Explain the centrality of the motif of performance in the textual conversation between Shakespeare’s The Tempest, and Margaret Atwood’s Hag Seed.

Margaret Atwood’s 2016 prose-fiction novel *Hag-Seed* (2016) extends upon the use of performance in William Shakespeare’s tragicomic play *The Tempest* (1611), asserting the power of performance for both good and bad, mirroring life’s ups and downs. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare explores the malevolent power of performance in Prospero’s manipulation of his usurpers to achieve revenge, with Atwood reasserting this idea in a modern context through Felix’s illusion. However, Shakespeare conversely creates a ‘play-within-a-play’ that allows him to explore the power of performance to bring people together, with Atwood also metatheatrically creating a ‘play-within-a-play-within-a-novel’ to explore the liberative power of performance in prison reform. Thus, Atwood’s reinterpretation of the canonical text goes beyond a spatial-temporal and generic shift, bringing new meaning to Shakespeare’s representation of the performative nature of life through an exploration of its capacity to both harm and liberate, a dichotomy central to the human experience.

Prospero’s obsession with attaining immoral vengeance through means of ‘rough magic’ blurs the lines between reality and illusion as he manipulates those on the island as the director in his theatre. *The Tempest* begins in media res in the midst of an illusory tempest conjured by Prospero, immediately highlighting his use of performance to deceive and manipulate. Prospero’s vindictive position as the ‘Prince of Power’ is demonstrated as Prospero malevolently manipulates the royal court in order to re-achieve his Dukedom. Prospero deceives Alonso in feeling immense culpability for Ferdinand’s death,
yet Alonso’s repetition of ‘O, it is monstrous, monstrous’ draws upon dramatic irony using the audience’s knowledge of Prospero’s manipulation to suggest that the conjurer himself may be monstrous. This tyrannical representation of Prospero is furthered in his treatment of Ariel, threatening that he ‘will peg thee... til thou hast howled away twelve winters’, hyperbolically using his ‘art’ to exert control over his subjects. Similarly, Caliban states, ‘I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer...’, alluding to John Dee, Queen Elizabeth’s official alchemist, who was a controversial figure thought to be dealing in evil magic, or goetia. Therefore, Prospero’s performance and magic propels the play in order to blur the lines between reality and illusion, manipulating the royal court as the director in the island of his theatre.

Atwood similarly uses performance to highlight the power of illusion and demonstrates its ability to deceive and manipulate in a contemporary context. From the outset of the novel, Felix proclaims ‘Let’s make magic!’ in referencing his theatrical performances, alliteratively demonstrating how the literal magical abilities held by Prospero translates to magic of the theatre in Hag-seed, successfully bringing The Tempest into a real-world context. Felix’s deception ranges from his adoption of the nom de plume of F. Duke, adopting a Shakespearean echo that references Prospero, the Duke of Naples, through to his manipulation of Estelle in his sexual suggestiveness: ‘what clever naughty thing? his tone implied’. Yet, Felix’s ultimate performative deception lies in his entrapment of Tony and Sal in their visit to Fletcher Correctional, where Felix is thrilled to see his enemies being ‘sucked into a vortex of his own creation’, a metaphor alluding to the physical tempest in Shakespeare’s play. Through the use of technology, ‘ketamime’ and ‘salvia’ induced illusion, Felix is able to enact his revenge on his usurpers, who scream ‘hell is empty, and all
the devils are here’, a biblical reference that continues to remain powerful in a modern context. Through the ‘drug-induced anguish’, Sal confesses his guilt, wailing ‘I’m a monster’ and Tony is forced to return Felix to his original position, or else suffer the contemporary consequences of having the video’s leaked to the internet. Thus, Atwood suggests that even in a modern context, the power of the theatre can be used to maliciously achieve revenge.

Shakespeare highlights the power of performance to unify and empower by employing meta-theatre to comment on his illustrious career as a playwright with The Tempest as his ‘swan song’. The wedding masque that Prospero puts on for Ferdinand and Miranda is a reminder of the play’s construction and is performed as a magnificent display of Prospero’s power and a father’s generous celebration of Miranda’s betrothal. Prospero bestows ‘some vanity of mine art’ and demonstrates his control over the goddesses of Iris and Juno, reflecting his use of performance to empower people and celebrate unity, which also mirrors Shakespeare’s power to unite people through his plays. Furthermore, Prospero cites the power of his performance and his accomplishments having ‘set roaring war... and rifted Jove’s stout oak’, with the mythical allusion to ‘Jove’, the most powerful Greek god, emphasising Shakespeare’s own success as a playwright. The metatheatrical commentary on Shakespeare’s own life is solidified in the Epilogue, where Prospero directly speaks to the audience, proclaiming ‘release me from my bands, with the help of your good hands’, referencing that his performances only have power as a result of the audience who appreciates them. As his ‘swan song’, Shakespeare gives up further performances as he has already fulfilled his unity of society and empowerment of individuals, indicated by the conclusion of ‘gentle breaths of the sail’, which contrast the opening ‘tempestuous noise’.
Atwood similarly uses performance to achieve an extrinsic purpose, highlighting the utility and value of theatre in a modern world. Through performance, Atwood compels the modern-day reader to understand the ‘outcasts’ of our own society by representing Caliban as a repository of the failures of humanity. Art is used as ‘a therapeutic and educational tool’, in which through violent political dramas like Julius Caesar or Macbeth, the prisoners are able to address the violence in their own pasts and come to terms with their incarceration. This is seen as Atwood reimagines Shakespeare’s Masques in Team Hag-Seed’s rap: ‘Hag-Seed’s black and Hag-Seed’s brown, ... Hag-Seed’s yellow and Hag-Seed’s trash white’, demonstrating how performance has compelled prisoners to come to terms with their identity. The novel form of Hag-Seed also invites a more intimate reading of the text than Shakespeare’s play form is able to achieve, utilising third person direct narration to explore the prisoner’s capability for change. As a result of the transformative process that performance has enabled the prisoners to undergo, Felix proclaims that ‘for once in their lives, they loved themselves’. Through such humanisation, Atwood asserts that as a result of performance outcasts do have the capacity to be reconciled within society, thus demonstrating theatre’s power to empower and transcend adversity.