body' and that 'Ophelia functions as a figure for the self-conscious performativity of girlhood' (7) are also relevant with regard to the reactivation of the Ophelia imagery for the marketing of *The Wilds*: each girl is shown floating in the water with a vacant expression, the iconographic flowers replaced by objects that represent their respective personalities, such as a screwdriver for Dorothy, nail polish and a cello bow for Fatin, a book for Nora, and a cross for Shelby. Launched via social media networks, the photographs partake in the fabrication of authenticity that characterizes these platforms. The reference to Ophelia is also noteworthy as it invokes a study of girlhood that preceded the notion of 'alpha girls' and emphasized the vulnerability of teenagers in a hostile environment, namely Mary Pipher's psychology bestseller *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994). In the study, Ophelia '[b]ecame the name given to many girls in crisis (and a name given to the *crisis of girlhood*)' before the movement of girl power gained momentum in the USA (Balizet 4–5).[11] Taking both the 'alpha girls' and the Ophelia discourse into account, *The Wilds* negotiates a complex notion of girlhood, as typical of twenty-first-century Shakespeare adaptations (16).

The girls' different levels of knowledge when it comes to literary classics demonstrate that intertextuality and adaptations are relations that need to be established by the recipients as much as by the producers. Taking into account the ways in which the Shakespearean legacy can 'wash ashore' in a twenty-first-century TV series, possibly in a discarded version, as when Shelby only knows bits and pieces of Arthur Miller's classic, the scene in the same episode in which the girls are 'slaving away' (1.4.25) to 'get log from the cave' (1.4.14) can work as a reference to *The Tempest*'s scene 3.1 for audiences who know the play well: here, Ferdinand, turned into Prospero's slave by a magic spell, piles up logs in front of Prospero's cave. However, in contrast to the straightforward references to Miller and Woolf, the references to Shakespeare remain oblique and depend on the audience's forensic interest. Similarly, the clearer links to *Tempest* adaptations such as *Lord of the Flies* and *Lost* (that have been perceived by many reviewers)

will depend on the audience's awareness that these texts can and have been interpreted as *Tempest* adaptations (an awareness not displayed in the reviews). Thus, the question of whether or not Shakespeare's traces get lost in *The Wilds* can only be answered individually, as it depends on the viewers' knowledge, attentiveness, and interest in pursuing intertextual references.

Thus, even though echoes of 'high' culture reverberate in a fragmented or at first deliberately misunderstood version in *The Wilds*, they sometimes convey a deeper truth and have prophetic value. This raises the question of whether Gretchen can indeed free the female community from the male scripts that have shaped their cultural heritage and whether such a liberation is necessary to achieve social change. Do Shakespeare's scripts have to be overcome to allow for a better future, as Heiner Müller has demanded: 'Shakespeare is a mirror through the ages, our hope a world he does not reflect any more. We haven't arrived at ourselves as long as Shakespeare is writing our plays' (119)? Or is it significant that Müller made this point for one of Shakespeare's tragedies, for *Hamlet*, and that Shakespeare's comedies and romances, which aim at reconciliation rather than revenge as resolution of tragic conflict, could be used as templates for a better future? It has been argued that *The Tempest* itself not only reproduces, but questions cultural master narratives about male power struggles and colonial exploitation, and that the absence of role models for Miranda in the play is a marked gap. On this trajectory, Courtney Lehmann has maintained in an article on Taymor's *Tempest* that Shakespeare's 'plays gesture toward an epistemology of the possible' and might offer a productive template to imagine social change (62). *The Wilds* makes clear, however, that Gretchen's plan for social change is doomed to fail. It foreshadows the Miranda-turned-Calibans' revolt against her, but leaves open whether this revolt will mean a post-feminist repudiation of her project or whether it will forge a more viable, more inclusive alternative for feminist action of the young generation. Like *The Tempest*, the season ends with an epilogue-as-prologue when Leah in the final minute of the show discovers the control room of a parallel experiment called 'The Twilight of Adam', in which a male control group is observed on an island under the same conditions. Season 2 of the series, expected for 2022, will shed further light on how Shakespeare can be transformed or get lost in the wilds, and whether his scripts that historically belong to 'the twilight of Adam' have something enabling to offer for a potential 'dawn of Eve'—or for an altogether different take on the tempestuous future awaiting us.

NOTES

[1] After a wave of popular Shakespeare films in the 1990s and 2000s, the new 'aggregate' of serial Shakespeare adaptations has arguably absorbed their 'adaptational energy' in the last fifteen years, while developing further many of their characteristics, such as topical settings, new scripts, modern language, high production standards, star casts, and a high degree of intertextuality (Lanier, 'Recent Shakespeare Adaptation' 105). See Mittell's seminal study *Complex TV* for an account of the characteristics and the history of complex TV series. See Bronfen and Wald for studies on recent serial adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. *The Wilds* as 'teen TV' can in particular be seen as a continuation of Shakespeare films aiming at young audiences, for instance *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She's the Man*, *Romeo + Juliet*, *O*, and *Hamlet: The Denmark Corporation*. For a discussion of Shakespeare's status in youth culture and film, see Hulbert et al.; Moseley (38); Balizet (12–8 and 24–60).

[2] On the links between *The Tempest* and *Lost*, see Hatchuel and Laist; Stockton; Barnes; Howe. On *Westworld* as a *Tempest* version, see Wald (21–81).

[3] In the introduction to their seminal collection *Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare*, Christy Desmet, Natalie Loper, and Jim Casey have likewise acknowledged that 'adaptation sometimes works not as a conscious process but as an embedded element within the cultural (un)conscious' (13). See also Marjorie Garber's seminal work on Shakespeare's impact on modern culture.

[4] See Vaughan for an account of previous theatrical productions that featured a Prospera or a Prospero performed by a female actor.

[5] See Reilly (119) and Tristram on the parallels between *The Tempest* and *Lord of the Flies*.

[6] Gretchen's first name evokes another dramatic world classic that is related to *The Tempest* via the shared intertext of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, namely Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*. In Goethe's tragedy, Gretchen falls victim to the power-hungry recklessness of her seducer Faust, who makes a pact with the devil in his desire for knowledge. For the connections between *The Tempest* and *Dr Faustus*, see for instance Bate; Lucking; and Logan (211–22). By contrast, Gretchen Klein herself takes up the position of the transgressive scientist. The choice of a German name might also be a reference to Victor Frankenstein, another transgressive scientist whose portrayal took inspiration from *The Tempest*. See Sawyer for a discussion of the similarities between *Frankenstein* and *The Tempest* and an account of Mary Shelley's engagement with the play (15; 19–20).

[7] Golding maintained that his interest in finding out the nature of 'man' drove his writing that resembles experiments in a laboratory: 'What man is, […] that I burn to know […]. The themes closest to my purpose […] have been themes of man at an extremity, man tested like building material, taken into the laboratory' (*Moving Target*, 199, see also Reilly 16–7).

[8] See Balizet (141–2) for a discussion of *Hamlet the Dame* in the context of girls' studies.

[9] See for instance The Wilds Wiki and Think Story.

[10] See Showalter and Peterson for seminal discussions of the romanticized iconography of female death in depictions of Ophelia.

[11] See Bickley and Stevens (120–6) and Balizet (93–129) for a discussion of young adult novels that also feature empowered Ophelia figures.

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