Michela Compagnoni

Brave New Tempests.
Brexit and Shakespeare's Dystopian Afterlives in Ali Smith's *Gliff*

Abstract: In the wake of Brexit, a surge of dystopian fiction by British authors has grappled with the political and cultural ruptures left in its trail. Ali Smith's *Gliff* (2024) stands as a compelling recent addition to this post-Brexit corpus. Set in a near-future Britain governed by biometric surveillance and bureaucratic erasure, *Gliff* follows two non-binary siblings, Briar and Rose, who are categorised as "Unverifiables" after their mother refuses digital registration. One morning, a red line is painted around their house – a visible decree of exclusion – and their displacement begins. The novel probes a society stratified by data and language, where identity is state-sanctioned and deviation punished. By invoking Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), *Gliff* joins a tradition of science-fictional adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* that reworks the latter's interrogations of knowledge, power, surveillance, and freedom within the speculative imaginaries of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Ali Smith*, *'Gliff'*, *Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'*, *Brexit*, *dystopia*, *surveillance*

1. Introduction: Red Lines

A red line of paint drawn around a house, a simple boundary that overnight transforms a family's existence, marking them as "Unverifiables". This stark image lies at the heart of *Gliff* (2024) by Ali Smith.[1] The novel captures with unsettling clarity the rise of social and class divides, the pervasive fear of the Other, and the subordination enforced by surveillance in the contemporary post-Brexit Britain. As the first instalment of a projected diptych, *Gliff* stands as a compelling recent addition to the body of novels by British authors confronting the central questions of the referendum and its aftermath through dystopian modes. Its arrival coincides with a surge of speculative and dystopian fiction that has sought to grapple with the political and cultural ruptures left in its wake. In the wider body of work that has been termed "Brexlit"[2] and encompasses diverse subgenres, the dystopian mode has proved among the most prominent. Works such as Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019), John Marrs' *The Passengers* (2019), and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019) exemplify this turn, staging near-futures that are haunted both by technological acceleration and by political fracture.

Widely regarded as the writer who inaugurated Brexlit with *Autumn* (2016), published in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Smith went on to develop the *Seasonal Quartet*, a sequence of state-of-the-nation novels that became foundational to the genre.[3] Across the four volumes, she explored many of the defining concerns of the Brexit era: immigration and hospitality, atavistic nationalism, pervasive xenophobia, populism, scrutiny, bureaucratic and technology-driven extremism, de-individualisation, and border policies. Eight years after the referendum, and four years after the

[1] Ali Smith, *Gliff* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2024). Further references to the novel appear in parentheses.

[2] Coined by Kristian Shaw in "Brexlit", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 15-30.

[3] Shaw, "Brexlit", 21. Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* includes *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), *Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), and *Summer* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2020).

quartet's conclusion, *Gliff* marks a shift in register: Smith reframes her long-standing preoccupations through the speculative lens of dystopian fiction and places questions of identity and language at the centre of her vision.[4]

Set in a near-future Britain governed by biometric governance and bureaucratic erasure, the novel follows two siblings, Briar and Rose, who are classified as "Unverifiables" after their mother refuses to comply with digital authentication. The red line painted around their home is a decree of exclusion that marks both house and inhabitants for disappearance. Being thus marginalised, they are forced to flee under the care of Leif, their mother's partner, who soon departs leaving the children to fend for themselves. Narrated by Briar, a non-binary, precocious, and logomaniacal Smith avatar in their early teens,[5] the story traces the siblings' precarious movement through a society increasingly hostile to those who fall outside the sanctioned categories of verification. At first, they find shelter in an unfurnished safe house Leif stocks with tinned food. Just outside, Rose becomes absorbed in the horses grazing in a nearby field, and she names her favourite Gliff, which grows into a powerful symbol of hope, multiplicity, and resistance to conformity. Briar and Rose then squat in an abandoned school where they join a community of misfits resisting the regime. Halfway through the novel, a caesura opens: five years pass, and the narrative resumes in a bleaker, more technocratic Britain.[6] Briar is now a factory supervisor, overseeing labourers scarred and mutilated by battery acid, trapped in the machinery of the state.

This dystopian trajectory also opens onto a broader literary dialogue: each chapter set five years later begins with the words "Brave new world" (116) or variations such as "Brave new wold" (121) and "Brave new old" (207), which signal Briar's rebellion against a system founded on uniformity. Through these refrains, Smith inscribes her novel into conversation with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), another vision of a society where identity is subordinated to state surveillance and bureaucratic legitimacy. However, in this article I would like to argue that Smith engages with Huxley not so much as a dystopian template as itself an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.[7] Just like Huxley, Smith reworks some of the play's central concerns to probe the mechanisms of control that structure their respective presents. By repeatedly echoing the famous verse from *The Tempest* that underscores its thematic and narrative connection with Huxley, *Gliff* situates itself within a tradition of science-fictional and dystopian adaptations of Shakespeare's play that interrogate propaganda, control, and freedom, foregrounding exile, Othering, and truth manipulation.[8]

In examining how the novel's portrayal of totalitarianism, symbolic resistance, and linguistic domination constitutes an extreme response to the political and cultural climate of post-Brexit, post-truth Britain, I trace these concerns back to Shakespeare's Prospero. His power, grounded in illusionist devices and proto-scientific logic, anticipates a model of mastery already entwined with early modern rationality and statecraft. *The Tempest* itself reflects the broader transition from Aristotelian *scientia*, based on immutable principles, to modern science conceived as an empirical and experimental

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[4] This is Smith's first properly dystopian novel, out of a total of fourteen.

[5] From contextual clues, Briar is 13 and Rose 11 at the beginning of the novel; other examples of young characters include Brooke in *There But For The* (2011) and Florence in *Spring*.

[6] The narrative departs from strict linearity, making use of both analepsis and prolepsis.

[7] Both *Brave New World* and *Gliff* may be read as permutations of *The Tempest*, exemplifying forms of creative criticism that generate fresh insight into Shakespeare by testing how the plays might illuminate concerns deemed urgent in their respective times. For discussion of *Brave New World* and Shakespeare, see Lucia Esposito, "Degenerating *Tempests*: The Loss of the Ethical Power of Shakespeare's Emotions in *Brave New World*", *Prospero. Rivista di letterature e culture straniere*, 29 (2024), 81-107.

[8] To cite but two among many adaptations: *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox, 1956) and Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022).

discipline.[9] Scott Maisano has accordingly identified *The Tempest* as one of "the earliest works of scientific romance".[10] Read in this light, *Gliff* testifies once again to the enduring potential of Shakespeare's play, in which the early contours of today's ethical and political debates can already be discerned. Its sustained interrogations of knowledge, identity, and domination continue to shape the speculative imaginaries of the twenty-first century.

2. Prosperean State: The Machinery of Power

It is by now well established that the Brexit process brought the issues of monitoring and regulation into sharp relief, exposing how appeals to sovereignty and freedom were underpinned by mechanisms of control that increasingly shape contemporary political life.[11] The campaign itself exemplified how strategies of domination already permeated political discourse, operating not only through institutional frameworks but through media influence, targeted data manipulation, and emotional appeals to nationalism.[12] Against this background, *Gliff* emerges as an extreme fictional response, pushing to dystopian limits dynamics that were already central to the *Seasonal Quartet*.[13]

The society portrayed in *Gliff* is structured around a system that, in the second half of the novel, hardens into full-blown, Orwellian totalitarianism.[14] Citizens are monitored through the pervasive use of devices and state-appointed "educators" (83), wearable technologies akin to smart watches that automatically film everything and perform a wide range of functions, such as cataloguing every trace of data. They are also used to instruct children in place of schools, systematically replacing other sources of knowledge with official, centrally manipulated channels of information. This reinforces a culture of exclusion that reaches its peak in the segregation of the so-called "Unverifiables" and the compulsory re-education of adults and children in Retraining Centres (106). Cameras are ubiquitous,[15] and even the smallest acts of rebellion take the form of exploiting gaps in the system, seeking out the voids where cameras fail to see. As the narrative shifts forward, this dystopian regime culminates in the mechanised world of the factory, where Briar works as "Day Shift Superior, Pickled / Preserved Goods Delivery Level Area 135" (221), a direct echo of Huxley's Hatcheries and Conditioning Centres.[16]

The totalising surveillance and coercion depicted in *Gliff* finds its most powerful antecedent in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. As absolute master of his insular domain, Prospero enacts a fantasy of omnipotence rooted in usurpation and sorcery, physical and psychological violence, unsettling the early-seventeenth-century conception of divinely ordained authority.[17] Prospero's dream of unbounded dominion is staged in a magical theatre of cruelty extending over every element of the island and reinforced through his manipulation of illusion and memory, which ensures that subjection remains

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[9] See Elizabeth Spiller, "Shakespeare and the Making of Early Modern Science: Resituating Prospero's Art", *South Central Review*, 26.1-2 (2009), 24-41.

[10] Scott Maisano, "Shakespeare's Revolution: *The Tempest* as Scientific Romance", in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, eds., The Tempest*: A Critical Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014), 166.

[11] See Philip Cunliffe et al., *Taking Control: Sovereignty and Democracy After Brexit* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

[12] See Steve Buckledee, *The Language of Brexit: How Britain Talked Its Way Out of the European Union* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

[13] See Tory Young, "What's to-day? Politics and Typography in Ali Smith's Decade", in Nick Bentley et al., eds., *The 2010s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 137-152.

[14] The second section of *Gliff* is pointedly entitled "Power" (145).

[15] The word 'camera' occurs eighteen times in the novel.

[16] Sites of human reproduction and social conditioning.

[17] See Jeffrey A. Rufo, "'He needs will be Absolute Milan': The Political Thought of *The Tempest*", in Vaughan and Mason Vaughan, eds., The Tempest*: A Critical Reader*, 137-164.

pervasive and inescapable. Although pivoting on the prominence of absolutist rule, the play famously foregrounds Caliban as a figure of resistance and disorder, thus not only interrogating the nature of control but also destabilising its very foundations.[18]

Shakespeare's portrayal of Prospero's overarching rule in *The Tempest* resurfaces in *Gliff*, where Smith reimagines these dynamics within a thoroughly panoptic world[19] in which the core fragilities exposed by the pre- and post-Brexit debate and policies have become a tangible and disquieting reality. In this world, the government itself assumes the role of a new Prospero: not embodied in a single figure but diffused through an omnipresent, all-seeing state apparatus that seeks to regulate every aspect of the citizens' lives. Central to this system is the exhaustive collection of personal data, carried out by agents who, in line with Michel Foucault's conception of biopower,[20] exercise surveillance at multiple, sometimes improbable levels of individual existence. One striking example is Colon, a local boy appointed by the government as a "Designated Data Collector slash Strangers" (88), who subjects Briar and Rose to a barrage of questions that lays bare the invasive logic of this regime (89-90). The siblings' refusal to provide answers crystallises their precarious condition as outcasts in a culture that has taken the hostile environment to dreadful extremes, although it remains unclear why they have been rendered 'Unverifiables'.[21] Like one of Prospero's spirits carrying out his master's orders, Colon shows how deeply state supervision is embedded in the fissures of society.

When Briar undergoes re-education and is remade into a servant of the state, like Winston Smith, the protagonist of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), this role aligns her/him with a contemporary Ariel: like Shakespeare's spirit, Briar fluctuates between genders and complies with whatever the system demands. As supervisor in the factory, Briar enforces class hierarchies, checks on employees, and submits to the pervasive gaze of the ever-watching cameras. Yet through the novel's first-person narration, readers gain access to Briar's thoughts and discover the depth of their loathing. Just as Prospero's spirits who "all do hate him / As rootedly as [Caliban]" (3.2.94-95),[22] Briar despises the system they now serve. Even so, survival requires submission to it, the bitter consequence of five years marked by violence, abuse of power, and forced ascent through the very hierarchy that destroyed their freedom.

In *Gliff*, five years after the siblings' displacement, the world has grown even bleaker and more technocratic. Here Smith aligns her dystopia with Huxley's techniques of subliminal sleep-teaching ('hypnopaedia') and the Bokanovsky Process of cloning, as well as with the many science-fictional adaptations of *The Tempest* that have imagined the fusion of control and futuristic technology. This logic is already discernible in Shakespeare's play, where Prospero's *art* is not merely magic but a composite practice of instruments and devices, straddling the intellectual disciplines of the Renaissance: alchemy, astrology, cartography, mathematics, and the magical arts in their broader sense, all mobilised as technologies of knowledge. At first glance, Prospero might appear as a relic, a stage magician out of place within the new scientific paradigm of the seventeenth century. Yet, as

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[18] Just to mention two classic studies: Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[19] See the notion of the subject as perfectly individualised 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).

[20] See, for instance, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[21] Colon's assignment to the "Strangers" sector, and his particular interest in Briar and Rose, provides an indication that the issue may be ethnically grounded, though this is not explicitly confirmed.

[22] All parenthetical references to the play are to William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, eds.Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Arden Bloomsbury Shakespare, 2011).

Maisano observes, Prospero's vision of universal decay or dissolution (4.1.148-158) articulates "an alchemist-cum-atomist's theory of everything in which the audience … discovers that all perceptible entities … are composed of subtle, imperceptible, but nonetheless physical 'stuff'".[23] In this sense, Smith's "techno-saturated dystopia"[24] interrogates the fraught relationship between technological and scientific progress and individual autonomy in the same way as *The Tempest*.

Equally significant in bringing *Gliff*, a novel that brims with wordplay, into continuity with Shakespeare is its relentless focus on language as a site of ethical and political struggle. Already a defining feature of the *Seasonal Quartet* and of her writing more broadly, Smith's preoccupation with the instability of words highlights their capacity to clarify and connect but also to distort, divide, and dominate.[25] Shakespeare's *Tempest* similarly probes the dual nature of language: its ability to conjure truth and justice, and its potential to warp reality through misperception or manipulation.[26]

This preoccupation with the power of language naturally extends into the domain of narrative itself. In *The Tempest*, Prospero is the sole proprietor of the island's stories; all alternative accounts, and particularly Caliban's, are framed as rebellion and sedition. The complete deprivation of freedom and free will imposed on the island's creatures is reinforced through Prospero's masterful ability to manipulate memory, exemplified in Miranda's amnesia of her life before the island – a past that appears to her "far off, / And rather like a dream than an assurance / That my remembrance warrants" (1.2.44-45). At the same time, through his spirits, he continuously creates and re-creates the reality of the island, producing for the shipwrecked a shifting world that oscillates between rational wakefulness and dreamlike illusion, where events seem inexplicable precisely because they are authored by an unseen power.

In *Gliff* this logic re-emerges in the state's propaganda and erasures. Beyond the total domination of public discourse and information, the novel imagines a society in which truth-telling itself is now obsolete, a condition embodied in the futile attempts of Briar and Rose's mother to resist the system by denouncing the powerful conglomerate for which she works (see 74-81).[27] Along with the silencing of dissent, the systematic effacement of collective memory also renders the novel a dystopian metamorphosis of its Shakespearean antecedent. Through the siblings' light, almost playful filter, Smith depicts a world of cultural amnesia in which, for instance, Colon has no knowledge of pop icons familiar to the siblings (85). The loss is not trivial, but symptomatic of a society so stripped of communality that even the most basic forms of shared cultural knowledge have vanished.

This mechanism of erasure extends to the destruction of the very spaces where memory might endure. Where Prospero reshapes reality itself through his spectral illusions, *Gliff* translates this vision by filling the narrative with spectral sites of memory: theatres, libraries, museums, and state schools – the very fabric of the commonweal – that have been razed or repurposed for private use.[28] In their place, state-appointed 'educators' offer a digital surrogate of Prospero's home-entertainment system, where spirits appear to dance, sing, and perform before vanishing into thin air.[29] In extending

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[23] Maisano, "Shakespeare's Revolution", 170.

[24] Nat Segnit, "Give Me Your Answer: Two Siblings Fend for Themselves in a Totalitarian State", *Times Literary Supplement* (15 November 2024), *www.the-tls.com*.

[25] See Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, "Introduction", in Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, eds., *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1-8; Ema Jelínková, "Introduction", in Ema Jelínková and Rachel Sumner, eds., *The Literary Art of Ali Smith: "All we are is Eyes"* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 9.

[26] See, among many others, Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*. The same duality of language is also famously at stake in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

[27] See Paraic O'Donnell, "*Gliff* by Ali Smith review — Reading the Signs of Crisis", *The Guardian* (2 November 2024), *www.theguardian.com*.

[28] The novel opens with an emblematic image: an art museum converted into an exclusive hotel (4).

[29] Most famously staged during the banquet and masque scenes (stage directions, 3.3.17-52; 4.1.60-138).

Shakespeare's meditation on memory and reality into the terrain of cultural erasure and state propaganda, Smith evokes the discursive strategies of contemporary politics, where populist rhetoric and illusory promises sustain the fantasy of sovereignty while masking deeper complexities.

If *The Tempest* stages the exercise of universal and unchallenged power, it also sets against it the persistent attempts to resist that power. Threats to sovereignty notoriously permeate the play,[30] dramatising the fragile yet enduring presence of rebellion to confirm that even authority presented as absolute remains open to challenge. The first locus of rebellion with which *Gliff* takes up this paradigm of resistance is the community of misfits who take refuge in the abandoned school, a symbolic building whose precariousness becomes – as is often the case in Smith's works – a metaphor for the erosion of cultural memory and collective responsibility.[31] These individuals "were largely unverifiable because of words", because they had said something deemed illegal, inappropriate, or otherwise unacceptable (161-162). Among them is Oona, an elderly activist and the school's former librarian, who becomes a kind instruct in revolutionary praxis for Briar through symbolic acts that anchors resistance in the preservation of knowledge and memory (174-179).

Resistance in *Gliff* is communal as much as individual, extending across hidden networks – namely, a clandestine organisation named Campion that saves and shelters the 'Unverifiables' – that preserve the possibility of solidarity within a regime designed to annihilate it. Crucially, such visions of solidarity reflect a pattern that runs throughout Smith's work: the consistent imagining of alternative forms of community and kinship as the ground for survival, both personal and collective.[32] Against the politics of exclusion that culminated in the Brexit referendum and intensified in its aftermath, Smith reasserts the principle of hospitality, seldom rooted in blood ties but instead emerging through chosen communities of care, fragile yet hopeful spaces in which the possibility of renewal is sustained.

Briar's own rebellion begins with a chance encounter: meeting a factory-worker named Ayesha Falcon and, for the first time in five years, hearing Rose mentioned. Retrieving a Shakespearean romance trope,[33] Ayesha tells Briar "You are the image of your sister", which unleashes a torrent of reflection from Briar: nobody knows she ever existed anymore, since her name has "fallen off any data connected to me" (117). When the school is stormed and Briar is taken away, the siblings are separated for good. Briar never discovers Rose's fate, and so the mere suggestion that she might still be alive reignites a flame of hope that had lain dormant while survival was Briar's only aim.[34]

It is at this point that the phrase "Brave new world" (116), opening the chapter narrating older Briar's life in the factory, assumes the same ironic charge it bears in Shakespeare's play and Huxley's novel. From then on, each chapter begins with a variation on the phrase, and each variation marks a stage in Briar's growing resistance.[35] When the words become "Brave new wold" (121), the altered

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[30] Caliban against Prospero, Sebastian and Antonio against Alonso.

[31] In keeping with Smith's characteristic intertextual logic, libraries as emblems of care, hospitality, and shared cultural memory, as well as sites of resistance and guardians of stories and multiplicity, are also present, for instance, in the short story collection *Public Libraries and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015) and in *Autumn* (2016).

[32] See Agnes Andewega and Dušan Janković, "'Always Try to Welcome People into the Home of Your Story'. Forms of Hospitality in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*", *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 11.2 (2024), 1-18; Michela Compagnoni, "The Spirit(s) of Time: Navigating the Present Through Shakespeare's Romances in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*", *Critical Survey*, 37.2 (2025), 112-127.

[33] For a Shakespearean parallel, see *The Winter's Tale*, where Leontes remarks on Florizel's resemblance to his father: "did print your royal father off, / Conceiving you. Were I but twenty-one, / Your father's image is so hit in you, / His very air, that I should call you brother". William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. John Pitcher (London: Arden Bloomsbury Shakespeare, 2010), 5.1.124-127.

[34] Briar likewise never learns what happened to Leif, except that she was refused re-entry at border control and later appears with a date of death (196).

[35] Smith is well known for her witty use of wordplay (see Young, "What's To-Day", 141-142; Germanà and Horton, "Introduction", 1). Fittingly, the second novel of the diptych will be entitled *Glyph*, a homophone of *Gliff*.

spelling signals the metaphorical space that opens for Briar the moment they learn Rose may still exist. Later, "Rave new old" (224) points to the tactics Briar develops within the factory, exploiting the blind spots in surveillance to fight the system from within. "Raveno(us)" (233) marks the pivotal moment when Briar trades painkillers with Ayesha for information.[36] With "Aven(i)r" (246), the word tilts toward futurity, crystallising the decision to rebel: "my briar self is back, prickly and twined and opening in me like a bush covered in wild opening blossom" (248).

The sequence builds toward a crescendo – "Brave you world," "Brave now world," and "Bravo new world" (255, 258, 264) – which accompanies Briar's escape from the factory and their wanderings in the countryside. It culminates in the final transformation, "Brave new word" (266), when readers learn how Rose and Gliff escaped together, the horse's polysemous name and Rose's candid innocence standing as metaphors for resistance against the regime's drive to fixity. In a gesture that recalls Shakespeare's own play with language in *The Tempest*, where meaning continually slips, multiplies, and resists containment, with each new inflection of Shakespeare's line Smith stages the slow emergence of rebellion, showing how totalitarianism can be unravelled not in one single act but through a series of small resistances prising open a fracture in the system. In this process, Briar comes into focus as a Caliban-like figure: marked by exclusion, shaped by subjugation, yet ultimately embodying the possibility of defiance. This parallel extends beyond their resistance to encompass the very terms in which *Gliff* reimagines Shakespeare's treatment of the 'Unverifiable' subjects of the island.

3. Caliban's Heirs: The Unruly Power of the Unverifiables

At the heart of *Gliff*, displacement finds its first solace in the figure of the horse, which tellingly gives the title to the novel's first section (1), thus foregrounding it from the outset as a living repository of hope against the odds. In Rose's devotion to the animal destined for the slaughterhouse, the horse embodies a fragile but sustaining metaphor for how care for the vulnerable, the expendable, and the silenced may itself become an act of resistance in a world structured by exclusion.

From this emblem of care, the narrative expands toward broader models of community, alternative forms of belonging that recur throughout Smith's oeuvre and constitute a central aspiration for much Brexlit.[37] The group of misfits inhabiting the abandoned St Saccobanda School exemplifies such solidarities: individuals who, though they live together only for a short period and largely keep to themselves, nonetheless mark each other indelibly through the simple fact of sheltering and sharing space.[38] A parallel emerges in Ayesha's account of those saved by Campion and gathered in the dark cave, where Rose takes care of the group through storytelling (240-245), a practice that, as so often in Smith's work, turns narrative itself into a vehicle of survival and connection.

This emphasis on care is also embodied in Leif, whose decision to take responsibility for Briar and Rose sets the siblings' fate of abandonment in motion. He provides for them with real devotion, before departing to find their mother unencumbered by the bureaucratic burden of carrying minors to whom he has no official relation. As Rose reflects, "He's not our family…. That's what the people in the passport offices kept saying to us" (94). In a society that has taught them to trust only data and

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[36] This echoes *Brave New World*'s 'soma', the state-distributed drug used to pacify citizens but also circulated through clandestine exchanges and barter.

[37] See Kristian Shaw, *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 3; examples of such alternative models of belonging recur throughout the *Seasonal Quartet* as well as in *There But For The* (2011) and *Companion Piece* (2022).

[38] The group includes children and teenagers, a seventy-nine-year-old former librarian, a renowned philosopher and art historian, as well as other figures identified only by name and their roles in the school community (111; 154; 156-162).

numbers, Briar and Rose must learn instead to place their trust in Leif, and in the possibility of care that exceeds formal recognition, since – as Briar acknowledges – "Family can be more things than people say it is" (Ibid.).

The precarious bond between Leif and the children is itself dangerous precisely because it cannot be "verified", and in *Gliff*'s world the inability to compress an individual into a dossier of certified facts – purporting to capture the entirety of their personhood – renders them inherently suspect. This emphasis on the 'Unverifiables' speaks directly to the Brexit context, where anti-immigrant sentiment fuelled fierce opposition to open border policies, intensifying xenophobic resistance to immigration and transnational mobility more broadly.[39] The treatment of those pushed to the outer edges of society has always been a defining concern of Smith's work,[40] and *Gliff* makes it starkly visible through its catalogue of exclusions. The abandoned school, for instance, also shelters two small "feral looking," completely silent children who, as the novel explains, "had been marked unverifiable simply because nobody knew what had happened to their adults and it couldn't be proved who they were" (162). The arbitrariness of such designations underscores how people of any age may be rendered unverifiable not only for what they are or what they say, but also for what they are *not* or for what they refuse to do.

As in so much literature that confronts the issue of monstrosity in its broadest sense, what is at stake here is not only the fear of difference but, more pointedly, the fear of what cannot be classified and regulated.[41] In the panoptic world Smith depicts, this fear becomes institutionalised, and the state responds to those who resist categorisation by re-educating them so that they can be reintegrated into the social fabric, once they have come to comply fully with its rigid binaries. It is in this nexus of exclusion, fear, and resistance that *Gliff* finds its strongest echo of Shakespeare's Caliban, who stands as the paragon of monstrosity: deformed and incomprehensible, Caliban is *the* model of the excluded figure to which so much later literature has returned. The play stages Caliban as the monster *par excellence*, the foil against which all others appear angelic, as Prospero makes clear when, addressing Miranda, he declares: "Thou think'st there is no more such shapes as he, / Having seen but him and Caliban. Foolish wench, / To th' most of men, this is a Caliban, / And they to him are angels" (1.2.479-482).

To risk a deliberate simplification of a much-debated critical issue, Caliban is for Prospero not merely a servant but also a creature to be reshaped.[42] Like *Gliff*'s 'Unverifiables', he is subjected to a process of re-education, reshaped through the imposition of his master's customs and language, in an effort to integrate him into the surrogate of Western civilisation over which Prospero presides as absolute ruler. Yet Caliban can never be fully assimilated. What makes him most threatening is not a specific deformity but the fact that his deformity is never clearly defined, always left deliberately imprecise when, again and again, characters attempt to decode and classify Caliban's irreducible difference driven by the compulsion to determine the origin and nature of his monstrous body.[43] The same logic drives the society of *Gliff*, where the 'Unverifiables' are feared not for what they

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[39] See Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2020).

[40] An exemplary case is Smith's participation in the *Refugee Tales* project, which brings together writers and asylum seekers to recount stories of displacement and detention: Ali Smith, "The Detainee's Tale", in David Herd and Anna Pincus, eds., *Refugee Tales* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2016), 15-26.

[41] I use 'monster' in a poststructuralist sense, as a liminal creature that resists definition and classification, subverting systems of norms. See Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003); and Jacques Derrida, *Points…: Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elizabeth Weber, transs. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1995), 386, where the monster is "not yet recognized" and "frightens because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure".

[42] See Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Creature Caliban", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51 (2000), 1-23.

[43] See Michela Compagnoni, *I mostri di Shakespeare: figure del deforme e dell'informe* (Roma: Carocci, 2022), 34-35.

demonstrably are, but because they resist all attempts at categorisation, jeopardizing the stability of a system predicated on the utter subjugation of difference.

From here, *Gliff* shifts its interrogation of the 'Unverifiables' toward the broader problem of identity, raising in oblique form the question of where identity resides.[44] Certainly not in documents, as Rose insists, for "a passport doesn't prove we're us, she said. We prove a passport's it. We just are us" (97). In *Brave New World* the answer is unequivocal: identity lies in the caste into which one is born, reinforced by the conditioning imposed to keep each subject in place within that hierarchy. In *Gliff*, by contrast, identity is multiple, transient, and unstable, a condition both liberating and perilous in a system intent on overseeing and systematising.

The notion that identity is not singular but fluid is already at work in *The Tempest*, where characters repeatedly question one another's true nature, only to discover that identities shift as roles transform. This instability arises from the blurred boundaries between illusion and reality, as well as from the profound metamorphoses each character undergoes over the play's three hours on the island: like a Renaissance alchemical process, each figure is somehow purged and perfected, emerging reborn by the end of the play.[45] The "sea-change" (1.2.401) evoked in Ariel's song becomes the emblem of this transformation, as Prospero's shapeshifting spirits drive the characters through cycles of disorientation and renewal. *Gliff* revisits this Shakespearean vision in distorted form: here, subjects can be rendered "temporary", their very being reduced to whether or not their data can be verified, as if their inner selves existed only in the eyes of the system that monitors them.

In this respect, Briar stands as the novel's most emblematic figure of fluctuating identity, continuing Smith's sustained exploration of non-binary and gender-fluid characters across her fiction.[46] Their refusal to be confined to a single category carries not only the stigma of exclusion but also the possibility of liberation. By slipping between names, genders, and roles, Briar unsettles the very boundaries on which the state's taxonomic logic depends and opens a space of resistance within instability: when a fellow resident of the school asks "are you a boy or a girl," Briar's disarming reply – "Yes I am" (160) – captures this refusal of binary logic. The novel approaches the question with characteristic delicacy, presenting it not as a problem to be solved but as one of the many ways characters inhabit their being. It is only after Briar's capture that their sexual and gender identity becomes problematised both by the guards and at the level of the narrative itself.

This process of coercive identification reaches its most violent expression when Briar is taken into a room and ordered to undress (211-216). "What the fuck is it?" one guard asks, the pronoun *it* enacting an immediate dehumanisation. "Can't tell," another replies, before demanding, "Which are you, then, you little weirdo?" Humiliation follows as Briar's clothes are cut away, their hair shorn off, and their body searched, until, as Briar recalls, "they told me what they'd decided I was". Identity here is not discovered but imposed, reduced to an arbitrary verdict backed by force. Even the name by which Briar will live for the next five years is the product of misrecognition: asked who they are, Briar replies "Allendale," after the folk song[47] that inspired their mother in naming both siblings, but the guards mishear it as "Alan Dale". The act of renaming completes the process of erasure and re-inscription, violently overwriting selfhood with the stamp of state power.

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[44] The novel pays close attention to names, which shift as fluidly as identities themselves (see, for instance, page 86).

[45] See, among others, Peggy Muñoz Simonds, "My Charms Crack Not: The Alchemical Structure of *The Tempest*", *Comparative Drama*, 31.4 (1997-1998), 538-570; Michela Compagnoni, "Steel Caliban: A New Etymological and Alchemical Inquiry into *The Tempest*", *Shakespeare*, 21.1 (2025), 33-48.

[46] Examples include Smith's novels *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *How to Be Both* (2014), as well as the short story "Erosive", in *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 115-122.

[47] The reference is to the traditional Northumbrian folk song *The Bonnie Lad of Allendale* (anonymous, c. 19th century).

What demands attention here is the way the violence of Briar's forced exposure finds a striking parallel in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, where a comparable scene unfolds as Stephano and Trinculo first encounter Caliban in Act 2, Scene 2. Their exchange reads almost like a grotesque anatomy, an inquisitorial survey of his body that rehearses the classificatory zeal of Renaissance science: "What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive?" Caliban becomes, in rapid succession, "a strange fish", "an islander that hath lately suffered by a / thunderbolt", "some monster of the isle", a "cat", a "mooncalf", a "puppy-headed monster" (2.2.27; 35-36; 64; 82; 105; 152-153). Like a specimen in an anatomical theatre – those sites of bodily scrutiny proliferating in Renaissance Europe[48] – Caliban is dissected through language, his identity suspended between human and non-human, natural and unnatural. Crucially, however, the inquiry never arrives at a definitive answer. Caliban remains undefined, an indeterminate figure whose refusal to be pinned down has allowed him, across centuries of adaptation, to become all possible versions of himself.

This scene's resonance with Briar's ordeal in *Gliff* is sharpened by the economic logic embedded in Shakespeare's play. Trinculo imagines the profit to be made from exhibiting such a creature: "Were I in England now … There would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man" (2.2.27-31). Stephano echoes the impulse, envisioning Caliban as a gift for royalty: "If I can recover him and keep him tame, and get to Naples with him, he's a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat's leather … I will not take too much for him! He shall pay for him that hath him, and that soundly" (67-77). With telling similarity, the same urge to codify as inseparable from the urge to commodify resurfaces in *Gliff*, when the guards, after their long and humiliating inquiry into Briar's body, dismiss their indeterminacy with the chilling remark: "Good test case, though. Got the looks. Worth money" (214). In both texts, the refusal of definition becomes inextricable from the threat of objectification, laying bare how the drive to regiment and categorise bodies is bound to the impulse to exploit them.

4. Conclusion: Supera Bounders

From the same drive to define and demarcate arises one of the most resonant motifs in *Gliff*: the drawing of borders. The novel's third section, tellingly entitled "Lines" (219), foregrounds boundary-making as both literal and symbolic practice. Early on, Briar names the agents who paint the fatal red lines "supera bounders" (63), borrowing the phrase from the strange machine they operate, itself labelled "SUPERA BOUNDER" (54). The absurdity of the name, and the fact that the machine strikes Briar as "an invention made by an amateur for a joke" (54-55), underscores the banality of a simple sweep of paint with which lives are annulled as though existence itself could be erased by bureaucratic decree.

The glaring unawareness of those who perform such acts – like the "superabounder" who casually remarks, "Doing my job… What I'm paid to" (54) – is a paradigmatic case of bureaucratic inertia exemplifying Hannah Arendt's notion of the banality of evil, where wrongdoing arises from the ordinary functioning of bureaucracies once individuals cease to exercise judgment.[49] As Davide Del Bello observes, Shakespeare had already staged such dynamics in *The Tempest*, in which "evildoing … is ambiguously entangled with the systematic deployment and swift exercise of expedient

[48] Famous examples of anatomical theatres include that of the University of Padua, the first of its kind, built at the behest of the anatomist Girolamo Fabrici d'Acquapendente (1564), and that of the University of Leiden (1597).

[49] For a discussion of this issue in relation to Brexlit, see Lyndsey Stonebridge, "The Banality of Brexit", in Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature*, 7-14.

'instruction' (III.iii.85) meant to trigger specific results".[50] Prospero's repeated praise of Ariel and the spirits for the meticulous precision with which they execute his commands betrays a relish in procedural compliance, an echo of the bureaucratic inertia that Smith translates into a twenty-first-century equivalent.

An issue central to recent British debates and to Smith's post-referendum fiction,[51] in *Gliff* lines do not merely demarcate; they redefine. Like any border, they are conventions but nonetheless carry the arbitrary prerogative to determine the identity and belonging of places and those who inhabit them. The same holds in *The Tempest*, where spaces are provisional and unstable: the Duchy of Milan in Prospero's tale, the island in Caliban's claim to inheritance, and the reign of Naples in Antonio and Sebastian's plot.[52] Each is transformed – or made vulnerable to transformation – by usurpation, as violently and arbitrarily as a red line painted across the ground. Unlike in *Brave New World*, where the 'savages' are enclosed within the Reservation, in *Gliff* the line compels expulsion rather than confinement, forcing flight much as Prospero himself was once cast adrift.

To read Smith's novel through Shakespeare is thus to see how the line operates on two interwoven levels. On the one hand, it condenses the logic of dominance and surveillance. Prospero's omnipotent art, grounded in the manipulation of illusion and memory, finds a modern analogue in the technologies of cataloguing, monitoring, and erasure that structure Smith's state. The red line is the visible trace of an invisible system, marking the reach of a government that aspires to total control. On the other hand, the line exposes the instability of identity and belonging. In *The Tempest*, questions of who one is remain unsettled, shifting with each new configuration of power. *Gliff* reworks this legacy by showing how the category of the 'Unverifiable' emerges precisely from what cannot be contained or fixed. In both texts, the attempt to stabilise identity only reveals its inherent fluidity.

What, then, does it mean to live 'inside' or 'outside' the line? For Shakespeare's characters, as for Smith's, borders are never neutral: they are instruments of domination and also the conditions that make rebellion thinkable. Caliban, Ariel, and even Antonio plot to resist the sovereign power that seeks to define and bind them. Briar's own rebellion follows this trajectory, refusing the identities imposed on them and finally rewriting Prospero's "brave new world" into a series of subversive fractures by erasing data, including their own ("Now that I don't exist I finally exist again", 260).

Today, in a world increasingly preoccupied with borders and belonging, the image of the line carries an unsettling familiarity. Yet in its arbitrariness, the line also reveals its fragility. Just as Prospero's island dissolves into air and his sovereign magic into words, so too Smith suggests that systems of exclusion are not immutable. They can be undone and reimagined. For *Gliff* is steeped in Shakespearean tropes and echoes that extend far beyond *The Tempest*: the lost parents, children, and siblings; the rediscovered family members; the mixed and fluid identities; the magic and folklore; the dreams, storytelling, and voyage cast as a quest. These hallmarks of the romances reappear in Smith's novel not as nostalgic allusions but as invitations to envisage alternatives for possible futures of peace rooted in rebirth, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

In *Brave New World*, Shakespeare gives John the Savage the words to voice his deepest emotions; in *Gliff*, *The Tempest* still furnishes the language with which we confront power, rethink identity, and lay bare the workings of control. As Andrew James Hartley observes, millennial Shakespearean rewritings invite us to investigate "the way contemporary concerns extend and rewrite the

[50] Davide Del Bello, "Things of Darkness: Enduring Evil in Shakespeare's Late Plays", *Memoria di Shakespeare*, 12, "Issues of Evil", ed. by Alessandra Marzola, forthcoming.
[51] Notable examples include *Spring* (2019), with its focus on an Immigration Removal Centre, and *Companion Piece* (2022), which engages with Covid-19 policies.
[52] See Orgel, *Illusion of Power*.

Shakespearean originals".[53] This is precisely what Smith achieves: her novel testifies to the vitality of Shakespeare's play as a living tool for navigating the fractures of our present.

[53] Andrew James Hartley, ed., *Shakespeare and Millennial Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2017), 10.