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Author(s): Susan Jennifer Elsley

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**Images of the Witch in Nineteenth-Century Culture**

**Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of  
Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy by Susan Jennifer Elsley**

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## **Abstract**

### **Images of the Witch in Nineteenth-Century Culture, Susan Jennifer Elsley**

This thesis examines the witch imagery used during the nineteenth century in children's literature, realist and gothic fiction, poetry and art, and by practitioners and critics of mesmerism, spiritualism and alternative spirituality. The thesis is based on close readings of nineteenth-century texts and detailed analysis of artwork, but also takes a long view of nineteenth-century witch imagery in relation to that of preceding and succeeding periods. I explore the means by which the image of the witch was introduced as an overt or covert figure into the work of nineteenth-century writers and artists during a period when the majority of literate people no longer believed in the existence of witchcraft; and I investigate the relationship between the metaphorical witch and the areas of social dissonance which she is used to symbolise. I demonstrate that the diversity of nineteenth-century witch imagery is very wide, but that there is a tendency for positive images to increase as the century progresses. Thereby the limited iconography of malevolent witches and powerless victims of witch-hunts, promulgated by seventeenth-century witch-hunters and eighteenth-century rationalist philosophers respectively, were joined by wise-women, fairy godmothers, sorceresses, and mythical immortals, all of whom were defined, directly or indirectly, as witches. Nonetheless I also reveal that every image of the witch I examine has a dark shadow, despite or because of the empathy between witch and creator which is evident in many of the works I have studied. In the Introduction I acknowledge the validity of theories put forward by historians regarding the influence of societal changes on the decline of witchcraft belief, but I argue that those changes also created the need for metaphorical witchery to address the anxieties created by those changes. I contend that the complexity of social change occurring during and prior to the nineteenth century resulted in an increase in the diversification of witch imagery. I argue that the use of diverse images in various cultural forms was facilitated by the growth of liberal individualism which allowed each writer or artist to articulate specific concerns through discrete images of the witch which were no longer coloured solely by the dictates of superstition or rationalism. I look at the peculiar ability of the witch as a symbolic outcast from society to view that society from an external perspective and to use the voice of the exile to say the unsayable. I also use definitions garnered from a wide spectrum of sources from cultural history to folklore and neo-paganism to justify my broad definition of the word 'witch'. In Chapter One I explore children's literature, on the assumption that images absorbed during childhood would influence both the conscious and unconscious witch

imagery produced by the adult imagination. I find the templates for familiar imagery in collections of folklore and, primarily, in translations of 'traditional' fairy tales sanitised for the nursery by collectors such as Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. I then examine fantasies created for Victorian children by authors such as Mary de Morgan, William Makepeace Thackeray, George MacDonald and Charles Kingsley, where the image of witch and fairy godmother is conflated in fiction which elevates the didactic fairy tale to a level which in some cases is imbued with a neo-platonic religiosity, thereby transforming the witch into a powerful portal to the divine. In contrast the canonical novelists whose work I examine in Chapter Two generally project witch imagery obliquely onto foolish, misguided, doomed or defiant women whose witchery is both allusionary and illusionary. I begin with the work of Sir Walter Scott whose bad or sad witches touch his novels with the supernatural while he denies their magic. Scott's witch imagery, like that of Perrault and Grimm, is reflected in the witches who represent women's exclusion from autonomy, education and/or the literary establishment in the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. Traditional fairy-tale imagery is particularly evident in Charles Dickens' use of the witch to represent negative aspects in the development of society or the individual. In contrast Scott's impulse to distance himself from the pre-urban world represented by his witches contrasts with Thomas Hardy's mourning of the female earth spirits of Wessex, thereby linking fluctuating and evolving images of nature with images of the nineteenth-century witch. In Chapter Three I explore poetry and art through Romantic verse, Tennyson's Camelot, Rossetti and Burne-Jones' Pre-Raphaelite classicism, Rosamund Marriot Watson and Mary Coleridge's shape-shifting, mirrored women, and Yeats' Celtic Twilight: in doing so I find representations of the witch as the destructive seductress, the muse, the dark 'other' of the suppressed poet, the symbol of spellbinding amoral nature, and the embodiment of the Celtic soul. In the final chapter witch imagery is attached to actual practitioners of so-called 'New Witchcraft', yet they also become part of a story which seeks to equate neo/quasi science with the supernatural. I demonstrate a gender realignment of occult power as the submissive mesmerist's tool evolves into the powerful mother/priestess. I note the interconnectedness of fiction and fact via the novels of authors such as Wilkie Collins and Edward Bulwer-Lytton; and identify the role of the campaigning godmother figure as a precursor of the radical feminist Wiccan. I believe that my thesis offers a uniquely comprehensive view of the use of metaphorical witch imagery in the nineteenth century.

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## Introduction

In 1823 Sir Walter Scott, who had included a witch-figure in most of his novels, implied that the wicked witch as a physical being was dead to the rational mind, and he wrote her obituary: ‘Nobody would believe such folly now-a-days, except low and ignorant persons’.<sup>1</sup> The diminution of the witch’s power to arouse fear among the elite had been demonstrated as early as 1736 when James I’s 1604 Witchcraft Act was superseded by an inversion which, instead of hanging those convicted of witchcraft, imposed less draconian punishments on those who claimed to perform magic or those who harmed a supposed witch. Thus the image of the felonious witch faded to that of a fraud or a victim, and the idea of the witch as a tangible entity lessened exponentially until the twentieth century when neo-pagan witches claimed to have ‘come out of the broom cupboard’ to ‘counter the imagery of evil’.<sup>2</sup> Yet, while the ‘real’ witch virtually disappeared from sight the metaphorical witch was in the ascendancy: as Roy Porter notes, ‘expelled through the door, the supernatural was let back ... through the window, in art and literature, in aesthetic and imaginative incarnations’ wherein witches ‘assumed a new symbolic reality’.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly evident in the diversity of witch imagery produced by nineteenth-century writers and artists for consumers who primarily occupied the broad intellectual middle ground between the elite and the ‘ignorant’. Ironically the powerful symbolism of witchery was being utilised most effectively during a period when those who claimed to be witches were suffering the final humiliation of being prosecuted under the 1824 Vagrancy Act. While belief in witches melted like a wax image under the light of rationalism, images of the witches whom King James and his Bible had deemed too wicked to live were reformed by pens and paintbrushes into metaphors of ‘otherness’, reflected in artistic mirroring of nineteenth-century society.

This thesis grew from an undergraduate study of the rise and decline of witch persecution and a personal interest in neo-paganism, which when combined motivated a curiosity about what happened to the image of the witch between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries. Initial research indicated that so-called witches were still committing

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Walter Scott cited in Coleman O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott’s Fiction* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Starhawk (Miriam Simos), *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess: Special 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Roy Porter, ‘Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment, Romantic and Liberal Thought’, Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (eds.) *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 5: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Athlone Press, 1999) p. 247.

misdeemeanours such as fortune telling and cursing, generally among the gullible ‘low and ignorant’.<sup>4</sup> Yet, that essentially medieval witch also became a significant figure to consumers, creators and practitioners of nineteenth-century art, literature, pseudo-science and alternative spirituality who were neither low nor ignorant, and whose fears and desires still resonate today. Consequently, metaphorical nineteenth-century witch imagery offered the broadest and most legitimate areas of investigation in my search for witch imagery in the nineteenth-century bridge between the Early Modern witch trials and the twentieth-century amalgam of Wicca, ‘Blair Witch’ and Hogwarts. My intention was to demonstrate that the multiplicity of individual voices speaking through these witches contributed to an evolutionary increase in the variety of witch-type and a movement from negative to positive imaging through the century. However, whilst I found evidence of a trajectory which carried the witch further from the image of the medieval hag and nearer to Wiccan priestess and healer, I also found that the whitest of witches in nineteenth-century culture is accompanied by the shadow of a wicked witch; a duality which indicates a deep ambiguity behind the use of the witch as a representation of ‘otherness’ within an outwardly confident society.

I readily accept the arguments of historians such as James Sharpe, Christopher Hill and many more that changes which took place prior to the nineteenth century led to a (nearly) terminal decline in belief in witchcraft.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, I contend that that these changes also generated a need for the metaphorical witch whose image could be summoned through the window of art and literature in the form of wise women, wicked hags, fairy godmothers or beguiling sorceresses to enable writers, artists and their readers and viewers to ‘tell stories about their own identities and about power and its operations’.<sup>6</sup> Diane Purkiss uses this phrase to liken Early Modern appropriations of the witch to those of twentieth-century Pagans who practise a religion they call Wicca or Witchcraft. Yet I believe it is equally applicable to those who found themselves occupying a rapidly changing nineteenth-century world, where the spread of urbanisation and industrialisation, the growth of science, the symbiotic decline of belief in miracles and magic, and the prospect of greater democracy,

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<sup>4</sup> Owen Davies provides an excellent study of ‘Occult Practitioners’ in Chapter Five of *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture: 1736-1951* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> See James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Harlow: Longman, 2001); Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London: Penguin, 1991); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: a Regional and Comparative study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970); Roy Porter and Brian P. Levack in Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clarke (eds.) *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Vol. 5 :The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (1999); and Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1991) for examples of theories for the decline of belief in witchcraft.

<sup>6</sup> Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 52.



universal education and female emancipation, might inspire fear as well as hope at all levels of society. Consequently, the need for a symbolic witch to help explain new identities and social systems foreshadowed that of neo-pagans who invoke her as an icon of environmental awareness, feminism, and defiance of what they consider to be the unacceptable imposition of societal norms. It also foreshadowed the critical perspective of women such as Virginia Woolf who saw the suppressed poet within the witch ‘who dashed her brains out on the moor’, or Hélène Cixous, who urges women writers to emulate the defiant laugh of the Medusa in the face of phallocentrism, or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who see the wicked queen trapped in the mirror and hear the anguished cry of the madwoman in the attic, and many others like myself for whom witchery is a feminist issue.<sup>7</sup> Most of us who appropriate the image of the witch in either the nineteenth, twentieth or twenty-first centuries use her as a creature of the edge, as she has usually been since her physical occupation of the fringes of the medieval nuclear village. In the nineteenth century when mass education and increased social mobility and urbanisation engendered feelings of both hope and fear, creators of literature or visual art might expose the witch on the edge as a symbol of terrifying revolution, sexual deviation, or dangerous rural superstition. Equally they might use her more ambiguously as the dark ‘other’ who represents social advancement or female equality; or they might mourn her as the sacrificial Earth goddess, symbolically exiled from urban society as the symbol of a lost pastoral Golden Age. As the shadowy outsider the witch reincarnated through nineteenth-century culture could allow those who summoned her to look on their nation and its inhabitants from an ‘other’, outsider perspective. Thus she was a mouthpiece through which writers and artists could say what was often deemed unspeakable in respectable society. While, in simplistic terms the Early Modern witch was primarily a hated figure, and her immediate successor became a figure of pity or derision, my close reading of nineteenth-century texts and artwork suggests that the witch in her ‘aesthetic and imaginative incarnation’ was predominantly a figure which evoked empathy.

Unlike historians who analyse the role of witch imagery in the opposing fields of ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ culture, my thesis examines the images created by primarily middle-class writers and artists for the consumers of ‘middling’ culture at a time which experienced increasing bourgeois power. It was an age in which the sons and daughters of clergymen, land agents and clerks produced works which entertained audiences ranging from small

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf cited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* Second Edition (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 544. Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ *Signs*: Vol.1, No.4 (Summer, 1976).

shopkeepers to the monarch and her consort, most of whom embodied middle-class Victorian values. The witch imagery utilised by bourgeois nineteenth-century culture is widely diverse, with each ‘witch’ being designed to serve a specific purpose in a period of liberal individualism which rejected the dictates of the mob or the elite. The witches invoked for and by nineteenth-century middle-class culture carried the genetic markers laid down by earlier elite or popular perceptions, but they demonstrated a diversity which pre-figured that of twentieth-century media in all its forms, where a witch might still be presented as malevolent, deluded or victimised, but equally as kindly, wise, magical or even as a link to the divine; and whether primarily ‘good’ or ‘bad’ her human vulnerability is often glimpsed beneath her witchery. She also pre-figures modern pagan witchcraft whose covens, according to Ronald Hutton, are dominated primarily by the lower-middle-class, and whose images of the witch-goddess range from the symbolic to the physical.<sup>8</sup>

In 2001 Sharpe (somewhat belatedly) noted the continuation of post-Enlightenment interest in the occult in the ‘current vogue for matters New Age’.<sup>9</sup> That interest is evident in academia too, as historians such as Hutton and Purkiss search for the roots of modern witchcraft and examine the stories from which the image of the modern witch was born. Hutton’s pioneering work *The Triumph of the Moon* discounts Neo-Pagan claims of an unbroken link to ancient belief systems, instead identifying Neo-Platonic Romanticism as the cradle of modern witchcraft.<sup>10</sup> Purkiss’ *The Witch in History* compares Early Modern representations of the witch with those presented by modern novelists, film makers, and neo-witches who are, she suggests, as unconstrained by ‘the rules of evidence’ as were their seventeenth-century predecessors who bestowed or assumed the image of the witch, or Charles Leland who produced ‘evidence’ of still-extant ancient witch practice at the close of the nineteenth century, or Margaret Murray who ‘invented a fertility religion’ in the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> My thesis, like that of Purkiss’, is not concerned with discovering ‘truth’ about witches; neither does it enter the debate about historical rigour applied to the discovery or creation of a Great Goddess. It is an investigation of perceptions, of images and how they are used, not an examination of witchcraft practice and prosecution. It makes detailed close readings as well as taking a long view of images of the witch and their

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 391-2 and p. 401.

<sup>9</sup> James Sharpe, *Witchcraft in Early Modern England*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*

<sup>11</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, pp. 52 and 36. See Charles Godfrey Leland, *Aradia: The Gospel of the Witches*, [1899] (London: Gates of Annwan, 1991) and Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921)

evolution through the nineteenth century. This requires an understanding of the witch imagery extant in nineteenth-century minds familiar with folklore, traditional fairy tales and Classical myths, the work of Walter Scott, the Romantic poets, Thomas Malory and many other influences. It also requires an acceptance that the witchery of certain images could be more evident to those looking at nineteenth-century texts through twenty-first-century eyes influenced by Leland, Murray or even Robert Graves' *White Goddess*. Consequently, I travel beyond the temporal boundaries of the nineteenth century and look back to the seventeenth century in order to identify the established cultural witch-marks which could be used to signify that a woman's metaphorical witchery was malevolent; to traditional seventeenth and eighteenth folklore and fairy tales to attempt to differentiate between wise-women, fairies and witches; to eighteenth century rationalism for references which might demonstrate her victimhood; and to pre-Christian myth and twentieth-century paganism to find the relationship between the witch and the goddess.

The diversity of witch imagery generated before, during and after the nineteenth century complicates any simple definition of a witch. The collections of folk lore with which I open my thesis demonstrate a casual intertwining of nomenclature which might result in a character being referred to as a witch, a hen wife, a fairy or a sorceress during the course of one short tale, thereby giving some validity to the claim by the neo-pagan witch Doreen Valiente that the worlds of witchcraft and Faerie have always been so close that 'it is not easy to draw a precise boundary between them'.<sup>12</sup> Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994) traces the etymological link between the word 'fairy' and the fates who spin, measure and cut the thread of destiny in many mythologies, and she notes that 'fairies share with Sibyls knowledge of the future and past', as, she might have added, do witches in their traditional incarnation.<sup>13</sup> Owen Davies describes the archetypal witch, whose 'popular' image is bequeathed by the medieval to the Victorian imagination, as an old woman with a deformity, a mole or other 'witch-mark', who keeps a pet (a familiar), travels in spirit form, can take animal form, and fly on a broomstick or other everyday object transformed into a supernatural vehicle; he cites a recollection made in 1833 of an old woman who wore a high steeple crowned hat 'just for all the world like the pictures of an old witch'.<sup>14</sup> While Davies credits the mass production of texts with consolidating a medieval image of the witch, the

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<sup>12</sup> Doreen Valiente, *An ABC of Witchcraft Past and Present* (London: Robert Hale, 1973), p. 118.

<sup>13</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), pp. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 174.

spread of education coupled with the translation and dissemination of Continental fairy tales, folk lore and mythology clearly not only provided children with an international array of witch-types but also introduced the bourgeoisie to representations of occult women who would previously have been familiar only at a parochial level via oral folk lore, or to those skilled in languages and who had received an elite education. By 1832 English readers could find in translations of Goethe's *Faust*, for instance, witches ranging from the kitchen crone, to broomstick-riding hags, and the seductive Lamia.<sup>15</sup> In 1853 the folklorist George Webbe Dasent prefixed his collection of Norse tales with a narrative charting the gradual degradation of the image of the wise pagan priestess and healer into that of the evil witch.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, all of the images outlined above qualify in this thesis as witch-figures in the nineteenth-century imagination. They also appear overwhelmingly in female form because, notwithstanding the fact that men died as witches in the witch trials, were prosecuted as cunning men and astrologers under the Vagrancy Act, and are joining covens and naming themselves witches as I type these words, the witch in terms of popular imagery is female.<sup>17</sup>

She is also wicked. The word 'witch' in the title of a film, book or even an academic paper (as I have found) has the potential to excite audiences; this excitement is possibly ignited by the associations of danger and darkness surrounding traditional images of the witch even in the minds of those who see her as a purely fictional entity. The examples of nineteenth-century culture examined in my thesis demonstrate cases in which the Gothic image of the witch provides an entertaining alternative to rationality, as in William Bell Scott's 'The Witch's Ballad', or a symbol of unmitigated evil such as George MacDonald's 'Watho'.<sup>18</sup> But there are many more cases of subtler appropriation wherein, because she is essentially an extra-mural figure of darkness and implied menace capable of flying at will across boundaries, she speaks from her exile and from the deepest recesses of the creative mind on behalf of women who long for parity with men in matters of the head and heart, as does George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver. She also speaks for Christians like MacDonald whose faith embraces a Romantic Deism, and she speaks with the voice of the Muse to and through poets and painters from D.G. Rossetti to Swinburne whose life-styles and artistry may deviate from accepted norms. She utters the dark thoughts of those battling with conflicting internal

<sup>15</sup> Goethe, *Faust* Louis Leibrich (ed.) (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1970)

<sup>16</sup> George Webbe Dasent, *Popular Tales from Norse Mythology* [1853] (New York: Dover, 2001), pp. xii – xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra offers the surprising statistical information that men made up ninety per cent of those prosecuted in Iceland's witch trials, although she concedes that this is not the norm throughout Europe, 'Witchcraft after the Witch-Trials' in Ankarloo and Clark (eds.) *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 5: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (1999), p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> These examples will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Three and One respectively.

and external ethical debates. I argued earlier that rapidly evolving intellectual and social changes prompted nineteenth-century writers and painters to articulate their fears or defiance through the figure of the witch, and enabled them to present that witch as they wished, free from the bias of the mob or the elite. I qualify that argument by suggesting that the specific choice of the witch to speak the unsayable is coloured by traditional imagery inherited from folklore and fairytale where the witch is the personification of powerful otherness. At her most elemental level the image of the witch was and is threatening; so, for example, the nineteenth-century novelist reaching for a metaphor for a destructive dominating mother-figure could, like Dickens, find the witch-queen leaping from a childhood fable into the character of Miss Havisham and assume that the reader shared this cultural heritage from childhood. Conversely, the image of the wicked witch might be invoked by means of similar allusions on behalf of female novelists or poets, such as Elizabeth Gaskell or Rosamund Marriott Watson, aware of the presumption of wickedness applied to their desire to cross gender boundaries as writers publishing their work and wishing, through the former's Bridget ('The Poor Clare') or the latter's 'Were-Wolf', to overturn or defiantly embrace the witch's darkness.<sup>19</sup> Whenever and however the image of the witch was used in nineteenth-century culture it retained a shadow of sinister capability, so the image was complex; it was positive and powerful but also negative and fearsome, even when authors of children's fiction conflated the images of witch and fairy godmother in the fairy tales which are the subject of my first chapter.

My thesis is divided into four chapters, which individually follow a chronological progression because I wished to demonstrate the transition from, in simplistic terms, the crone to the goddess in each of the areas I elected to research: a trajectory which moved at a different speed and terminated at a different place in children's literature, realist novels and Gothic short stories, poetry and art, and what became known as 'new witchcraft'. Chapter One focuses on the literature available to nineteenth-century children, highlighting the witch imagery which provided a common currency of witchery for every adult who had heard or read tales of magic, thereby producing templates for many of the witch figures appearing in the fiction those adults read. The chapter is divided into three parts, covering the areas of folklore, traditional fairy tales, and Victorian fairy tales. The first section identifies the witch imagery contained in collections modified by academics such as Dasent and Joseph Jacobs. The second addresses the versions of primarily German and French fairy tales such as

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<sup>19</sup> These texts will be discussed further in Chapters Two and Three respectively.

‘Cinderella’ and ‘The Sleeping Beauty’, whose witches were, and still are, more familiar to the general British readership than those originating in British folklore. Witches from these two groups were subsequently reconfigured in what I have defined as neo-fairy tales created in Victoria’s reign by writers such as George Cruikshank, Charles Kingsley and George MacDonald, where the witch and the fairy were merged into the wise fairy godmother who articulated guidance for young and old on behalf of her creators. I coined the term neo-fairy tale to differentiate these stories from the familiar sanitised tales inherited by the Victorians and from the nursery fare of didactic homilies also produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The ‘neo’ fairy tales were written at the same time, and often with the same skill, as the ‘novel’ fiction produced for adult consumption. Neo-fairy tales such as those written by MacDonald sometimes borrowed old motifs, but his texts have a mystical, neo-platonic quality, and the moonlight and stygian darkness with which he coloured his witch-godmother figures is both startlingly novel and powerfully ancient. Thus the writers of neo-fairy tales carried the witch close to the ideal of twentieth/twenty-first-century neo-paganism.

Chapter Two looks at nineteenth-century fiction, opening with a preliminary section on Walter Scott’s witch imagery because his writing was acknowledged as a primary influence by nearly every canonical nineteenth-century author whose work I examine in this section. His witch figures, like those of traditional fairy tale, provide readily identifiable templates of witch types for creators and consumers of novels throughout the nineteenth century. The main body of the chapter explores the use of witch imagery in the fiction written by Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. I examine Dickens’ frequent but oblique references to the witches of folklore and traditional fairytale. I also address the subjection of socially transgressive women to (mainly metaphorical) witch-trials in search of an enlightened verdict in the fiction of the Brontës, Gaskell and Eliot. The chapter ends with Thomas Hardy’s transformation of bewitching country women into sacrificial fin-de-siècle nature goddesses. In Dickens’ work the witch often becomes the symbol of negativity in the development of society or the individual. For the Brontës, Gaskell and Eliot she becomes a victim in the evolutionary struggle for intellectual and social parity between men and women. Scott and Hardy on the other hand, despite their differing attitudes towards women whose witchery symbolises the qualities of pre-urbanised and pre-industrial society, indicate the evolutionary development in values over half a century, which lead to a renewed yearning for the Romantic image of nature. Thereby the witch might inherit the mantle of Persephone, which bestowed on her a timeless

heritage and wild beauty. Yet, unlike the mythical Persephone she is only a woman who might die a sacrificial death, but never be reborn except through such innocuous successors as an anodyne younger sister or a powerless child. Writers of nineteenth-century rationalist fiction took an Enlightened view of the witch and presented her primarily as a victim; but like eighteenth-century philosophers they also denied her any magical power.<sup>20</sup> Only in their Gothic short stories do they introduce suggestions of occult power, but even these excursions into the supernatural contain the implied caveat that witchery exists solely in the eyes of the beholder.

Chapter Three analyses the diversity of witch imagery as perceived by nineteenth-century poets and graphic artists. It begins with an introductory section looking back to the witch imagery of that Romantic poetry which was still enjoyed by the Victorian public and influenced the work of Victorian poets and painters. The witches of Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge were uncanny, spellbinding creatures, whose origins in myth and legend placed them instantly beyond the constraints of nineteenth-century conventions or morality. They were supernatural by virtue of being beyond human nature, and they represented red-clawed super nature in their capacity to inspire creativity and to inflict suffering and death. The symbiotic relationship between changing perceptions of nature and of the witch is a theme running throughout this thesis, but this chapter in particular studies perceptions of female nature, and nature itself as represented by female witch imagery in poetry and art. The second section focuses on Eve as the witch in the tamed Garden of Eden, as represented by Guinevere in Camelot by Tennyson and others; and then it moves to the elemental witchery of Lilith/Vivien in the words of Tennyson and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and in the paintings of Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones. Section Three turns to Classical mythology where the witchery of Sibyls, Sirens and Gorgons is equated with the innocent amorality of nature and the muse by Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters. Section Four looks at how poets and artists represented the witches of Northern mythology including the Celtic-revivalist witch-women of W.B. Yeats, the shape-changers of Rosamund Marriott-Watson, and the negative and positive aspects of occult women in the poetry of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge. Tennyson, like those who demonised non-compliant women in the middle ages, implies that women who fail to conform to societal norms and expectations pose a threat to society. In contrast his fellow poets and painters in this section justify the ‘otherness’ of the witch and ‘otherness’ in human natures (including their own), both of which inspire fear and fascination in equal measure.

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<sup>20</sup> Purkiss aims the same accusation at historians in Chapter Three of *The Witch in History*.

Most of the witch imagery in this chapter is derived from myth so, as with the witches of fairy tales, the supernatural is not subjected to rationalism; disbelief on the part of viewers, readers or creators is immediately and willingly suspended, and the witch remains powerful, ‘other’ and fascinating even in her most fearsome incarnations.

Chapter Four demonstrates the way the imagery of folklore, myth and witch-hunts was used by and about those who explored new forms of quasi science and new routes to spiritual fulfilment that were grouped together under the derogatory title of ‘New Witchcraft’. An evolutionary progression is traced as the mesmerised female is first presented as a channel for the occult power of the diabolic mesmerist, then occult power undergoes gender realignment as the female spiritualist medium is equated with the pagan priestess or even goddess. The image of the malevolent witch is used by opponents of women who combine spiritualist beliefs with a passion to reform such areas as health, women’s rights and animal welfare; in contrast, their supporters compare them with the victims of medieval witch trials. Finally, Madame Blavatsky, the founding mother of Theosophy is either mocked as a fraudulent witch or honoured as a conduit of divine power, while her successor Annie Besant assumes the role of godmother with many of the associations applied to that role by tellers of neo-fairy tales. This chapter makes a connection between late-nineteenth-century healers and/or feminist activists and their twentieth-century counterparts who find affinity with Early Modern witch imagery as a way of challenging the status quo and focusing occult knowledge and power towards healing the spiritual and physical ills of individuals and the planet. Yet it also notes the relationship between fact and fiction as writers such as Harriet Martineau, Wilkie Collins, Robert Browning, Benjamin Disraeli and Edward Bulwer Lytton interweave the imagery of old and new witchcraft and play their part in the narrative through which the ‘new witch’ evolved into the neo-pagan witch.

It would have been interesting to cover other aspects of witch imagery, for example that used in nineteenth-century music, particularly opera, the theatre, the periodical press, and the direct or covert use of witch imagery in the trials of women and the reporting of those trials, all of which I believe would have provided fruitful areas of research. Purkiss also identifies many areas that she too would have liked to cover in *The Witch in History*, but she includes the story of the witch in ‘canonical literature from Shelley to Yeats’ and in the ‘art from Dürer to Burne-Jones’ as among those she has left untold.<sup>21</sup> The witch is a figure whose

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<sup>21</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 3.



imagery is culturally diverse and pervasive, and one study can only encompass part of that diversity. This thesis covers literature from Shelley to Yeats and a range of nineteenth-century artists including Burne-Jones, thus helping to fill a gap in current scholarship of the witch figure in history and culture. Hutton's *Triumph of the Moon* mentions Scott and Hardy but flies above the works of authors such as Dickens or Gaskell, whose witch imagery fed the imaginations of those whose status in society aligns them with the members of 'the upper levels of the working class and the lower levels of the middle one' who, Hutton claims, comprise the majority of modern British pagan witch covens.<sup>22</sup> Gilbert and Gubar do explore a broad selection of nineteenth-century literature in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, but their witch-figures are presented as either mad or bad; they note Elizabeth Barrett Browning's description of Aurora Leigh's 'sinister' vision of her dead mother as 'Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite', yet they make no mention of Romney's description of Aurora as a 'Witch, scholar, poet, dreamer, and the rest'.<sup>23</sup> Gently mocking it may be, but Romney's use of the word 'witch' implies that it can also be used to invoke the image of a bewitchingly attractive and wise woman. My thesis aims to demonstrate the rich diversity of witch imagery which permeated cultural representations during the nineteenth century and to show that this diversity enabled the witch to speak the unspeakable, remind us of the margins and the marginalised, and evoke the idea of complex powers which defy logic but, even now, speak to the cultural imagination.

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<sup>22</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 401.

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.18. See also Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* 'Book Two: Aurora's Aspirations', l. 86, in M.H. Abrams, (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Sixth Edition Vol. 2. (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993), p. 1042.

## Chapter 1

### The Witches of Nineteenth-Century Childhood

Using Wordsworth's premise that 'the child is father of the man', it seems reasonable to assume that witches appearing in nineteenth-century novels, poetry and art were probably influenced by images encountered in their creators' infancies.<sup>1</sup> This area of research has revealed that the miscellany of characters coloured by witch imagery, from the malevolent hag and the bloody-handed Gothic sorceress to the earth-mother and the possessor of occult and even divine knowledge, is not the exclusive product of the twentieth century. A degree of diversity is evident in the folklore and fairy tales available in the early nineteenth century, but flourishes and expands as new fairy tales are created for the juvenile Victorian readership. So this thesis, which examines the Victorian bridge between dark Early Modern witch-imagery and the diverse twentieth-century spectrum of images, opens with an exploration of the witches to be found in literature available to Victorian children.

Fairy tales available to children throughout the nineteenth century could be divided crudely into three categories; firstly, the orally transmitted, collectively generated images, recorded with minimal intervention by British folklorists; secondly, those to be found in Continental fairy tales, originating in French and German folklore, but moulded into the familiar characters of traditional fairy tale; and lastly, those which I classify as neo-fairy tales, being the creations of individual Victorian writers such as William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) and George MacDonald (1824-1905), who used motifs from traditional tales in entertaining works which also engaged with the author's own personal and public concerns. There *should* be a relatively smooth progression from oral tale to literary recording, and thereby to the evolution of personalised new Victorian adaptations. Yet British folklore, recorded primarily during the nineteenth century, appeared in collections aimed at children, but also became the focus of adult attention from two diverse sections of society; anthropologists and Victorian Romantics and mystics.<sup>2</sup> In fact the creators of Victorian neo-fairy tales plucked their most obvious witch-imagery directly from the Continental traditional tales recorded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

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<sup>1</sup>William Wordsworth, 'My heart leaps up', [1802, published 1807] M.H. Abrams (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Sixth Edition Volume 2*, p. 187, l. 7.

<sup>2</sup> The mystics include William Sharp (Fiona Macleod), W B. Yeats and George Russell, all of whom used Celtic myth and folklore to create a nineteenth-century neo-paganism, which still resonates with Pagans in the twenty-first century.

although some also introduced subtle sub-texts, referencing Classical and European mythology. The path is convoluted and the characters ambiguous, as in every fairy tale; nevertheless, as the following chapter will demonstrate, the magical fruits of Victorian fairyland ensured the image of the witch survived the rationalist's curse and lived into the twentieth century and beyond in multifarious variety.

## **Folklore**

It is too simplistic to categorise folklore as the product of the collective voice of 'the folk', in contrast to neo-fairy tales which each spoke with the voice of an individual creator. Folktales did indeed trickle down orally through generations to form source-pools upon which storytellers drew for motifs and narrative threads, yet when Charles Lamb wrote (as 'Elia') in 1823 of the 'maid, and more legendary aunt, [who] supplied me with, good store' of 'witch-stories', or when Charles Dickens recalled forty years later the story-telling nurse-maid who 'had a fiendish enjoyment of my terrors', they illustrated the inevitable personalisation of common oral stock by its narrator.<sup>3</sup> Equally, when a hitherto 'living' narrative was metaphorically netted and pinned to the page by a folklore collector, it too became the partially individualised subject of selective editorship, influenced by personal bias and motivation, as well as by changing social attitudes. Folklore collectors ranged from the amateur to the professional. In the late eighteenth century young Walter Scott gathered Scottish tales whose witches subsequently worked their way into his early nineteenth-century poetry and novels, while from 1838 to 1845 Lady Charlotte Guest brought the Arthurian enchantresses of the Welsh *Mabinogion* to an English readership, and later Lady Wilde and W.B. Yeats garnered Irish magical myths and folklore in the 1880s. However, those who subjected folklore to academic scrutiny, such as George Webbe

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<sup>3</sup>Charles Lamb, 'Witches and Other Night-Fears', *Essays of Elia* [1823] <http://www.angelfire.co.nv/mg/elia/html> (accessed 14/2/12) , and Charles Dickens, 'Mercy' in 'Nurse's Stories' *The Uncommercial Traveller* [1861] (Gloucestershire: Nonesuch Classics, 2007), p. 166.

Dasent in the 1850s, and Andrew Lang and Joseph Jacobs in the 1890s, provide the most comprehensive collections of British folklore rooted in Celtic, Norse and Anglo Saxon tales, which ‘old women in country places’ still told to their Victorian grandchildren.<sup>4</sup>

These three scholars are doubly relevant to this thesis, both through the witch-imagery in their stories and their justification of the value of fairy tales to children and the childlike; a judgement shared by writers of Victorian neo-fairy tales. Addressing his junior readership, Lang confessed to adapting his stories for them by omitting ‘pieces only suitable for ... old gentlemen’, who presumably included himself, Jacobs and Dasent.<sup>5</sup> Lang wrote wide-ranging anthropological works including *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887), and belonged to the Folklore Society (founded 1878) and the Society for Psychical Research (founded 1882). However, he criticised folklorists for their refusal to investigate contemporary reports of magic and witchcraft, and castigated psychical researchers for their disinclination to examine folklore beliefs when he saw little distinction between the two.<sup>6</sup> Yet he maintained a strict demarcation between his academic work ‘for old gentlemen’ and the fairy tale collections he reproduced from the works of other writers.<sup>7</sup> Jacobs was not quite so exclusive, as extensive notes on the provenance and derivation of the tale are appended to his collections of *English and Celtic Fairy Tales* (1890-1894), although children are instructed not to read those notes.<sup>8</sup> Similarly when Dasent translated Asbjornsen and Moe’s collection of *Popular Tales from the Norse* (1858) he used his profound knowledge of Scandinavian myth in a complex introductory essay on the origin and diffusion of popular tales. This separation of contemporary academic study from the ‘once upon a time’ of fairyland indicates a desire by all these scholars to locate themselves firmly in the ‘rational’ nineteenth century whilst simultaneously allowing children the freedom to explore a timeless ‘otherworld’.

Lang, Jacobs and Dasent all implicitly associated belief in the supernatural with intellectual naiveté. Scotsman Lang equated childhood with the social state of the

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Lang (ed.), Preface to *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* [1898] (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p. ix

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Lang, Preface to *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*, p. xii.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Lang, Preface to *Cock Lane and Common-Sense* [1894] (Miami: HardPress Publishing, 2010), p. iii.

<sup>7</sup> Lang’s twelve fairy books, which randomly mixed folklore and fairy tales from three centuries and many countries, began with the *Blue Fairy Book* in 1889 and ended with *The Lilac Fairy Book* in 1910.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Jacobs (ed.), ‘The English Fairy Tales Are Now Closed/ Little Boys And Girls Must Read No Further’. *English Fairy Tales & More English Fairy Tales* [1890-98] (London: Bodley Head, 1968), p. 287.

Rousseauesque noble savage, stating that ‘belief in magic and sorcery’ was a natural element of the ‘savage intellectual condition’, and thereby an essential component of the rite of passage undertaken by the immature individual or society.<sup>9</sup> Jacobs, the Australian-born son of a Jewish émigré from London, stated a desire to use ‘nursery literature’ as a means to bridge the ‘lamentable gap between the governing and recording classes and the dumb working classes’, and that between English children and their Irish counterparts.<sup>10</sup> His ‘Fairy Tales’, particularly the *Celtic*, edited in a late nineteenth-century milieu coloured by the Celtic Twilight, are often bathed in ambiguity which blurs the distinction between witch and fairy, goddess and fiend, in images of magical women standing at the periphery of a new mystical spirituality. Yet, in terms of witch-imagery Dasent’s essay is the most surprising in its modernity. Written four decades before Jacobs’ work it makes a clear connection between goddess and witch, outlining what Dasent identifies as medieval Christian demonisation of ancient Norse goddesses whereby ‘Frigga ... Freyja, the goddess of love and plenty’ and ‘the three Norns ... who sway the weirds of men, and spin their destinies’, were consequently perceived as the leaders of ‘a midnight band of women, who practised secret and unholy rites’ which, he contends, ‘leads us at once to witchcraft’.<sup>11</sup> He describes women in pre-Christian society as the possessors ‘by natural right’ of ‘book-learning, physic, soothsaying, and incantation’, although, ‘even when they used these mysteries for good purpose, [they] were but a step from sin’ (p. xiii). Dasent places woman as the natural link to nurturing deities and as the ‘rightful’ practitioner of arts once perceived as magical, whilst also deducing that perversion or misconception of those arts could result in malevolence or victim-hood. His analysis of the evolution of the witch anticipates beliefs and theories (ranging from the emotive to the rigorously academic) postulated by a plethora of twentieth-century pagans, feminists and historians.

Very few women are actually named as witches in the *Popular Tales*, although many are overlaid with implicit witch-imagery. Therefore a mother’s rash transformation of her sons into birds during a moment of irritation, in ‘The Seven

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<sup>9</sup> Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion* Vol.1[1887] <http://classicalit.about.com/library/bl-texts/alang/bl-alang>, Chapter 4. Accessed 14/2/12.

<sup>10</sup> Jacobs, Preface to *English Fairy Tales* p.1 and Preface to *Celtic Fairy Tales* [1894], in *Celtic Fairy Tales and More Celtic Fairy Tales* (London, Sydney, Toronto: Bodley Head 1970), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Dasent (ed.), Introduction to *Popular Tales from Norse Mythology* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), pp. vii–xii. Subsequent references come from this abridged edition unless otherwise stated, and as such will be cited in the text.

Ravens' illustrates Dasent's claims regarding belief in every woman's innate magical capability (xii). Similarly, the jealous step-mother in 'The Werewolf' is said to show her 'true disposition' when she practises her 'wicked arts' to transform a prince into a werewolf (p. 33). In contrast the mother-in-law in 'The Twelve White Peacocks' uses simple evil guile, not magic, to convince her son that his wife is a witch, in a tale where children also become birds. Yet, in this tale the destructive wish is not activated directly by the mother, but by 'an old witch of the Trolls' (pp. 162-3). In these Norse tales trolls are both supernatural and sub-human, being in some cases, as Dasent notes, 'very near akin to the witches of the Middle Age' (p. xxii). Presumably he envisages a grotesque hag inhabiting a spiritual plane somewhere between that of mankind and demons, the antithesis of a fairy positioned between mankind and the angels. Yet, it is not uncommon to find a character in folklore being referred to as both 'witch' and 'fairy' in the same story.

One example among many is found in the story of 'The Horned Women', passed to Jacobs by Lady Wilde. The sinister and autocratic ladies who introduce themselves as witches are also described as 'Fenian Women' (of the primordial fairy ilk) who dwell in Slievenamon, 'a famous fairy palace in Tipperary'.<sup>12</sup> These fearsome women invade the home of an industrious housewife, and sit around her fireside either carding or spinning wool; they silence her with a spell and take blood from her sleeping children, and they speak in Irish. They are threatening symbols of everything ancient, untamed, undomesticated and un-Anglicised and, significantly, they are referred to as both fairies and witches. Both names refer to magical female entities, but while fairies in folk and fairy tale may be 'good', 'bad' or even ambivalent, the word 'witch' clearly defines a negative image. However, when the wise-woman or hen-wife brews a magic potion or looks into the future she is practising what is evidently witchcraft, although she may not be called a witch. Then, as shall be demonstrated shortly, some Victorian neo-fairy tales blurred the distinction once again by giving a wise magical woman the trappings and physical attributes of a witch, and the beneficent nature of a 'good' fairy.

As Marina Warner notes in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), good fairies are also 'frequently disguised as hideous and ragged crones in order to test the heroine's kindness'.<sup>13</sup> Warner highlights the association between the words 'fairy, 'fay' and

<sup>12</sup> Jacobs, Notes to *Celtic Fairy Tales*, p. 294.

<sup>13</sup> Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 215.

‘fate’, and thereby traces the connection between fairies and the Fates who occur as a trio of sisters in mythologies as diverse as the Norse to the Greece, where they spin, measure and cut the thread of life.<sup>14</sup> Their provenance was doubtless well understood by those who recorded folktales, although it may have been lost to the teller. The tale of ‘The Horned Women’ contains the subtext of this sisterhood, as does Dasent’s ‘The Three Aunts’, where the supernatural women show only kindness to the heroine, despite their hideous appearance. Yet, even when every indicator suggests that witches or fairies are ‘good’, they evoke a sense of unease. They seem to read the future and the human soul. Jack Zipes contends in *Breaking the Magic Spell* (1979) that folklore was spurned by the controlling seventeenth and eighteenth-century elites for its representations of an abundance of people aided by haphazard magical providence to break through the class barrier, thereby potentially threatening the status quo.<sup>15</sup> Yet, it is clear that although magical women appearing under a variety of names in folklore, fairy tales and neo-fairy tales are anarchistic beings controlling powers beyond those of monarchy or society, their influence is not ‘haphazard’. They are externalised catalysts who convert random fortune into a moralistic tale of the survival of the fittest by ensuring that the gifts of providence are not wasted on the unworthy. In traditional and neo-fairy tale the three sisters are generally represented by a single Spinner who produces the life-thread but does not measure or curtail that thread. Her wheel signals a Spinner’s witchcraft or fairycraft, but also refers obliquely to the medieval wheel of life which, at a turn, may invert the positions of the highest and lowest in society.

The Spinner in folklore is often of lowly status herself (unlike the Horned Women), as are other familiar peasant-witch figures such as the Hen-Wife and the Wise-Woman. Their social position is comparable with that of the majority of the accused in Early Modern witch trials so one might expect them to be portrayed in an unrelenting negative light. However numerous acts of magical kindness are performed by poor elderly women featured in nineteenth-century folklore collections: Jacob’s version of ‘The Cauld Lad of Hilton’ where the inhabitants of Hilton Hall ‘asked the nearest hen-wife what they should do’ to dismiss a troublesome Brownie, is typical of many traditional tales which indicate that the old woman with a knowledge of the

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<sup>14</sup> Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 3.

supernatural was an integral part of society, although her lowly status, poverty, or eccentricity placed her at that society's periphery.<sup>16</sup> However, her relative isolation also left her vulnerable to persecution if her 'magic' failed or a scapegoat was required by that society. It is an interesting anomaly that some women in Medieval and Early Modern witch trials and in folklore were depicted as being on the outermost rim of the circles of power, while seemingly possessing supernatural wisdom and the ability to transform human lives. While accepting that in fairy stories the irrational is often the norm, there are obvious parallels with the historical paradox that women living in the most abject poverty were sometimes believed to have made pacts with the Devil, giving them the implied potential to destroy the most powerful in the land. The hag who competes in a battle of wits with the heroine of 'Smallhead and the King's Sons' is described as 'a terrible enchantress' with 'more power of witchcraft than anyone', yet she lives in squalor.<sup>17</sup> The witches of folklore and traditional fairy tale also often have treasure secreted away but never spent, indicative perhaps of society's need to believe that those at its edge are there by design, to test human goodness or because evil deeds or evil natures have distorted their fortunes. Consequently, neighbours are absolved from the need to bestow charity in any form. While many of the 'good' peasant witches, who appear in Victorian folklore collections as wise-women or hen-wives, display selfless generosity as well as wisdom and moral rectitude, their evil counterparts are often defined by their insatiable greed and foolishness.

A more sinister witch than the one who coveted the goods of others was one who coveted or threatened their children. Historical witchcraft accusations demonstrate the palpable fear of losing children and the need for a scapegoat if that loss happened.<sup>18</sup> Yet folklore also presents incidents of parental culpability in such loss, as in Dasent's 'The Twelve White Peacocks' where a queen with twelve sons makes a wish rendered more shocking by the sacrificial image of blood spilt on pristine snow, which is evoked by her words, 'If only I had a daughter as white as snow and as red as blood, I shouldn't care what happened to my sons' (p.162). The witches who facilitate these exchanges are remnants of ancient mythical entities who might take an innocent life in exchange for desire fulfilled, or the trickster who would take that life as

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<sup>16</sup> Jacobs (ed.), 'The Cauld Lad of Hilton' *English Fairy Tales*, p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobs (ed.), 'Smallhead and the King's Sons' *Celtic Fairy Tales*, p. 236.

<sup>18</sup> See Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, for examples of Early Modern child-bewitching, p. 100-111.



punishment for a moment's selfish thought. The children transformed in such stories are a reminder that the bird has long been emblematic of the human soul and the changing of children into birds is often used as a euphemism for death, when the soul is believed to fly from the body.<sup>19</sup> Yet, in magical realms, deaths may be reversed as the spell is broken. Therefore these are tales of hope as well as fear. The fictional witches who control human souls in this way are agents of life and death. Some are totally malicious, but some wear aspects of the Norse ruler of the dead, Hel, whom Dasent describes as 'stern and grim' but not evil.<sup>20</sup> Others reflect the parochial awe inspired by the lowly woman with power to open the door between worlds, the village midwife and layer-out of the dead. The rare witch-queens are more common in these tales than any others. They are often motivated by jealousy of step-children, as in the Irish tale 'The Fate of the Children of Lir' where four children are transformed into swans, although their human voices cannot be stilled. The daughter Fingula denounces her step-mother, 'Thou witch! We know thee by thy right name!'<sup>21</sup> In Classical terms her name would be Atropos, the one who cuts the thread of life. Unlike Clotho, the ambiguous Spinner, Atropos symbolises the uncompromising face of death. When Fingula calls her step-mother 'witch' the image conjured by the name is entirely, unambiguously, dark.

The fascinating aspect each of these tales share is, of course, that so-called 'right names' are written on water; ancient goddesses become fairies or fiends, while their priestesses become wise-women or witch-hags and, as philosophical waters ripple, the names change once more. Jacobs notes that the 'Lir' story is part of the mythological cycle concerning the Tuatha de Danaan, and its protagonists are members of the 'Pagan Irish Pantheon', who 'live on to this very day in Irish folk-belief as chiefs and rulers of the fairies'.<sup>22</sup> Although Lir's bride uses 'a Druid's wand of spells and wizardry' to perform her evil, the heroine of another Irish story, 'Conla and the Fairy Maid' is condemned by a druid for using 'women wiles and witchery' to entice Conla away to the 'Plains of the Ever Living'. In an apparent linking of fairyland and Christendom the Fairy Maid predicts a time when the 'Law will come' and banish 'the Druid's magic spells that come from the lips of the false black demon', but

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<sup>19</sup> See Udo Becker, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols* (New York and London: Continuum, 1994), p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Dasent, *Popular Tales from Norse Mythology*, p. xi.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, 'The Fate of the Children of Lir' *Celtic Fairy Tales*, p. 156.

<sup>22</sup> Jacobs, *Celtic Fairy Tales*, p. 315.

meanwhile she implies that, parallel to the pre-Christian world, lies a blessed land where 'there is neither death nor sin'.<sup>23</sup> The Welsh tale of 'Elidore' has a similar view of the Celtic Other-World (this one existing alongside Christianity) whose inhabitants 'were so good [although] they worshipped none, unless you might say they were worshippers of Truth'.<sup>24</sup> Dasent wrote in 1858 of goddesses evolving into the Virgin Mary, who in turn 'appears as divine mother, spinner and helpful virgin'; yet the followers of those goddesses became women defined by church and 'folk' as wicked practitioners of sorcery (p. viii). In 1891 Jacobs' 'Fairy Maid' used 'women's wiles and witchery' to lead a mortal to a place where morality was not dependent on religious faith. The witches of folklore had many faces and those faces were reflected, albeit often mistily, in Victorian neo-fairy tales.

### **Traditional Fairy Tales**

British authors composing their neo-fairy tales from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards generally alluded overtly to continental fairy tales rather than to the folk and fairy lore of Britain, presumably because by that time fairy tale figures originating in France and Germany provided a store of 'traditional,' easily recognisable stories and characters. Jacobs concedes that during the mid-eighteenth-century English and 'Scotch' children were 'captivated' by French tales whose 'superior elegance and clearness ... replaced the rude vigour of the English ones'.<sup>25</sup> In an inversion worthy of Puck, an early collection of fairy tales produced for British children in 1823 was entitled *The Court of Oberon*, but despite the Shakespearian reference consisted mainly of stories translated from three French sources, namely Madame D'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault (both writing in the 1690s) and Antoine Galland's translation from the fourteenth-century Arabic of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1704 to 1719).<sup>26</sup> By the late nineteenth century when Andrew Lang began publishing his collections of tales he still included the works of D'Aulnoy, Perrault and Galland, augmented by those of the German Brothers Grimm and the Dane Hans Christian Andersen, with a sprinkling of British folklore.

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<sup>23</sup> Jacobs, 'Conla and the Fairy Maid' *Celtic Fairy Tales*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Jacobs, 'Elidor' *Celtic Fairy Tales*, p. 252.

<sup>25</sup> Jacobs, 'Introductory Notes' to *English Fairy Tales*.

<sup>26</sup> See Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True: Classic Fairy Tales and Their Traditions* (New York: Routledge 1999), p. 116.

The term ‘fairy story’ probably originated in Marie-Catherine D’Aulnoy’s *Les Contes des Fées* (1697-1698), first translated into English as *Tales of the Fairys* [sic] in 1699. It is also conceivable that many of the strong female characters featured later in Victorian neo-fairy tales owed their existence to the influence of Mme. D’Aulnoy and her fellow story spinners in the salons of seventeenth-century France. These intelligent, imaginative women, apparently constrained by a national and domestic patriarchy, developed the telling of sophisticated *contes de fées*, as an entertaining and competitive addition to discussions on art, literature and society. Anne Thackeray Ritchie doubted in 1895 whether D’Aulnoy’s *Memoirs*, which includes tales of fantastic adventures beyond the confines of the salon, were ‘history’ or ‘the divagations of a fanciful imagination longing for adventure and excitement’.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless the salon sisterhood created, in Zipes’ words, ‘Pagan worlds in which the final “say” was determined by ... extraordinarily majestic and powerful fairies’, who, he might have added, have little to distinguish them from their equally majestic and powerful witches.<sup>28</sup> The Desert Fairy of D’Aulnoy’s ‘The Yellow Dwarf’ (apparently Charles Dickens’ favourite) and the Lion-Witch in her story ‘The Friendly Frog’ both combine attributes of the witch-queens of folk lore with imagery plucked from classical myth and, in the case of the Desert Fairy, elements of the medieval peasant witch. So initially the Desert Fairy appears as an aged and extremely ugly crone who ‘lean’d upon a Crutch, had a black taffety Ruff on, [and] a red velvet Hood’, yet she attacks the hero as a Medusa, ‘her Head covered with Snakes’, flies away with him on a winged gryphon, transforms herself into a seductive nymph, but is betrayed by the revelation of her griffin feet.<sup>29</sup> The Lion-Witch, who keeps a young queen captive for her own amusement in ‘The Benevolent Frog’, is a female Hercules: gigantic, dressed only in a lion skin, carrying a stone club, and with her hair tied back by a dried snake skin.<sup>30</sup> It is fascinating to think that groups of courtly ladies should revel in fantasies of sexual control, the release of the beast lurking within the human soul, and even lesbianism. D’Aulnoy whose tales have been described as ‘wild, undisciplined, almost feverishly imaginative’ and who ‘plotted to have [her] husband executed for high treason’ demonstrates a considerable degree of ambivalence in her presentation of the

<sup>27</sup> Anne Thackeray Ritchie (ed.), *The Fairy Tales of Madame D’Aulnoy* [1895] (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of the Pacific, 2003), p. xi.

<sup>28</sup> Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Ritchie (ed.) ‘The Yellow Dwarf’ in *The Fairy Tales of Madame D’Aulnoy*, pp. 239-41.

<sup>30</sup> Ritchie (ed.), ‘The Benevolent Frog’ in Ritchie (ed.) *The Fairy Tales of Madame D’Aulnoy*, p. 305.

villainess.<sup>31</sup> The Desert Fairy, like Wilde's Horned Women with their elevated status and aura of wickedness, is an infinitely more exciting character than the insipid hero and heroine she ultimately destroys. Thereby D'Aulnoy prefigures the 'personalised' witch-figure, deliberately constructed to convey her creator's message or indulge her creator's fantasies, who is an essential element of many Victorian neo-fairy tales.

However, it was retired French civil servant Charles Perrault who, rather than creating fantastic tales from disparate elements of folklore and mythology, ensured the conversion of 'stories whose survival depended on cottage memories'.<sup>32</sup> Of his eight stories published in 1697 as *Histoires ou contes du temps passe: Contes de Ma Mere L'Oye*, four feature fairies of some description: 'La Belle au Bois Dormant', 'Cendrillon', 'Les Fées' and 'Riquet la Houppe'. English translations of these tales from *Mother Goose* were gradually introduced to Britain from 1804 by publisher Benjamin Tabart, and in 1823 by John Harris who had already used the comforting apron of the 'godmother' story-teller for his 1802 collection *Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales*. The basic story framework, as well as the eponymous heroines, of stories like 'Cinderella' and 'Sleeping Beauty' were used directly by creators of Victorian neo-fairy tales; yet these authors also drew upon deeper and less immediately obvious sources, such as medieval witch imagery and the ancient image of the ambiguous Spinner Goddess, to adapt Perrault's fairy godmothers and wicked fairies to their own requirements. Consequently, although Perrault's traditional stories contain no obvious references to witches, they became vitally important to writers of neo-fairy tales and to the subsequent diversification of witch-imagery.

Despite the undoubted popularity of tales from *The Arabian Nights* during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries few of the exotic supernatural beings from these tales appear in the guise of witches in neo-fairy tales or novels. While, as Angus Wilson notes, *The Arabian Nights Entertainments* is 'the book that, after the New Testament and Shakespeare's works' Charles Dickens 'quotes or alludes to most often in his novels', the witch-figures within those novels (from Miss Havisham to Mrs Sparsit) reflect those conjured by the wickedly inventive French salon ladies, or those invoked with charm and morality by Perrault, or summoned with Germanic gloom by the Brothers Grimm.<sup>33</sup> The same could be said of George MacDonald whose status in

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Iona and Peter Opie (eds.) *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press 1974), p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> Iona and Peter Opie (eds.), *The Classical Fairy Tales*, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (Middlesex: Penguin 1982), p. 24.

the world of children's literature equates with that of Dickens in the adult sphere. The scarcity of what Lang described as 'Geni' and 'Peris, who are Arab fairies', seems to indicate an inclination on behalf of most authors of popular Victorian fiction to connect, consciously or subconsciously, with the witch-imagery absorbed (via old women's stories or traditional fairy tale collections) from a common heritage of European folklore, in a country whose genetic and cultural origins were primarily a mixture of the Norse, Saxon and Celtic.<sup>34</sup>

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were serious academics who saw the preservation of their country's folklore heritage as a vital part of the consolidation of disparate Germanic regions. Between them they produced noted works on German grammar, heroic legend, ancient German law and German mythology, but their surname is probably most commonly connected with the crone whose image invariably springs to mind when the words 'witch' and 'fairy tale' are used in the same sentence: the one who tried to cook Hansel and Gretel in her oven. After an extensive period of research into their national folklore the Grimms produced their first volume of *Kinder-und Hausmarchen (Children's and Household Tales)* in 1812. In 1823 Edgar Taylor's translation of a selection of these tales appeared in Britain, with illustrations by George Cruikshank. In this edition 'Hansel and Gretel' are fugitives from a 'cruel-stepmother' who is 'a fairy' and turns Hansel into a fawn.<sup>35</sup> In the more familiar 1853 version they are lured into the bread and sugar house of a sub-human 'bose Hexe', who is a cannibal, but not quite an animal: 'Witches have red eyes, and cannot see far, but they have a keen scent like the beasts and are aware when human beings draw near'.<sup>36</sup> Like many other fictional hags she feigns helplessness as 'a woman as old as the hills, who supported herself on crutches', but once she is dead the children discover 'chests full of pearls and jewels'.<sup>37</sup> As her captor expires screaming horribly in the oven Gretel is absolved from the need to demonstrate Christian compassion as the 'Godless witch was miserably burnt to death'.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, as in the British folklore collections the evil hag is presented as a soul-less miser, and also not only inhuman but un-human. Long before Darwin revealed the animal nature of mankind, the beast within was an object of dread, prowling through myth and scripture,

<sup>34</sup> Lang (ed.), *Arabian Nights Entertainments*, p. xi

<sup>35</sup> Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'Hansel and Gretel' *Grimms' Fairy Tales* 1823 (London: Puffin Classics, (1994). pp. 146-7

<sup>36</sup> Iona and Peter Opie (eds.), *The Classic Fairy Tales*, p. 316.

<sup>37</sup> Iona and Peter Opie (eds.) *The Classic Fairy Tales*, p. 319.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

threatening to burst free from the ‘normal’ when they lost control, and palpably evident just beneath the skin of those who were ‘different’. Some English versions of this story call the villainess a ‘bad fairy’ and others use the word ‘witch’. The German text actually uses the word ‘hexe’.<sup>39</sup> Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra notes the regular use by German witchcraft scholars of the distinct terms Hexerei for witchcraft and Zauberei for sorcery.<sup>40</sup> Eric Partridge’s etymological dictionary *Origins* reveals that the German ‘hexe’ has its roots in ‘hag’ meaning hedge and ‘tysja’ meaning fairy, and that the related Middle English ‘hagge’ was a female demon or wild woman of the woods.<sup>41</sup> Unlike the fairies of Perrault’s ‘Cinderella’ or ‘Sleeping Beauty’, the Grimms’ dark fairies did not need Victorian illustrators such as George Cruikshank to conflate the image of fairy and witch when the text already did so.

The ‘old fairy’ preying on the young in the Grimms’ story of ‘Jorinda and Jorindel’ also lives in the middle of a thick dark wood, but in a derelict castle not a cottage. Her witch status is confirmed by her ability to take the form of an owl or cat, and by her appearance, ‘pale and meagre, with staring eyes, and a nose and chin that almost met one another’.<sup>42</sup> Her power to do evil is restricted to the hours of darkness, when she turns youths straying near her castle into stone and maidens into birds. This witch is not a nightmarish consumer of human flesh but a much more familiar bane of the rural community, a destroyer of fertility. When crops were blighted, and livestock or humans aborted or proved barren, or when animals and children died, the future of a community was endangered and the blame was laid upon the ‘witch’. Therefore this tale hints at darker early tales, where young men are rendered impotent while young women are trapped in a virgin state. Cruikshank’s illustration for the first English edition of ‘Jorinda and Jorindel’ depicts the ‘fairy’ as hook-nosed and cloaked, waving a crutch as she attempts to escape, while her black cat, back arched and hair bristling stands on the carved table of a once splendid banqueting hall.<sup>43</sup> In another familiar tale Snow-drop (Snow-White) suffers her arrested development at the hands of her envious witch-queen stepmother disguised as an old pedlar, who plots that stay-laces which should shape emerging feminine curves are used to strangle the girl,

<sup>39</sup> R. Godwin-Jones and V. Commonwealth *Grimm Fairy Tales Menu*.

[www.fln.vcu.edu/grimm/grimm\\_menu](http://www.fln.vcu.edu/grimm/grimm_menu), produced as a dual-language version. Accessed 14/2/12.

<sup>40</sup> Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, ‘Witchcraft After the Witch-Trials’ in Ankarloo and Clarke (eds.), *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic: Vol. 5: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, pp. 163-4.

<sup>41</sup> Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 281.

<sup>42</sup> Grimm, ‘Jorinda and Jorindel’, *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, p. 58

<sup>43</sup> *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, p. 60.

combs which should lift unruly girlish locks into mature confinement carry poison, and an apple, the symbol of sexual knowledge, chokes her. On learning of Snow-Drop's resurrection and splendid marriage the witch-queen also 'choked with passion and died'.<sup>44</sup>

Yet in the transition from folklore rooted in mythologised rites of passage to nursery fairy tale a desire emerges, on the part of the storyteller rather than the villain/ess, to delay the acquisition of sexual knowledge. Zipes' fascinating collection, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1983), charts the way in which a tale the Brothers Grimm found 'too cruel, too sexual and too tragic' in its early French incarnation was sanitised for nineteenth-century readers.<sup>45</sup> In Perrault's 1697 version Red Riding Hood is waylaid by the wolf after dallying to gather flowers, like Persephone in the classical myth of the death of summer and of innocence. Having willingly undressed and got into bed with the wolf in Granny's clothing, Red Riding Hood perishes as the wicked wolf throws himself upon her and devours her.<sup>46</sup> Perrault's warning to young girls about seducers with 'winning ways' is clear. In most versions which appeared before that of Grimm the grandmother and Red Riding Hood are consumed by, and become one with, the wolf. As Zipes points out, the wolf traditionally represented 'the human wild side...a hazard of nature linked to sorcery'.<sup>47</sup> Marianne Rumpf suggests that the original villain in the tale adapted by Perrault was a werewolf. She claims that sixteenth and-seventeenth-century France experienced a 'virtual epidemic of trials' of men accused of being werewolves, just as women were accused of being witches.<sup>48</sup> She found that the accusations ran parallel in time and place, and in the nature of crimes, such as destruction of livestock and killing of children. So the link between witches and werewolves existed in the folklore which spawned traditional fairy tales, and is detectable for example in the lupine nature of the witch in 'Hansel and Gretel'. In reality, British wolves had died out long before their Continental cousins, so shape-shifting became a lesser charge in British witch trials because, as Davies says, 'No one was afraid of being savaged by a vicious hare'.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Grimm, 'Snow Drop', *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p. 104.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood: Versions of the Tale in Sociocultural Context* (London: Heinemann, 1983), pp. 14-15.

<sup>46</sup> See Opie (eds.), 'Little Red Ridinghood' in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, pp. 119-126.

<sup>47</sup> Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Marianne Rumpf quoted in Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 191.

Fortunately for Victorian writers the French and German fairy tale wolf provided a useful metaphor for untamed human nature which might engulf a pubescent girl, thereby releasing the wolf in her. In one Christmas story, 'The Fir Tree', Dickens articulated the male yearning for the innocent: 'She was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss': presumably, however, he referred to the virgin who remained outside the bed and outside (thereby separate from) the wolf.<sup>50</sup> Yet when this virgin dons a blood-red cloak, she signals not only impending womanhood but a propensity to the sinfulness of the scarlet woman. Red is also, according to Davies, a colour associated with Victorian witchcraft.<sup>51</sup> Thus the onset of menstruation rendered the wayward female capable of becoming the wolfish harlot or eventually, less dramatically but no less socially unacceptable, the dependant old woman alone on the periphery of society. In agrarian societies the solitary old woman was the typical parasitic 'witch', while in increasingly urban societies she was a reminder of poverty and of the death which eventually devours all. Neither aggressive female sexuality nor undignified old age was a subject to be welcomed into the Victorian nursery. Fortunately the Brothers Grimm sent a virtuous and manly hunter to recover both granny and 'Little Red Cap' from all consuming evil, although the threat of the scarlet wolf-witch is detectable, as shall shortly be demonstrated, beneath the surface of a number of neo-fairy tales.

Many of the Grimms' stories are tense with a medieval fear of thorny, sharp-toothed nature lurking outside the boundaries of male-dominated rural communities; apprehensions which resonate with a desire for nature to be catalogued and contained within the collector's cabinet or the trimmed hedge; or for the supernatural to be safely bound within the covers of fairy stories or Gothic novels. But the Romantic vision of nature as divinely magical and female also had its adherents, such as MacDonald, Kingsley, Yeats and William Sharp for whom folk lore and myth provided templates for goddess/mother nature figures. The Grimms' 'Mother Holle' is an early version of these 'godmothers,' as despite her unprepossessing appearance she metes out natural justice, rewarding those who serve her well and punishing those who neglect her.<sup>52</sup> The girl diligently shaking the feather bed to create snowfall below

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Dickens, 'The Christmas Tree' [1850] quoted in Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens*, p. 22.

<sup>51</sup>In *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture* Davies states: 'By the nineteenth century...witches...were predominantly thought to have a preference for red clothing', p. 187.

<sup>52</sup> *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, pp. 247-250.



is rewarded with a shower of gold, while a shower of pitch blackens her lazy sister. Mother Holle exemplifies the goddesses referred to by Dasent, who were granted the mantle of the Virgin Mary. She probably evolved from the Germanic snow goddess Holda ‘the merciful’, whose association with spinning makes her not only a goddess of domesticity but links her with the ancient Spinner of Life. Frau Holle or Holda was also a fertility goddess with dominion over the souls of unborn and dead children. Medieval Christianity portrayed her as Queen of the Witches, but even in the eyes of earlier worshippers she had a dark side as punisher of children who misbehaved. In one of her benign roles she delivers babies to expectant mothers, carrying them through the air on the back of a goose.<sup>53</sup>

Theories abound as to the derivation of the title ‘Mother Goose’, but Holda certainly has a legitimate claim to that title. As a deity with a renewed Pagan following in the twenty-first century Holda forms an interesting link between pre-Christian goddesses, medieval witches, eighteenth-century story-book godmothers, and twentieth-century neo-pagan witches. As the stern but motherly Frau Holle she also provides a template for the redoubtable fairy godmothers of the Victorian neo-fairy tales. Holda’s emblem is the elder tree, thereby also linking her to Hans Christian Andersen’s gently maternal creation, the ‘Elder-Tree Mother’ (1845) who emerges as a fragrant spirit from a pot of curative elder-flower tea. Symbolising nature’s perpetual cycle she is alternately ‘a kind-looking old dame’ and ‘a pretty and graceful young girl’, taking a child on a magical flight through the life he has lived and is yet to live, and stimulating his senses through a lifetime of seasons.<sup>54</sup> She represents comforting domesticated nature, not a fearsome demon of the wild woods or a sinister hag of the hedge.

The difference between the witches of Grimm and Andersen is that many of Andersen’s are his own creations; he spanned the division between the traditional stories and neo-fairy tales by reproducing tales from a common heritage and by weaving original works from motifs retrieved from folklore and myth. By utilising fairyland as a place in which to construct his ‘own’ version of Christianity, Andersen employed the same displacement, for the same purpose, as MacDonald and Kingsley were to do in Britain; and, like them, he creates magical women who do not always

<sup>53</sup> Thorskegga Thorn, <http://www.thorshof.org/holda.htm>. Accessed 14/2/12.

<sup>54</sup> Hans Christian Andersen ‘The Elder-Tree Mother’ in *Fairy Tales and Legends* [1835-37] (London: Bodley Head, 1935), pp. 214, 217.

show the gentle side of nature. For example the witch in his story *The Little Mermaid* (1836), ‘caressing a toad’ in her house built of the bones of dead sailors inhabits a grotesque undersea forest where trees are ‘polypi, looking like hundred-headed serpents shooting out of the ground’.<sup>55</sup> She and her environs are not unnatural, but grimly natural. She is the undersea version of the wild-wood ‘hexe bosc’, and thereby the antithesis of the mer-people in their manicured garden.

The witch’s world is more scientifically realistic than that of the Mermaid, but at a time when science threatened blind faith, Andersen seemed to equate science with evil, as in his story ‘The Drop of Water’ where a spot of ‘witches’ blood’ added to a drop of ditch-water discloses thousands of ‘imps’ in a maelstrom of murderous aggression.<sup>56</sup> In Zipes’ analysis of Andersen’s works he contends that the troubled mind of the author found comfort in combining his own animistic belief in Christianity with the physicist Hans Christian Orsted’s theory that the laws of nature are the thoughts of God.<sup>57</sup> Andersen certainly respected Orsted, just as Orsted encouraged his story-telling countryman, but Andersen’s saga of ‘The Snow Queen’ (1845) finds no comfortable compromise in the battle between faith and scientific reason. In this parable about unconditional love, the choice between faith and reason, and between a painless half-life or a life full of suffering and joy, each dilemma is represented by a witch-figure, although none are specifically named as such. The Snow Queen herself is ‘exquisitely fair and delicate, but made entirely of ice: she appears, like the subjects of a junior microscopica, as queen bee, a formation of exotic ice flora on window panes, and ultimately as a snowflake which assumes human shape and size.’<sup>58</sup> Like the wicked witch-queens of folklore she is a child-stealer, who abducts young Kay when his vision is distorted and his soul frozen by a splinter of ice from the Mirror of Reason. Kay’s friend Gerda uses Christian sensibility to counter cold reason; as the boy weeps at the sound of a hymn the (implicitly) deceiving splinter of science is washed from his eye. The novelty of Andersen’s tale is not just that despite being in a temporal other-world it addresses the contemporary debate between science and religion, but that it does so by using a figure carved from irrational myth and superstition to represent cold rationality.

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<sup>55</sup> Andersen, ‘The Little Mermaid’ *Fairy Tales and Legends*, pp. 85-6.

<sup>56</sup> Andersen, ‘The Drop of Water’ *Fairy Tales and Legends*, pp. .222-3.

<sup>57</sup> Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, p. 89.

<sup>58</sup> Andersen, ‘The Snow Queen’, *Fairy Tales and Legends*, pp. 120-121.

However, the two other witch-figures encountered by Gerda on her epic rescue mission provide a more conventional object lesson on the dangers of judging by appearances. The old lady living in a delightful thatched cottage, its multicoloured windows infusing the interior with rainbow light, is an enchantress, albeit one who does not practice magic ‘for the sake of mischief, but merely for her own amusement’.<sup>59</sup> Bewitched girls who linger indolently in the garden of ceaseless summer, listening to the tales of speaking flowers, become mournful dreaming flowers themselves. Here sensual satisfaction is a substitute for life. The Finmark woman, in contrast, lives in a simple shelter, open to the elements and lit by the Northern lights, not by light refracted through glass. She is short, dirty and nearly naked, yet she is a wise-woman, skilled enough to ‘twist all the winds of the world into a rope’, and accept that the Christ-like strength of ‘a loving and innocent child’ wandering ‘barefoot through the world’ is more powerful than *her* magic.<sup>60</sup> In this later story Andersen inverts the ‘fair versus foul’, ‘tame versus wild’ imagery of *The Little Mermaid*, thereby blurring the distinction between witch and fairy, and inviting his young readership to look beyond the superficial. It is a far cry from his first story ‘The Tinderbox’ (1835) in which a soldier’s killing of a witch in order to secure a fortune is justified, as Zipes notes, by the belief that such a murder is ‘not viewed as immoral since witches are evil per se’.<sup>61</sup>

These tales from Andersen demonstrate the early metamorphosis of folklore into neo-fairy tale, whereby the latter became both the entertainer and the educator of those fortunate enough to be granted an edifying and pleasurable period between birth and adulthood. The appearance in 1846 of Mary Howitt’s translation of *Andersen’s Wonderful Stories for Children* is defined by Zipes as a ‘momentous occasion’ when new Christian moral fantasies ‘guaranteed the legitimacy of the literary fairy tale for middle-class audiences’.<sup>62</sup> In 1820, when the stories now defined as Traditional or Classical fairy tales were making their entry into Britain, Mrs. Sherwood, an advocate of didactic literature, described such tales as ‘an improper medium of instruction’ wherein it would be ‘absurd ...to introduce Christian principles’. It was an argument undermined by Andersen a generation later, and totally invalidated over the subsequent half-century by the writers of new Victorian fairy-tale parables who, I

<sup>59</sup> Andersen, ‘The Snow Queen’, p. 128.

<sup>60</sup> Andersen, ‘The Snow Queen’, p. 145.

<sup>61</sup> Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, p. 117.

contend, also converted the witch into a ‘proper’ (as opposed to ‘an improper’) agent of instruction.<sup>63</sup>

### Neo-fairy tales

In 1884 Mrs. Molesworth’s *Christmas Tree Land* featured a lady known as ‘Godmother’ telling a story to a group of entranced children. Her dark green cloak slips open to reveal a glimpse of a glittering feathery gown. A child strokes the dress, asking ‘Are you perhaps a bird as well as a fairy?’:

Call me whatever you like ... bird or a fairy, or a will-o’-the-wisp, or even a witch. Many people have called me a witch, and I don’t mind. Only, dears, never think of me except as loving you and wanting to make you happy and good ... The world is full of people who don’t see things the right way, and blame others when it is their own fault all the while.<sup>64</sup>

This vignette encapsulates both the diversification of witch-imagery during the nineteenth century and the strands which form the thread of my thesis. While the old woman concedes that her appearance and ‘otherness’ comply to some degree with the dark Early Modern concept of the malevolent witch, her words deny the validity of that image, her cloak is green, not black, and her uplifting stories define her as a ‘wise’ woman, while the dazzling silver gown signifies that beneath all she may be more than a white witch, and nearer to a goddess. Yet the child’s brief flutter of apprehension hints that an outward distancing from wickedness is shadowed by a fear that ‘Godmother’ might possess dark power as well as light.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries collections of traditional fairy tales were published under the names of Mother Bunch or Mother Goose, representing alternative mother-figures usually pictured surrounded by groups of happy, attentive children. Warner notes the paradox that the ‘unattached and ageing’ woman was often seen as a ‘witch’ and therefore a threat to society, while Mother Goose, also ‘unattached and ageing’ was presented as the authoritative spinner of tales.<sup>65</sup> These story spinners were outwardly cosy refuges for the child, while vague hints at the supernatural in the storyteller herself added excitement to her words, and encouraged the child to suspend disbelief. In 1998 U.C. Knoepfelmacher explored the use of fairy

<sup>63</sup> Zipes, *When Dreams Came True*, p. 116.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Louisa Molesworth ‘The Story of a King’s Daughter’, *Christmas-Tree Land* [1884] cited in Jack Zipes (ed.), *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves* (New York and London: Routledge, 1987), p. 268.

<sup>65</sup> Warner, *The Beast and the Blonde*, p. 220.

tale as a means for male writers to identify with their ‘sororal self’ through female heroines.<sup>66</sup> However, it is clear that another female, the witch/fairy godmother, was also used as a vehicle by many Victorian authors. She was often portrayed as the ‘wise-woman’, relaying the author’s chosen moral message, but conveying it in a more subtle and entertaining way than that used by writers such as Mrs Gatty with their mind-numbing didactic homilies.<sup>67</sup> The most innovative of Victorian neo-fairy tales are the clearly defined products of individual creators, wherein the perception of a character as a witch or a fairy (good or bad), or as a wise woman, or even as God the Mother, depends not on any name allotted to her, or to magical shape-shifting, but on her image in the eye of the beholder, as directed by the author.

Some less successful writers tried, clumsily, to re-shape traditional fairy stories in order to conduct their moral crusade. George Cruikshank fell into this category, but his primary relevance to this thesis is contained in his illustrations for his version of *Cinderella and the Glass Slipper* (first published in 1854) which show the godmother dressed in the cloak and pointed hat of a witch. Cruikshank’s targets are alcoholism and, to a lesser degree, gambling, in this reworking in which Cinderella goes to the ball to secure her father’s release from a debtors’ prison, where he languishes as a result of her step-mother’s gambling. Later, the King is convinced, by a long sermon from the forthright magical ‘little lady’, to burn all the alcohol in the kingdom on a huge bonfire at the wedding banquet.<sup>68</sup> Significantly, although this powerful godmother is adept at moral rhetoric, as well as being talented in transforming mundane vegetable and animal life into objects of desire, she is ‘little’. Cruikshank constantly refers to her as ‘the dwarf’ and she is drawn as half the height of Cinderella. Similarly, the magical transformation scene, so central to the traditional story, is considerably shorter in this version than the scene in which the King is transformed into a teetotaller. Seemingly Cruikshank, consciously or not, shrank the magical element of the original story and inflated its moral message.

This particular story was originally written in 1854 as a repost to a teetotalist parody of *Cinderella* written by Charles Dickens. Cruikshank was initially a valued friend of Dickens, illustrating his *Sketches by Boz* (1836-37) and *Oliver Twist* (1838).

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<sup>66</sup> Ulrich Camillus Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland: Victorian Fairy Tales and Femininity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 13.

<sup>67</sup> Margaret (Mrs Alfred) Gatty *Parables from Nature* [1855 – 1870] (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914).

<sup>68</sup> George Cruikshank, ‘Cinderella and the Glass Slipper [1854] in Zipes (ed.) *Victorian Fairy Tales*, p. 55.

When his father died of alcoholism Cruikshank, a heavy drinker, became a campaigner for total abstinence. His appropriation of the fairy tale genre to promulgate his beliefs annoyed Dickens, who attacked him in his *Household Words* article 'Frauds on the Fairies' in October 1853. Undeterred Cruikshank continued to use fairy tale to pursue his crusades, despite a tepid public response.<sup>69</sup> Yet a close examination of the illustrations for his *Cinderella* suggests an inner conflict between the artist and the crusader. The impression of the little witch as an uncomfortably rigid conduit for a single message grows stronger when contrasted with the vibrancy generally characteristic of Cruikshank's illustrations. One only has to compare her with the animation of the fleeing witch in his illustration for Grimms' 'Jorinda and Jorindel' to imagine the increased tension imposed by the contortion of an artistic talent in pursuit of a personal mission.

In *The Rose and the Ring* (1854) William Makepeace Thackeray uses the kernel of the *Sleeping Beauty* tale far more effectively to produce an engaging and 'improving' story in which Fairy Blackstick, the godmother to generations of royalty, initiates a regime of 'tough love' when, after three thousand years, she begins to doubt the ultimate efficacy of unconditional magical charity:

What good am I doing by sending this Princess to sleep for a hundred years? By fixing a black pudding on to that booby's nose? By causing diamonds and Pearls to drop from one little girl's mouth, and vipers and toads from another's? I begin to think I do as much harm as good by my performances. I might as well shut my incantations up, and allow things to take their natural course.<sup>70</sup>

Blackstick's ebony crutch, which she uses as a wand and as a means 'to ride to the moon or on other excursions', gives her a strong aura of 'witchery' in a period in which the broomstick had only recently become the vehicle of choice for the witch of folklore and story book.<sup>71</sup> She bestows the inverted gift of a 'little misfortune' on the latest batch of babies, in order to encourage them to develop into responsible adults. Their first misfortune is to lose their parents but, as Knoepflmacher suggests, Thackeray's own childhood misfortune, which involved, his father's death and his subsequent separation from his mother following her remarriage blessed him with 'a

<sup>69</sup> Zipes describes them as 'museum-pieces of moralism' in *Victorian Fairy Tales*, p. 38.

<sup>70</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Rose and the Ring* [1854]

[http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk\\_files=1443927](http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=1443927). Accessed 5/3/12, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. According to Davies the broomstick 'makes its appearance more often in nineteenth-century folklore than it does in early modern witch material' *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p.188, and Keith Thomas claims that 'the broomstick made famous by subsequent children's fiction, occurs only once in an English witch-trial', *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 529.

self-reliance' which enabled him to attain emotional as well as physical manhood.<sup>72</sup> However, in view of his identification with the character of Fairy Blackstick, misfortune may also have made a 'mother' of him. *The Rose and the Ring* was written for Thackeray's daughters as they recovered from scarletina in a home robbed of a mother by Isabella Thackeray's mental illness. Thackeray insisted on assuming the role of 'mother' as well as father to his children. When he claimed that this 'Fireside Pantomime' was written with the collaboration of his friend 'Miss Bunch', a governess of 'great fancy and droll imagination', it might be safe to conjecture that as well as engaging with the debate between the advocates of charitable intervention and 'self-help', he enhanced his role of mother-substitute by donning the cloak of the mythical chap-book story-spinner, Mother Bunch.<sup>73</sup>

Godmothers with black cloaks, steeple hats and broomsticks were also used by less innovative storytellers than Thackeray, as may be seen by Cruikshank's illustrations for Juliana Ewing's 'Timothy's Shoes', which appeared in *Aunt Judy's Magazine* between November 1870 and January 1871.<sup>74</sup> This utilitarian godmother flies in on her broomstick with a gift of indestructible, child-minding boots which are designed to keep their recipient on the right path to adulthood. She is, physically, indistinguishable from the stock 'witch' figure, and thereby a complete contrast to the effete, gossamer-winged fairy godmothers 'floating about the rocks in their white dresses ... like so many bright flowers', about whom Ewing's mother Mrs Gatty wrote in 1851.<sup>75</sup>

Mary De Morgan deviates slightly from the black-clad template in *A Toy Princess* (1877) where her godmother, Fairy Taboret wears a red cloak, but is, more predictably, possessed of 'bright black eyes' a hooked nose and long chin' and the ability to fly and become invisible.<sup>76</sup> While Davies notes the use of red as generally emblematic of witchcraft in the Victorian era it is also a colour traditionally indicative of many things, including danger and female transgression.<sup>77</sup> There may be deeper reasons for its use in this clever little story which subtly attacks any society whose elite views shows of emotion as vulgar and believes that women as well as children

<sup>72</sup> Knoepfmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> Thackeray, *The Rose and the Ring*, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Juliana Horatia Ewing, 'Timothy's Shoes' in *Lob-Lie-by-the-Fire*, [1893] (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1964)

<sup>75</sup> Margaret Gatty, *The Fairy Godmothers and Other Tales* [1851] <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/11319>, p.1. Accessed 15/2/12.

<sup>76</sup> Mary De Morgan 'A Toy Princess' in Zipes (ed.), *Victorian Fairy Tales*, p. 168.

<sup>77</sup> Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 187.

should be seen and not heard; particularly when that story is told by a woman living quietly on the periphery of the colourful and controversial Pre-Raphaelite circle. Marilyn Pemberton writes of the influence of William Morris's Socialism on Mary, but she also lists the philanthropic work of Mary's mother Sophia, including her campaigning for playgrounds for poor children, and higher education and suffrage for women.<sup>78</sup> Taboret's philosophy, particularly her opposition to the silencing of women, clearly echoes that of Sophia, but when Pemberton notes that 'biographical details of Mary's life are sparse but there are some tantalising glimpses of her in *William de Morgan and His Wife*' she provides oblique evidence of the partial invisibility of the Victorian spinster.<sup>79</sup>

Taboret's goddaughter, having left a joyful land to marry the monarch of a 'stiff and quiet' kingdom, soon dies of misery. Determined to save Princess Ursula from the same fate Taboret leaves her with a loving foster-family, and substitutes a magical life-like doll in her place. This replica is suitably unobtrusive and compliant, with a total vocabulary of four trite phrases. But when the king decides to retire Taboret feels obliged to confess her trick and offers to restore Ursula to her country. After a week both the lovingly demonstrative Princess and her shocked subjects are so unhappy that Taboret asks the people to choose between the lively, loving princess and the leather and wood puppet; they choose the doll. Ursula returns to the simple home of those she loves, and, as Taboret's parting laugh suggests, the people of the hide-bound country get the puppet they deserve. Although this inversion of the Cinderella story has travelled far from the simplicity of its rags to riches original, Ursula's contentment with her domesticated fate as a country housewife hardly qualifies her as a 'new' woman. But she is a 'whole' woman, choosing to live by the application and expression of hand, heart and mind, rather than accepting the easy option of life as a voiceless pampered puppet. It was the message expounded by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, reiterated (passionately) by Florence Nightingale in her novel *Cassandra* in 1854, and by John Stuart Mill in his essay on 'The Subjection of Women' in 1869.

The examples used so far indicate that the use of an image generally perceived as negative to present a positive character is more than an entertaining inversion. Those

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<sup>78</sup> Marilyn Pemberton, 'Mary de Morgan: Out of the Morrisian Shadow', [www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english/MarilynPembertonArticleIssue14.htm](http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english/MarilynPembertonArticleIssue14.htm), p.3. Accessed 15/2/12.

<sup>79</sup> Marilyn Pemberton, 'Mary de Morgan', p. 5.



Victorian writers who openly merged the images of witch and godmother were using the godmother as an authority figure through whom they could promulgate their message, whether it was an attack on destructive addictions, or a promotion of self-help or of female rights; but by linking the godmother with the witch (while not actually naming her as such) they add weight to a message which might run counter to generally accepted social norms. Therefore as the fairy godmother the witch becomes an alternative, if unconventional, authority figure exercising power over the highest in fairyland, while as the witch the fairy godmother signals her status as a powerful outsider, sometimes even a counter-authority figure.

George MacDonald, one of the most prolific writers of Victorian children's stories, did use the bad fairy godmother without resorting to this type of inversion in some of his tales, but beneath his reassurance that, 'I never knew of any interference on the part of a wicked fairy that did not turn out a good thing in the end', lies a deep desire to prove that pain and suffering are part of a great and ultimately benign Divine Plan.<sup>80</sup> While MacDonald's fairy tales often attack specific social issues about which he has strong feelings, they occupy a level nearer to the 'rite of passage' myths from which folklore evolved and they have a mystical quality which, in MacDonald's words, invites readers 'of any age' to find the meaning they were 'capable of finding', and which inspired the twentieth-century cross-generational myth-making of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.<sup>81</sup> The witches, fairies good and bad, and godmother figures who dominate his fantasies encompass every type from the congenitally wicked to the loving earth-mother, and from the salaciously seductive to the neo-Platonic divinity of the 'Mistress of the Silver Moon'.<sup>82</sup> Their variety is indicative of the imagination and internal debate of a man ordained as a Congregationalist minister, but seeking to find an alternative to Calvinist pre-destination through what his son later referred to as a 'fairy-faith Christianity'.<sup>83</sup> It is fascinating to note that while Lewis' MacDonald-inspired Christian myths of Narnia feature a satanic White Witch, her positive mirror-image is Galadriel, the wise fairy (Elf) in Tolkien's Middle Earth, with its twentieth-century following amongst those seeking their own alternative spirituality.

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<sup>80</sup> George MacDonald, 'Little Daylight' [1868] in U.C.Knoepflmacher (ed.), *George MacDonald: The Complete Fairy Tales* (New York and London: Penguin, 1999), p. 150.

<sup>81</sup> George MacDonald 'The Fantastic Imagination' in *George MacDonald: The Complete Fairy Tales* p.7 and Knoepflmacher's introduction, pp. viii-ix.

<sup>82</sup> George MacDonald, *The Princess and Curdie* [1883] (Radford VA; Wilder Publications, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>83</sup> Greville MacDonald, quoted in William Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffman* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 27.

Nevertheless, the two wicked fairy godmothers, Makemnoit and the Swamp Fairy, who appear in MacDonald's 'The Light Princess' (1864) and 'Little Daylight' (1868) respectively, show none of the ambiguity of nature or purpose demonstrated by some of his later godmother creations.<sup>84</sup> Both of them play the role of the evil-gift giver in stories based on the traditional *Sleeping Beauty* christening scene, with each gift being generated by a pun. The clergyman who should have named one baby 'Daylight' is tricked into naming her Little Daylight, so that she sleeps all day, wakes at night, and waxes and wanes with the moon. A similar wicked gift ensures that the Light Princess is bereft of gravity, as a result of which the weightless baby has to be removed from the ceiling with fire tongs, while as a little girl she floats across the lawn tethered like a balloon to a string. The humour of the word-play and the overtly ingenuous subversion of a much-loved nursery tale is delightfully engaging in these works which are aimed primarily at a young readership. However, they are also parables about growing-up, and as such form part of the Victorian section of timeless 'rites of passage' mythology. So the Light Princess, cursed to break her parents' hearts by lack of emotional as well as physical gravity, must learn to empathise with others before her entire gravity returns and she becomes an emotional as well as a physical adult, while Little Daylight learns not to fear growing up or growing old. The curses laid on both princesses are lifted by the intervention of princes. The Light Princess cries for the first time at the suffering of 'a callow story-book prince' who in Knoepflmacher's words 'turns into a Christ-like martyr' as he uses his body to plug a hole draining the life-water from the kingdom.<sup>85</sup> Little Daylight, shamed and confused by the changes happening to her body, retreats ever deeper into the forest (like Red Riding Hood), dancing under the full moon in the full beauty of youth, and becoming 'like an old woman exhausted with suffering' when the nights are moonless.<sup>86</sup> The prince who kisses Daylight's haggard lips in pity under the dark moon fulfils the conditions which break the curse, and perhaps indicates that if becoming an adult is not a curse then growing old in unconditional love is not to be feared either.

Yet, if the princes directly aid the rite of passage into adulthood, the witches' curses indirectly facilitate that passage and allow the princesses to become more complete adults than their parents, and certainly more worthy potential rulers than the

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<sup>84</sup> MacDonald uses 'swamp fairy' with no capital letters.

<sup>85</sup> Knoepflmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, p. 136.

<sup>86</sup> MacDonald, 'Little Daylight', *The Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 153

Light Princess's 'light-headed' and 'light-hearted' father who does not know how babies are made, and who forgets the existence of his poverty-stricken sister, Makemnoit, because 'he could not see into the garret she lived in, could he?'.<sup>87</sup> The King's ineffectual justification of his neglect of a poor relative is yet another inversion of the popular belief, reinforced by folklore that poor witches either feign poverty for good or ill, or earned their destitution through evil deeds. MacDonald preached his sermons, such as this one against neglect of the poor, through the pen rather than the pulpit, and also 'lived' his charitable beliefs through his association with such social reformers as Octavia Hill. However, having to support his wife and eleven children solely by his writing, he also understood the experience of poverty and suffered the humiliation of seeking help from reluctant in-laws. Although, like Thackeray and De Morgan, MacDonald used his fairy godmothers to convey his social and personal anxieties, Makemnoit and the Swamp Fairy, unlike Blackstick and Taboret, are self-evidently wicked fairies who are actually referred to as witches. Their gifts are intended to be curses and both their images are dark, although the chilling lack of compassion willed on the Light Princess, coupled with Makemnoit's demonic dance with a serpent, takes that story to a more sinister level. Arthur Hughes' illustrations for the stories differentiate perfectly between the depths and intensity of each text. His Swamp Fairy has the appearance of a masculine pantomime dame as she marches through the swamp, the fetid character of which reflects her own, shaking her fist at the palace and intent on using the child's gender as a curse. She has more in common with the witches represented in the theatre who, from the early eighteenth-century became, as Porter demonstrates, figures of fun not fear.<sup>88</sup> Hughes' Makemnoit, in contrast exudes the contorted sinister glamour of stygian sorcery as she gyrates maniacally in front of the christening party. Her witchery is both evil and erotic: her actions bring about the sexual 'fall' of the princess, whose adult emotions are awakened when she falls into the lake with the prince and clearly delights in her first experience of 'gravity'. The fact that MacDonald, an ordained clergyman, uses the word 'fall' repeatedly in this scene is surely not an unintentional pun, yet, in this case at least, the Fall is presented as a positive stage in the process of achieving gravity and reaching maturity; it is another example of ultimate good resulting from

<sup>87</sup> George MacDonald, 'The Light Princess' [1868] in *The Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 16.

<sup>88</sup> 'Witchcraft was moving from the tragic to the comic muse' according to Porter 'Culture and the Supernatural c.1680-1800' in Ankarloo and Clarke, *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Vol. 5: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, p. 246.

what, to some readers, might initially be seen as evil. MacDonald's friend John Ruskin found this scene deeply unpalatable, and warned that others would also disapprove.<sup>89</sup> Yet Ruskin did not seem to notice (as Knoepflmacher does) phallic symbolism in the scene where Makemnoit conjures up a giant serpent which she caresses as it rises, expands and drills into the floor of the lake, only to collapse, spent and flaccid having completed an inverted act of insemination designed to drain the land of every drop of life-giving fluid.<sup>90</sup>

In this inversion of gender roles, and of the traditional relationship between witches and the moon, Makemnoit rapes the earth, but curses the *moon* (the ruler of the tides) in order to dam nurturing springs, babies' tears, mothers' milk and, implicitly, the menstrual flow which will allow the Princess to become a woman. The positive association of the moon, water, night and death with the female aspect of nature was a key element of the English and German Romantic poetry which had a profound influence on MacDonald. With other nineteenth-century thinkers he was drawn back to the words of men like Keats and Novalis, under whose imagination things which had been fearful became beautiful, and who echoed what Hutton describes as the 'early modern hermetic tradition' of a female 'world soul' standing in the 'starry heaven' between God and the earth, as a 'fount of life and inspiration.'<sup>91</sup> In *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) MacDonald takes the willing reader closer to the heart of his 'fairy faith' Christianity, while offering glimpses of the neo-pagan and neo-platonic imagery which also informs his text. Its sequel *The Princess and Curdie* (1883) explores deeper, and arguably, darker areas.

Unlike the two earlier tales the 'Princess' stories are centred upon the 'Spinner in the Tower' motif rather than the 'Christening Gift' element of *The Sleeping Beauty* tale. Nonetheless, both young Princess Irene and Curdie the miner undergo baptisms of sorts, and receive gifts from the old Princess Irene, the 'Great Great' Spinner Grandmother. Young Irene is bathed in a seemingly bottomless silver tub, through which she views the starry wonders of the cosmos, and is then given a ball of gossamer thread, her life-thread, which will always link her to the Spinner. Likewise, Curdie is subjected to a literal baptism of fire when he plunges his hands into burning roses (the flower not only of love but of female divinity from Apuleius's many-

<sup>89</sup> John Ruskin, cited in Knoepflmacher (ed.), *George MacDonald: The Complete Fairy Tales*, p. xiii.

<sup>90</sup> Knoepflmacher, *Ventures into Childland*, p. 134.

<sup>91</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 32.

faceted Isis to the Virgin Mary) and is rewarded with ‘wise’ hands which allow him to divine the true nature of those he touches.<sup>92</sup>

The original Sleeping Beauty falls into her dream state after she finds the old lady spinning in the tower. Conversely, Irene and Curdie each find the Spinner when they ‘lose’ themselves: Irene finds her as she ‘loses’ herself in her own home, and again when she loses reality while in a fever after pricking her finger on a brooch pin, while Curdie is visited by the Godmother in the guise of a beautiful lady who heals him in his delirium following a battle wound. Losing oneself in order to find oneself is a recurring theme in many of MacDonald’s fantasy works, including *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895) (both written for adults) where magical mother-figures guide the young through dream-states to awake to deeper truths. As *The Princess and Curdie* opens Curdie is in danger of sleep-walking into a dreamless adulthood which is only a ‘continuous dying’ rather than ‘a continuous resurrection’.<sup>93</sup> For MacDonald the ideal state is to become an adult who is ‘childlike’, not childish, and thereby continues to grow in mind and spirit, and he uses the voices of his witch/godmothers, good or bad, to facilitate that growth.<sup>94</sup>

There are no overtly sexual rites of passage in the *Princess* books. Instead Curdie and Irene demonstrate their growing maturity by granting the old Princess’s wish that they believe in her and refuse to deny her existence or denigrate her name, all of which could equally be defined as attributes of Christian steadfastness. Yet the Spinner in her tower may also be seen as the neo-platonic Wisdom Sophia. MacDonald refers to her as ‘the Mistress of the Silver Moon’ whom Kath Filmer describes as being ‘surrounded by the symbols of the very beginning of existence’, namely boundless darkness, a wheel of fire, and the music of the spheres.<sup>95</sup> The Sophia and her tower belong to the night, but her starlit infinity is the antithesis of the dark subterranean caverns inhabited by grotesque, materialistic goblins. As behoves the mistress of the moon old Princess Irene changes from a wrinkled crone to a queenly matron or a sparkling young woman; but unlike Little Daylight *she* is not ruled by the moon’s phases; her outward appearance alters only as she wills, or as the nature of those who view her dictates. Therefore while some will see her as a symbol

<sup>92</sup> See Lucius Apulius (120-180), *The Golden Ass* trans. Robert Graves (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), p. 234 on Isis and roses.

<sup>93</sup> MacDonald, *The Princess and Curdie*, p. 10

<sup>94</sup> MacDonald, ‘The Fantastic Imagination’, in *The Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 7.

<sup>95</sup> Kath Filmer (ed.), *The Victorian Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in the Mythopoeic Fiction of the Victorian Age*, (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 133.

of the divine supernatural, to some she is a siren as ‘beautiful as an angel’, who reputedly strikes blind all who look upon her, while to others she is Old Mother Weatherwop the witch, who flies on a broomstick and whose appearance heralds disaster. Shapes, as she tells Curdie, ‘are only dresses’ and ‘dresses are only names’.<sup>96</sup> In fact shapes and names are as illusory in MacDonald’s ‘Sleeping Beauty’ tales as they are in the original where the Wicked Fairy is also known as the Witch and assumes the shape of the Spinner to ensure the fulfilment of the fate she has cast for the young Princess.

One of the characteristics used by MacDonald in his tales to differentiate between godmothers or grandmothers and wicked witches is that the former are wise, while the latter know much, like Makemnoit who knows the ‘ins and outs’ of everything, or Watho, the wolf/witch of *The History of Photogen and Nycteris* (1879) who ‘desired to know everything’.<sup>97</sup> It might be assumed from this that MacDonald was not in favour of education for girls, but he actually placed as much value on education for his five daughters as for their six brothers. His fairy tales make a clear distinction between wisdom, which he aligns with faith, and the rapacious search for knowledge without the amelioration of wisdom. Watho has links to the child-stealing witches of folklore, but the grotesque experimentation she conducts on the two children, by raising the boy under constant glaring light and the girl in perpetual darkness, could be seen as MacDonald’s cry against the practice of vivisection. As such it would reiterate an attack he had made recently in a realist adult novel, castigating those who believed God made animals ‘to be tortured that we might gather ease ... it sets my soul aflame with such indignant wrath’.<sup>98</sup> Watho, the red-haired witch with a ‘wolf in her mind’, is transformed bodily into a wolf who is ultimately destroyed by her victims.<sup>99</sup> MacDonald had also used the ‘Red Riding Hood’ witch/wolf motif in his first published work *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (1858) where Anados, the wanderer in a life-quest through fairy land, is ensnared and seduced by the hollow Alder-Maiden. She is in league with the Ash-Tree ogre whose eyes ‘seemed lighted up with an infinite greed. A gnawing

<sup>96</sup> MacDonald, *The Princess and Curdie*, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> MacDonald, ‘The Light Princess’, *The Complete Fairy Tales*, p.17, and ‘The History of Photogen and Nycteris: A Day and Night Mahrchen’ [1879] in *The Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 304.

<sup>98</sup> George MacDonald, *Paul Faber* [1878] cited in Elizabeth Saintsbury, *George MacDonald: A Short Life* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1987) p.58. MacDonald had a wide contemporary readership for his many works of Scottish realist fiction, which are now less popular than his fantasy and poetry.

<sup>99</sup> MacDonald, ‘The History of Photogen and Nycteris’ *The Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 7.

voracity'.<sup>100</sup> The wolf imagery is accentuated by Hughes' illustration of a gigantic canine paw looming over the prone figure of Anados. Anados travels with the Shadow of his guilt, finally finding expiation by destroying (like Red Riding Hood's woodman) 'a great brute, like a wolf, but twice the size' which is devouring the victims of a false religion.<sup>101</sup>

MacDonald's utilization of the darkest aspect of the Red Riding Hood tale does not so much concern debates about religion as his desire to condemn what he implied was the worship of certain aspects of Victorian society. The Alder-Maiden and her 'other', the wolfish Ash-Tree ogre, are manifestations of a self-devouring greed for sexual knowledge without love, just as Watho, MacDonald's other lupine witch, represents self-destructive greed for intellectual knowledge un-ameliorated by compassion. In his other adult fantasy, *Lilith* (1895), he also used the witch-figure in the form of a rapacious vampire princess to symbolise material greed. Lilith assumes two fearsome animal shapes as she becomes a gigantic leech consuming the life-blood of her saviour while he sleeps, and a black-spotted white leopard whose domain metaphorically devours itself through self-consuming trade and exploitation of its mineral wealth. Although *Lilith* was written when Britain was experiencing the obverse of its mid-century euphoria, it also reflects the author's long held view that material wealth was sterile and potentially harmful; a view intensified by greed for such wealth being represented by the name-sake of a Talmudic figure who gave birth, not to children, but to demonic hordes.<sup>102</sup>

In *Lilith* MacDonald subverts two traditional witch-images, those of Lilith and Eve. His Lilith takes her name from Adam's first wife in Hebrew myth who, banished for refusing to submit to Adam's authority, became the destroyer of children and the seductress of young men who slept alone. As Eve's elder sister her witchery was seen as even deeper and more destructive than that of Eve by those who blamed Eve for mankind's expulsion from Eden; a theme which will be addressed more fully in Chapter Three of my thesis. Yet, although MacDonald's eponymous Lilith is evil, she is also a tormented creature who inspires pity as well as fear, and is led to eventual repentance and the comforting sleep of death by Mr Raven, the guide through the

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<sup>100</sup> George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* [1858] (London: Azure, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>101</sup> MacDonald, *Phantastes*, p. 308.

<sup>102</sup> A view also demonstrated by Old Irene's claim to have blessed Curdie's family with poverty, in *The Princess and Curdie*, p. 30.

other-world. Mr Raven is identified as Adam, thereby signifying that the woman known as Mrs Raven wife is Eve, whom MacDonald presents in prelapsarian innocence and glory. He writes of her eyes ‘A whole night-heaven lay condensed in each pupil’, and he continues, ‘her eyes must have been coming direct out of his [God’s] own! the still face might be a primeval perfection; the live eyes were a continuous creation’.<sup>103</sup> She is the epitome of Dasent’s demonised goddess, stripped once more of her witch-robe and melded with MacDonald’s ‘fairy faith’ Christian deity.

The characters of *Lilith* are far too abstruse, and the plot too convoluted, for most children of any era to comprehend, but Mrs Raven in her snow-pure gown is yet another version of the godmother figures who aid the protagonists of MacDonald’s children’s literature on their journeys. These godmothers possess and dispense wisdom, but its acquisition is dependent upon a degree of faith on the part of the recipient. So Curdie earns his ‘knowing hands’ by having enough faith in Old Irene to put his hands into the flames; while in ‘The Golden Key’ (1867) Mossy and Tangle must trust the old woman whom they meet when lost (like Hansel and Gretel) in the forest, and whose cauldron cooks willingly sacrificial flying fish, the flesh of which endows those who eat it with the facility to understand the speech of every earthly creature. This ‘Grandmother’ (as she asks to be called) is a perfect prototype Wiccan green witch-goddess. She is the Earth Mother, not the queenly inhabitant of a heavenly tower. Her hair is tinged with green, her green clothing smells of ‘grass and lavender’, and she walks barefoot so that nothing comes between her and her Element.<sup>104</sup> Her greenness betokens life, but only earthly life; as she directs the young travellers towards a safe journey through this life she foreshadows the next life by lamenting, ‘I am never allowed to keep my children long’.<sup>105</sup>

MacDonald’s witches may be as black as Makemnoit, or as green and gentle as the ‘Golden Key’ grandmother, or as multifaceted as Old Princess Irene, but they all deliver the message that while there is salvation for all it may have to be preceded by suffering. Yet it is not just the obviously wicked witches who inflict that suffering.

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<sup>103</sup> MacDonald, *Lilith* [1896] (Virginia:IndyPublish.com), p. 27. Novalis (Friedrich Leopold von Hardenberg) wrote of Night as ‘world queen, the higher messenger of a holy word, a nurse of blessed love’ in *Hymns to the Night* [1800] trans. Dick Higgins (New York: McPherson & Company, 1988), p.13. See also Saintsbury, *George MacDonald: A Short Life*, on MacDonald’s admiration of the poetry of Novalis, pp. 56,58.

<sup>104</sup> MacDonald, ‘The Golden Key’, pp. 125-127.

<sup>105</sup> MacDonald, ‘The Golden Key,’ p. 130.



Despite rejecting the Calvinist ‘puritanical martinet of a God’, MacDonald created in *The Wise Woman* (1874) a being as stern as the *Old Testament* Jehovah, who ‘in some countries would have been called a witch’ but had ‘more power than any witch could have’.<sup>106</sup> The black cloak covering a white gown represents not only her affinity with the moon, but the ambivalence of a character who subjects two little girls to a gruelling regime of moral reformation, finally only accepting one of them as worthy of redemption. This story is seen as one of MacDonald’s darkest, but even the Mistress of the Silver Moon had her dark side, as demonstrated by the ultimate apocalyptic destruction of the kingdom established under her auspices by King Curdie and Queen Irene, which closes *The Princess and Curdie*, and which Stephen Prickett described as a ‘startlingly bleak allusion to the passing of Christianity’.<sup>107</sup> I prefer Roderick McGillis’s interpretation of that scene as a purging which leaves the land ‘ready for a new beginning’; a vision which McGillis calls ‘both horrible and uplifting’, two words which are also applicable to the witches who personify MacDonald’s internal debate.<sup>108</sup>

The ‘dual aspect’ supernatural godmother is probably best exemplified in her familiar Victorian incarnation(s) as Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid and her alter-ego ‘sister’ Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby in Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* (1862-63).<sup>109</sup> The first sister is the hook-nosed, black-clad, dispenser of blind justice who punishes those who deviate from the right path. The second sister is the ‘soft, fat, smooth, cuddly, delicious’ foster-mother of children who (although ‘death’ is never mentioned directly) enter her element in order to be prepared for re-birth.<sup>110</sup> The first impels, and is impelled, by love, the second by mechanical natural necessity, ‘I work by machinery, just like an engine’.<sup>111</sup> Each begins where the other ends, and those who will not listen to the first must obey the second. Their ‘oneness’ is signposted in Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid’s assurance that she will grow as lovely as her sister when people behave as they should (p.125). Kingsley used the godmother/witch as a central figure

<sup>106</sup> MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, [1867] cited in Gray, *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth*, p.28, and MacDonald, ‘The Wise Woman, or the Lost Princess’ *Collected Fairy Tales*, p. 229.

<sup>107</sup> Stephen Prickett cited by Kisten Jeffrey Johnson, ‘Curdie’s Intertextual Dialogue’ in Roderick McGillis (ed.), *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs* (Pennsylvania: Zossima Press, 2008), p. 153.

<sup>108</sup> McGillis, ‘Fantasy as Miracle’ in *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs*, p. 215

<sup>109</sup> This children’s story was actually serialised in the very adult context of the middle-class periodical, *Macmillan’s Magazine*.

<sup>110</sup> Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Landbaby* [1826-63] (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1994), p. 130. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

in a work which Humphrey Carpenter suggested was significant in a ‘fumbling towards the creation of some sort of alternative religion’, and in which ‘maternal fairies take the place of the love of Christ’.<sup>112</sup> It is important to note that neither MacDonald nor Kingsley sought to install a mother goddess as a supreme deity. It is particularly clear with MacDonald’s ‘Golden Key’ Grandmother, as with Kingsley’s Mother Carey and the Sisters, that they represent the divine aspect of Nature, but that something unfathomable lies beyond them.<sup>113</sup> Like MacDonald, Kingsley was an ordained clergyman, but although MacDonald very quickly resigned his Presbyterian ministry and thereafter mythologised his basic faith through his fairy tales, he never lost that faith. In contrast, Susan Chitty suggests that despite his later opposition to Newman, Kingsley ‘flirted’ with Catholicism and even contemplated a barefoot pilgrimage to a French monastery which he envisaged would culminate in confession and scourging. Chitty argues that doubt and loss of faith preceded a return to the Anglican Church by the man who eventually became chaplain to Queen Victoria.<sup>114</sup> Yet the vow with which he made that return on the night of his twenty-second birthday is strongly redolent of Pantheism, ‘I have been for the last hour on the shore. Before the sleeping Earth and the sleepless sea and stars I devoted myself to God’.<sup>115</sup>

The same imagery of maternal nature born from a conflation of spiritualities occurred two decades later as Tom the chimney sweep began his journey to rebirth at the magical time of ‘three o’clock on a midsummer morning’ when ‘old Mrs Earth was fast asleep’, but the steam which Tom followed on its way to the ocean was as wakeful as its elemental spirit, made manifest as the Irishwoman in a ‘crimson madder petticoat’ (pp. 9-10).<sup>116</sup> She shows Tom the stream’s source in a spring likened to those of Classical Greece which the ‘heathen’ peopled with nymphs, then she challenges the brutal Grimes with her ‘knowing’ and her curse. As the comic band pursues Tom from the hall she flows ahead like a river ‘smoothly and gracefully’ with

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<sup>112</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children’s Literature* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 41.

<sup>113</sup> See also MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* [1868-9] where ‘North Wind’, an amalgam of the maternal and erotic, carries the dreaming boy Diamond gently through a pre-death experience, leading him to something unspecified beyond her, but she also kills innocent sailors in a storm because, she explains, it is in her nature to do so.

<sup>114</sup> Susan Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk: A Life of Charles Kingsley* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), p. 59.

<sup>115</sup> Cited in Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk*, p. 60.

<sup>116</sup> There is also a significant link here between gypsies and nineteenth-century witchcraft, see Davies, *Witchcraft and Magic* for details of incidents of gypsies involved in bewitching (pp.35-3), un-witching and fortune telling p. 58.

twinkling feet'. (pp. 24-25). She transforms into the kindly red-petticoated schoolmistress, and finally, just before Tom falls into the sea, she too enters the water:

her shawl and her petticoat floated off her, and the green water-weeds floated around her head, and the fairies of the stream came up ... and bore her away ... for she was the queen of them all; and perhaps of more besides. (p. 38)

Eventually Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby, Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid, Mother Carey who makes new creatures out of seawater all day long, and the Irishwoman are all revealed to be one being, whose name is written in her eyes in letters that are too dazzling to be read. Despite Kingsley's professed dislike of what he called 'Mari-idolitary', the multifaceted aquatic 'queen of the fairies' seems to reflect many qualities of the Queen of Heaven. Yet the Irishwoman, mirroring the constantly evolving water course, also dances through the evolution of witch imagery. Springing from its source in classical magic the stream and its scarlet-clad spirit pass through the Early Modern imagery of beggarly 'knowing' and 'cursing', and enter a period when the good fairy and the bad fairy are conflated with the goddess and the wicked witch; until finally they foreshadow a period when modern witches such as Marian Green would describe the female aspect of divinity as Earth Mother, Moon Goddess and Mother Ocean.<sup>117</sup> For those actively engaged with twentieth-and twenty-first-century alternative spirituality witch-imagery overlays the images of the magical mother-substitutes created by Kingsley and MacDonald.

Like MacDonald, Kingsley targeted many areas of social concern with his 'Muscular Christianity', championing causes such as Chartism, and highlighting the plight of the poor through novels like *Yeast* (1851) and *Alton Locke* (1850), but *The Water Babies* was a spectacular success, prompting the passing of the 'Chimney Sweeps Regulation Act' within a year of its publication, thereby ensuring that no more children suffocated in chimneys. Yet there may also be deeper reasons for the author's desire to create an afterlife 'otherworld' where dead children could find loving arms to hold them, and stern but just mother-substitutes to wash away their sins. His younger brother Herbert ran away from school in bad weather having been accused of stealing a silver spoon, then developed rheumatic fever. The resulting heart damage was blamed for his subsequent death. However, Chitty reports local belief (still extant) that his gravestone bearing only initials indicates that Herbert may have

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<sup>117</sup> Marian Green, *A Witch Alone*, (London: Thorsons, 1995), pp. 31-32.

committed suicide.<sup>118</sup> In a less gentle afterlife than that of *The Water-Babies* a child-suicide might not have gone to Hell as an adult would, but might still have been confined in eternal purgatory or Limbo, as would the un-baptised Tom. Chitty's biography of Kingsley also depicts him working tirelessly for the disenfranchised while immersed in something akin to sadomasochism in his private life, drawing and writing about tortured female saints and searching for penitence through self-flagellation and cold baths, and, by implication, wishing that he, like 'dirty' Tom, could have his sins washed away.<sup>119</sup>

Whatever the speculation may be regarding any writer's motivation for creating specific characters it is evident that the fairy tale witch/godmother has many faces because she has to speak forcefully about a range of public issues, and possibly also whisper softly about a multitude of private ones. It is also evident that there is no convenient overall progression from the negative to the positive image of the witch. Writers such as Cruikshank, Thackeray and De Morgan amplify the magical message of the 'good' fairy godmother by, like Mrs Molesworth, allowing glimpses of underlying witch-imagery. MacDonald outlined the difference between witches and those who were wise women and good fairies, explaining those who might call his Wise Woman a witch would be mistaken 'for she never did anything wicked', and claiming that the power of fairies is natural while that of witches is generated by wickedness.<sup>120</sup> Yet, many of his mother-substitutes are, like Mother Nature herself, capable of acts which, he suggests, seem malign when seen through myopically worldly eyes. Kingsley's unified sisterhood illustrates the relevance and subtlety of the Victorian section of the bridge between the dark image of the medieval witch and the green or white witch perceived by some in the twentieth century. The counterpart of Tom's prickly dark godmother can be found in medieval and Early Modern witch-imagery, while her softly maternal 'other' is reflected in the Earth Mother of modern paganism, yet they are resolved into one being in a Victorian fairy tale where the word 'witch' is never mentioned.

Three conclusions emerge clearly from this exploration of Victorian fairyland. Firstly, the distinction between witches and fairies is highly ambiguous, but unlike the somewhat random use of various words to describe magical women in earlier tales

<sup>118</sup> Susan Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk*, p. 45.

<sup>119</sup> Chitty writes of Kingsley's 'obsession' with clean clothes and cold baths, p. 221.

<sup>120</sup> MacDonald, 'The Wise Woman', *Complete Fairy Tales*, p.229, see also, 'Little Daylight', p. 151.

derived circuitously from age-old oral source, neo-fairy tales seem to deliberately interweave these images in order to create fairy godmother figures who are (mostly) loving but have superhuman power which they can and do utilise to reward good or punish transgression. Secondly, the newly created witch/fairies of Victorian fantasy are individually designed models who fly across the boundaries of traditional fairy-tales carrying the messages of their human creators. When the witches of nineteenth-century realist fiction perform the same service they do so more circumspectly, often in the role of the scapegoat whose victimhood is signalled by erroneous perceptions of witch-hood, or those for whom witch-imagery is a metaphor for the evil in human nature. Thirdly, whether these new fairy tale witches are good or bad they share a common vigour and intensity whereby even when they are the misunderstood 'good' these women are strong, while their 'bad' sisters are not sly charlatans but genuinely and mightily wicked hags. The witch of fairy tale may have many images, but in the otherworld of fairyland, where magic is real and lives may be transformed instantly with the wave of a wand, there is no place (as there is in nineteenth-century realist fiction) for the witch as fraud or victim.

## Chapter Two

### Representations of the Witch in Nineteenth-Century Fiction

The majority of canonical Victorian novelists do not demonstrate the same degree of innovation in their use of witch imagery as that shown by their counterparts in the field of children's literature. They generally ameliorate witch-imagery inherited from folklore, Early Modern witch trials and traditional fairy stories with the sceptical rationalism of the Enlightenment, thereby creating witch-figures who, unlike the powerful witches of neo-fairy tales, are usually presented as victims, with even the most evil being excused to some degree by the blows life has dealt them. The witches of realist nineteenth-century novels are devoid of any magical ability whatsoever; their role as hag, or siren, or unjustly demonised victim is used instead as a metaphor for the malign nature of flaws, such as greed or selfishness, in individuals or society in general. In contrast, the same authors' short stories often addressed the idea of the woman-as-witch with far greater directness and, perversely, with greater ambiguity, in works portraying her as both a woman erroneously labelled a witch through fear, hatred or delusion (including self-delusion), *and* as a malign demon. The underlying message of nineteenth-century fiction is that witchery is in the eye of the beholder, but that eye is a compound organ capable of viewing the supernatural through rational and irrational lenses. Most authors of canonical nineteenth-century fiction saw their story-telling abilities as tools with which to initiate social reform, but each was also a sensationalist in that he or she wished to stimulate and manipulate the imaginations and emotions of an audience. Consequently, images of the witch were regularly used not only to generate pity or indignation (for the witch or her victim) but also to induce a tingle along the spine of the captivated reader.

The word 'witch' is seldom used in Victorian novels. Writers such as Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens and George Eliot usually alerted their readership to the witch-like qualities of a character by allusions to seventeenth-century witchcraft or to the familiar witch-motifs of traditional fairy tales, thereby using potent triggers which could shroud a woman in an aura of witchery without naming her as a witch.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy used the even subtler device of merging

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<sup>1</sup> For example Alice in Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, Madame Walravens in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Miss Flite in Dickens' *Bleak House*.

heroine and landscape in tales impelled by symbols of a pagan seasonal cycle, consequently conflating woman, fairy, witch, and earth goddess into images familiar to myth-readers such as Dasent and myth writers such as MacDonald, as well as to modern pagans. The contrast between the use made by Hardy of the witch as a symbol of the late nineteenth-century rural world threatened by urbanisation and Walter Scott's earlier use of her image as symbolic of outmoded rural life threatening social progress at the beginning of the century is indicative of changing perceptions of nature and of the witch in the eyes of some beholders.

The fiction of the Brontës, Gaskell, Dickens, Eliot and Hardy is the primary focus of this chapter, although the lenses of fairy tale, witch-prosecutions, mythology and paganism revealed an abundance of witches in the works of other nineteenth-century novelists, some of whom will feature in the chapter on New Witchcraft because their work enters the area of quasi science and/or neo-spirituality. Authors included in *this* chapter provide a wide range of divergent witch types within their individual oeuvres. Gaskell for instance provides examples of the wise woman, the fairy, the dark hag and the witch-hunt victim within four pieces of fiction, as well as creating a 'doubled-woman' even more obviously worthy of the name than Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre/Bertha Rochester or Catherine's dual incarnation in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. However, an examination of nineteenth-century novelists' witches would be incomplete without a preliminary foray into the fictional creations of Walter Scott, a man of paradox fascinated by witchcraft, myth and Scottish folk-history which he used to invoke a coven of witches so colourful that they remained burned into the imagination decades after his death, but while doing so he progressively 'rationalised' his witches by revealing them to be frauds or fools. Scott also prefigured the Victorian novelists' use of witch-imagery, by creating realist female characters, vulnerable or vicious, but defined by the motifs redolent of medieval and Early Modern witchcraft-beliefs

### **Sir Walter Scott's witches**

Sir Walter Scott died in 1832, five years before Victoria became Queen, yet his influence runs in a steady stream through the Victorian age, permeating the cultural

landscape in areas from literature to architecture, and from painting to opera.<sup>2</sup> Virtually every noteworthy writer from Dickens to Yeats includes him in their list of favourite authors, and his continued popularity is evident in the frequency of direct or oblique reference to Scott or his works throughout the nineteenth century. In 1860 George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, the heroine of *The Mill on the Floss*, empathised with fiery dark-haired Minna (who is fascinated by sorcery) in Scott's *The Pirate* (1822), rather than with Minna's meek, fair-haired sister Brenda.<sup>3</sup> In 1868 Eliza Lynn Linton castigated the so-called 'Girl of the Period' who, Linton claimed, frizzed her hair like an African savage or let it trail unrestrained down her back like 'Madge Wildfire'.<sup>4</sup> Linton does not need to explain that Madge is the deranged self-proclaimed witch in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) or, indeed, even to mention Scott's name, as she assumes that her readers will understand the allusion.

Scott conjured his witches from folklore and myth, presenting them with an engaging theatricality, yet also defining them as victims whose 'otherness' denied them a place in contemporary society. They are emblematic of the duality of a man trying to balance romantic love of his nation's past with a rational desire for its future prosperity and dignity, just as he used his friendship with George IV to rediscover the long lost regalia of Scotland, but never envisaged a future king of Scotland wearing the crown.<sup>5</sup> Ironically the Victorians loved the literary concoctions which he brewed from elements of medieval history, romance and folklore. They had no qualms about taking temporary respite in an enchanted fairy tale Golden Age before returning to the challenging reality of their urbanised society, but they could also admire the 'Victorian values' demonstrated by a man who epitomised the Protestant work ethic. The duality of Scott's life and character is symbolised by his origins in the Scottish Borders, and the reality that unity between England and Scotland promised greater security from civil unrest triggered by urbanisation or the threat of Napoleonic invasion. Scott also needed to find an accommodation between the past and the present in order to protect his own future. He achieved this through his twin careers as

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<sup>2</sup> See Philip V. Allingham, 'Walter Scott' on *The Victorian Web*, <http://www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/scott/scottov.html>, on Scott's influence on architecture, drama, and the Gothic Revival. Accessed 21-06-11.

<sup>3</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* [1860] (London: J.M. Dent, 1996), p. 277.

<sup>4</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period' *Saturday Review* 14<sup>th</sup> March 1868.

<sup>5</sup> See Carola Oman, *The Wizard of the North: The Life of Sir Walter Scott* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), p. 220.



lawyer and author. George Landow and Philip Allingham deduce that the Victorians loved Scott because he allowed them to ‘have their cake and eat it’.<sup>6</sup>

Scott’s witches add zest to the cake, but their purpose is greater than the simple gratification of a taste for the Gothic. The dependable rationalist heroes of the novels he wrote between 1814 and 1822 represent present virtue and future hope; the feckless, reckless anti-heroes represent a picturesque but no longer habitable past, while the irrational voice of witch or sibyl echoes from primordial depths. She is both the symbol and the product of primitive superstition. She is often an unnatural mother-figure to the Byronic anti-hero, and is, like him, doomed not to live on into the new ‘rational’ day. However, Coleman Parsons notes an increasing scepticism and rationalism on Scott’s part as he matured, which contrasted with his ‘previous delight’ in the use of ‘tales of wonder’.<sup>7</sup> This trend is noticeable in Scott’s treatment of witches, as the aura of magic is peeled away to reveal duplicitous or psychologically unstable and plainly mortal women. Whereas in 1803, Walter Scott the young folklore-gathering lawyer-poet described, with blood-curdling relish, the carnage wrought by the ‘wayward ladies of the Glen’, the green-clad sirens of his early poem ‘Glenfinlas’, in 1823 *Sir Walter Scott, the Sheriff Deputy and Clerk of Sessions dismissed Macbeth’s hags*, ‘Nobody would believe such folly now-a-days, except low and ignorant creatures, such as those who consult gipsies in order to have their fortunes told’.<sup>8</sup>

Those words seem to denigrate his most convincingly heroic witch-figure, Meg Merrilies, the gypsy who appeared in *Guy Mannering* in 1815. Meg is described as six foot high, wearing a man’s great-coat and carrying ‘a goodly sloethorn cudgel’, whose ‘elf-locks’ are like ‘the snakes of the gorgon’.<sup>9</sup> Scott’s fictional witches who intrude themselves most violently upon the mind’s eye share a masculinity of physique, visage and dress. This generally marks them as uncanny, unnatural women and thereby unnatural mothers, although Meg becomes a self-sacrificing fairy godmother, spinning Harry Barton’s fate and wreaking vengeance on his enemies.

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<sup>6</sup> George P. Landow and Philip Allingham, ‘Why Did The Victorians Love Sir Walter Scott’s Writings?’ *The Victorian Web: literature, history, and culture in the age of Victoria*. <http://www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/scott/why.html>. Accessed 06/02/2006.

<sup>7</sup> Coleman O. Parsons, *Witchcraft and Demonology in Scott’s Fiction* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Scott, *Tales of a Grandfather: First Series* [1823] cited in Parsons p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering* [1815] (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1879), p. 11. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

Despite having a reputation for being ‘crack-brained’ (p. 231) she is a commanding figure whose curses are given authorial veracity; Harry’s father pays dearly for his expulsion of the gypsies, and as Harry’s abductor sneers ‘ye hag of Satan! The hemp’s not sown that will hang me’ she predicts correctly that, ‘It’s sown, and it’s grown, and it’s heckled, and it’s twisted’ (p. 286).

In contrast, in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) Madge Wildfire flits about the midnight hillside as erratically as her namesake as a figure of grotesque comedy and heartrending tragedy. Her strapping build, bizarre costume, constant cavorting and high-pitched nonsensical singing provide a comic foil to her embittered hag of a mother, Meg Murdockson, while both women revel in theatrical displays of witch imagery, likened to an unsophisticated production of *Macbeth*. The mother, in common with centuries of powerless and resentful women, assumes the cloak of diabolism, while the daughter is driven to insanity by her baby’s murder at the hands of its ambitious grandmother. Madge’s foster child also suffers the lonely death of a fugitive patricide in a novel which establishes the convention that the fate of those mothered by Scott’s witches is inevitably bleak.

Scott distances himself further from innocent witchery in *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), where the interference of the ‘good’ witch accidentally destroys her young ‘Master’ Ravenswood and Lucy, the new heir to Ravenswood’s lost land. Their love could unite their families but Old Alice views Ravenswood with motherly eyes which are literally sightless, and she is also blind to the benefits of a union between the old and new families, and blind to the consequences of her efforts to drive them apart. She is a complex character, both saintly and destructive in her total devotion to the past. In contrast Scott resorts again to the simplistic *Macbeth* analogy when defining the other three witch figures in this novel who talk of riding on hemlock stalks and excitedly anticipate Ravenswood’s death when they might have ‘the streaking and winding’ of his ‘bonny corpse’.<sup>10</sup> This is just the lasciviousness and bravado of the hopeless and powerless, but Ailsie Gourley’s prophesy of Ravenswood’s death in quick-sands, and her chilling declaration at Lucy’s wedding to another man that the girl’s ‘winding-sheet is up as high as her throat already’, are of a far darker quality (p. 221). This so-called ‘Wise Woman’ is an instrument of psychological poisoning, driving Lucy to murderous insanity and death. Scott uses the

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Scott, *The Bride of Lammermoor* [1819] (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1879), p. 165 . Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

example of the ‘old Sycorax’ to draw a distinction between the mentally or physically feeble victims of superstition, and the truly criminal. His lawyer’s conscience finds solace in the argument that some past convictions were deserved by those who earned ‘as poisoners...and diabolical agents in secret domestic crimes, the severe fate to which they were condemned for the imaginary guilt of witchcraft’ (p. 206).

A.O.J. Cockshut notes that Scott’s last novel *The Pirate* (1822) is pervaded, as *The Bride* is not, with reflective passages in which superstition is placed under the microscope of the historian’.<sup>11</sup> Yet, *The Pirate*, with its quotation from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* on the title page, hints that Norna, the lofty Orcadian Pythoness, rules over a female Prospero’s kingdom; but her ‘magic’ is simply trickery, and while her name aligns her with the Norse Fates, her home at Fitful-head symbolises her unstable mind. Although eventually acknowledging her delusions, she insists she must ‘remain the dreaded – the mystical ... or I must be no more’.<sup>12</sup> But she simply ceases to be the witch Norna and becomes the devout Ulla, with Bible in hand, while her reformed pirate son dies nobly, fighting for his king. Her fate is rendered more prosaic by an end-note defining her as the victim of a ‘singular kind of insanity’ characterised by an ingenuousness causing the ‘maniac’ to delude his or her self even more effectively than they delude others.<sup>13</sup>

Scott deduces that so-called possessors of magical powers are first venerated by society, then feared and hated, and ‘finally regarded as impostors’.<sup>14</sup> He depicts so-called witches primarily as victims, and reveals the sociology and psychology transforming women into witch, yet also readily dramatises and glamorises these women. Bessie Millie, the aged crone selling fair winds to sailors was described in his notes as ‘withered and dried up as a mummy’ with ‘a ghastly expression of cunning’; a figure far removed from the theatrically commanding Norna whose creation she inspired.<sup>15</sup> Young Walter Scott enthusiastically collected witchcraft artefacts along with fast-vanishing folktales, while in 1830 the mature author grudgingly produced *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* because his publisher thought there was a market for the subject. There was, and continued to be, such a market. The Victorian appetite for magic and sensation was still unsated. Mid-Victorian Britain was a place

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<sup>11</sup> A.O.J. Cockshut, *The Achievement of Walter Scott* (London: Collins, 1969), p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Scott, *The Pirate* [1822] (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1879), p. 258.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, notes to *The Pirate*, p. 336.

<sup>14</sup> Scott, *The Pirate*, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Scott, notes to *The Pirate*, p. 329.

in which both Palladian and neo-Gothic architecture existed side by side in the built environment, and the rational and the sensational filled similar cultural niches. The readers of Victorian fiction might agree with Scott that belief in witchcraft was foolish, but still enjoy a sprinkling of supernatural seasoning on their recreational fiction.

### **The Brontës' Witches**

Writing in 1834 to her friend Ellen Nussey, who asked her to recommend suitable reading matter, Charlotte Brontë was adamant on the subject of fiction, 'read Scott alone; all novels after his are worthless'.<sup>16</sup> Consequently it is reasonable to assume that Scott's witches, as well as his heroes and heroines, had a place in the minds of Anne, Emily and Charlotte as they escaped from the dreary, almost Gothic, isolation of a Yorkshire parsonage into their adolescent 'otherworlds' of Gondal and Angria. Witch imagery equally has its place in the novels produced by the more mature sisterhood as they wrote under the androgynous nom-de-plumes of Acton, Ellis and Currer Bell respectively. Even Anne used two divergent images of the witch in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) where Fergus wishes that the mysterious tenant might be a witch, while Eliza is described as 'bewitching'.<sup>17</sup> Emily envisaged a Miltonic pairing of the Witch and the Devil, cyclically reborn on her wild Yorkshire moors, in her only novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847). The Brontë sisters, like Scott, used traditional or darkly neo-gothic witch-imagery for sinister effect, and witch-women whose masculine qualities and/or irrational behaviour defined them as 'other', as exemplified by Charlotte's frenzied mad woman Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847). However, Charlotte also drew on Romantic witchery, unwittingly transposing the eponymous heroine of her novel *Shirley* (1849) into the feminist neo-pagan world of positive witch imagery. But, following the untimely deaths of all her siblings, she introduced the fairy-tale witch into the muffled dream-reality of her final novel *Villette* (1853).

*Wuthering Heights* is probably most evocative of Scott, not only for the merging of wild, emotionally erratic and multi-faceted male and female protagonists with a

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<sup>16</sup> Letter to 'E' from Charlotte Brontë, Haworth, [1834], cited by Elizabeth Gaskell in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* [1857] (Oxford: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1919), p. 104.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [1848], Stevie Davies (ed.) (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 14 and 18.

savage landscape, but also with the author's use of direct witch-imagery to heighten an impression of diabolism which is only partially dispelled by rationalism. As with Scott a 'rational' narrator, Lockwood, distances himself from rural superstition by primarily relaying the words of Nelly Dean to relate the convoluted story of Catherine Earnshaw, who dies as Catherine Linton, and is effectively reborn as the second Catherine Linton, becomes the victimised 'little witch' Catherine Heathcliff, and finally the loving wise woman Catherine Earnshaw. Yet it is Lockwood who casts the initial shadow over the tale as, in the opening pages, he labels the younger Catherine a 'little witch', albeit one who shows only 'mock malignancy' in her 'beautiful eyes' as she threatens the scripture-spouting Joseph with her proficiency in the Black Arts.<sup>18</sup> It is also Lockwood who introduces the spectre of dread which pervades most of the subsequent text, as he feels the clinging hand, hears the pleading voice, sees the child's face, and frantically spills the blood of a phantom Catherine Linton (the first), whom he damns in his terrified frenzy as 'a fiend' a 'changeling – a wicked little soul' (pp. 17-18). Although Lockwood subsequently dismisses the incident as a 'ridiculous nightmare' (p. 20), Emily Brontë has rapidly established the bleak tone of the novel through 'rational' Lockwood's perception of the doubled Catherine in corporeal and non-corporeal forms.

Nelly Dean, in contrast, sees Catherine Earnshaw as a 'wild, wicked slip' (p. 29) whose witchery is as innocent as that of the second Catherine whom Joseph accuses of having 'witched' Hareton into uprooting fruit bushes in order to plant a flower bed (p. 231). Equally, Nelly sympathises with young Heathcliff's suffering under the jealous rule of Hindley, although after his death she muses on his origins, imagining 'some fit parentage for him', using the words 'goblin', 'ghoul', 'vampire' and 'incarnate demon' (p. 239) to suggest an answer. Demonic allusions are attached to Heathcliff, from the day he joins the Earnshaw family as a grotesque 'imp of Satan' (p. 27) until the day he dies 'grinning at death', his soul 'harried off' by 'the devil' (p. 244). Heathcliff's saturnine looks and wolfish behaviour align him with the medieval devil and the werewolf and, as already demonstrated in this thesis, the devil and his witch are as intertwined as the witch and the werewolf, or the wolf and the wayward maiden, in the imagery established by folklore and fairy tales, So Catherine tells Nelly 'I *am* Heathcliff!' (p. 59) and Gilbert and Gubar see Catherine and

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<sup>18</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* [1847] (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1992), p. 10. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

Heathcliff ultimately exorcised from the 'hereditary estate' but lingering at its edge 'as witch and goblin, Eve and Satan'.<sup>19</sup>

These ominous images haunt the moorland as Cathy haunted Heathcliff's imagination after her death, while Hareton and Catherine become a mortal Nature Spirit and a gently bewitching Eve. In his rage Heathcliff calls young Catherine an 'accursed witch' whose love would make Hareton 'an outcast, and a beggar' (pp. 232-3), but it is actually her love and her willingness to act as a bestower of wisdom which saves Hareton from the state of ignorant alienation to which Heathcliff's bitterness had exiled him. In their study of the suppressed female voice in nineteenth-century literature, Gilbert and Gubar quote Sherry Ortner's view that women are relegated to 'Otherness', excluded from the 'sphere of culture's hegemony', when they are 'denied the autonomy ... that the pen represents'; Ortner asks, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?'.<sup>20</sup> In *Wuthering Heights* Emily Brontë uses her pen to reverse that gender specificity, then marries Nature to Culture as the Witch uses her newly acquired compassionate wisdom (a necessary supplement to knowledge) to help the Beast find his humanity. Gathering together the threads of pagan and Christian mythology running through the text, Emily Brontë weaves a fairy tale ending akin to that of MacDonald's pantheistic myths.

But, like MacDonald's fairy tales, this one is essentially dark. The unreliable voice of Lockwood is heard again in the closing line as he wonders 'how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers' for those sleeping beneath the moorland turf (p. 245). Most readers, including Charlotte Brontë, *could* imagine 'lost and fallen' spirits rising from those graves, in a work in which 'every beam of sunshine is poured down through black bars of threatening cloud'.<sup>21</sup> *Wuthering Heights* is essentially a Gothic novel, where the cloud of black demonic witchery hangs over the figure of the restored Eve. In contrast, the positive witch-imagery attached to Emily by Charlotte in her novel *Shirley* (1849) places her nearer to the Wiccan ideal than any other 'witch' in this chapter.

Biographers and critics from Elizabeth Gaskell (1857) onwards have mirrored Margaret Reynolds' assessment that the character of Shirley Keeldar was 'partly

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 306.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, pp. 278 and 369.

based on Emily'.<sup>22</sup> The qualifying adverb, 'partly', echoes Gaskell's surprise that such a charismatic character should be based on the sister whom even Charlotte described as 'having a tendency to seclusion' with an imagination 'more sombre than sunny'.<sup>23</sup> Yet, Shirley, whom the ingenuously wise child Henry sees as 'a kind of white witch', is part of what Reynolds defines as Charlotte's creation of a 'lively myth' in which Emily became 'part egotistical hero, part fierce and solitary witch, part holy fool'.<sup>24</sup> Shirley and Emily also became part of the process by which, Hutton argues, the modern Wiccan found 'a goddess'.<sup>25</sup> Surprisingly, Hutton only makes one reference to the Brontës; neither *Wuthering Heights* nor Emily's pantheistic poetry are mentioned in *The Triumph of the Moon*, although Hutton cites the 'remarkable' case of Charlotte Brontë whose heroine Jane Eyre also 'paid a passionate lip-service to Christianity' while operating emotionally 'within a cosmology where ... God has created nature to be a divine mother for all living things' particularly women.<sup>26</sup> Hutton is referring directly to the dream sequence in which the moon appears in human form, warning 'My daughter, flee temptation', and Jane replies 'Mother, I will'.<sup>27</sup> A more 'remarkably' exhilarating example of the parson's daughter's reinstatement of Eve to the position of Christo/pagan All-Mother is in fact to be found in Shirley Keeldar's condemnation of Milton for his failure to differentiate between Eve and his cook, and Shirley's vision of Eve as a Titan goddess speaking 'face to face' with God.<sup>28</sup> Declining to go to church, Shirley announces

I will stay out here with my mother Eve, in these days called Nature. I love her – undying, mighty being! Heaven may have fallen from her brow when she fell in paradise; but all that is glorious on earth shines there still. She is taking me to her bosom, and showing me her heart. (p. 316)

That heart fills her with 'unwonted power'.

It could be argued that Charlotte's mythologised version of Emily became, in *Shirley*, the 'white-witch-other' of Charlotte herself, speaking empowering words

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<sup>22</sup> Leighton and Reynolds (eds.) *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 197. See also Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 324, Mrs Humphrey Ward, introduction to *Shirley* (London: John Murray, 1899), p. xiii, and Gilbert and Gubar, p. 251.

<sup>23</sup> Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 278.

<sup>24</sup> Leighton and Reynolds (eds.) *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [1847] Richard J. Dunn (ed.) (London and New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), p. 281. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* [1849] Andrew and Judith Hook (eds.) (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 315-16. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

which chime with the defiant Deism of Emily's poem 'No Coward Soul is Mine' (c.1846), but which Charlotte might hesitate to declare directly, despite the bleak circumstances under which she wrote *Shirley*.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that Shirley is the 'other' of the novel's gently self-constrained Caroline Helstone, who does what Caroline 'would like to do'.<sup>30</sup> From her first inception the generic witch has been the 'other' of the generic woman, as the dark or defiant 'other' of womankind; nineteenth-century fiction contains many examples of specific mirroring whereby characteristics associated with generic ideas of witchery are attached to an 'other' woman whose words and actions make manifest the suppressed emotions of the heroine. This is nowhere more evident than in the work of Charlotte Brontë where Bertha Rochester mirrors the dark aspect of Jane, while Shirley offers Caroline positive alternatives to the conventional expectations of society. When Jane Eyre tells herself that Mrs Rochester will not be born until she (Jane) is dressed in her 'wraith-like' wedding apparel, she foreshadows the revelation that Mrs Rochester is alive and imprisoned in incendiary fury, but she also subconsciously exposes her fear that marriage will result in the death of her 'self'. Bertha's subsequent destruction of the veil Jane has accepted reluctantly from Rochester's hand is the most symbolic example of the 'recurrent images' cited by Gilbert and Gubar to demonstrate that Bertha 'acts for Jane'.<sup>31</sup> By leaving Rochester physically broken and dependant Bertha enables Jane to avoid exchanging one life of confinement and dependence for another, and instead enables her to become a living 'Mrs Rochester' on her own terms. In a similar vein Shirley not only chooses the (poor) man she will marry, but by rejecting the ignobly motivated proposal made by his brother, Shirley allows Caroline to begin *her* marriage in a greatly superior moral position to that of her humiliated husband.

Both witch-women, Bertha and Shirley, demonstrate (like those of Scott) a degree of unnatural power. Bertha, with a stature 'almost equalling her husband', whom she wrestles with 'virile force' (p. 258), is the physical inversion of Jane Eyre. Conversely, Shirley and Caroline are both personable young women, differentiated superficially only by Shirley's independent wealth and more confident manner; two

<sup>29</sup> Emily Jane Brontë, 'No coward soul is mine', Leighton and Reynolds (eds) *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 213. Ward introduced *Shirley* as a book begun when, before his death, the sisters trembled beneath the drunken 'shadow' cast by their brother Branwell, and continued and completed as first Emily and then Anne died, with the prospect of a peaceful life unfulfilled, (London: John Murray, 1899), p. xi.

<sup>30</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 382.

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 361.



elements not entirely unrelated. But while Shirley argues that Caroline is neither ‘masculine’ nor ‘spirited’ enough to ‘flash out’ with ‘manly fire’ (p. 352) she declares that *she* is ‘something more’ than a woman, and that her title should be ‘Shirley Keeldar, Esquire’; as she has a ‘man’s name’ and holds a man’s position’ (as a landowner) ‘it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood’ (p. 213). Yet Brontë uses the innocent veracity of Henry to reinstate the womanliness of Shirley who is ‘not an Amazon’ (p. 471). By modern standards this light-hearted disparagement of the female and elevation of the male hardly qualifies Shirley as a feminist white-witch. Gilbert and Gubar accuse Brontë of abandoning the ‘radical intent’ with which she began writing *Shirley* and capitulating to convention, just as Shirley capitulated to her ‘hero and patriarch’.<sup>32</sup> The modern Wiccan might also find it difficult to empathise with Shirley’s acceptance of the industrialisation imposed on the mystical and geographical heart of the novel. But *Shirley* is set in a time (1812) when as Shirley’s new husband and ‘master’ argues, embryo industrialisation promised housing, food and employment to those who had none (p. 598). It was also written when Shirley Keeldar’s pre-marital radicalism was seen by some as distasteful in comparison with Caroline’s ‘flower-like purity’.<sup>33</sup> Given the social constraints of the period, the loss of Shirley’s Eden might be seen as a courageous, if subtle, attack on the married woman’s loss of autonomy, while her links to white witchery might also provide a more positive role model for late nineteenth-century ‘new women’ and twentieth-century green feminist Wiccans than Thomas Hardy’s sacrificial earth goddesses Tess and Eustacia Vye. Nonetheless, Shirley’s inability to save her fairy-haunted Eden also illustrates the fact that the most powerful ‘witches’ of realist fiction are ineffectual victims compared with those of fairy tale; as demonstrated by Scott’s interpretation of magic as delusion in his treatment of Norna in *The Pirate*.

The description of Bertha Rochester as a ‘mad lady ... as cunning as a witch’ in *Jane Eyre* (p. 376) illustrates the recurrence of the words ‘witch’ and ‘mad’ to define women who departed from the bounds of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century convention. Bertha’s situation resonates with that of many women who were labelled insane and confined to asylums, while others who fought for the rights of their incarcerated ‘sisters’ were vilified by allusions to witchery, as demonstrated in Chapter Four of my thesis. The original of Gilbert and Gubar’s mad woman in the

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 394-5.

<sup>33</sup> Mrs Ward introduction to *Shirley* (London: John Murray, 1899), p. xxvi.

atic escapes her incarceration by literally achieving a pyrrhic victory. Less dramatically, but more effectively, Shirley rejects an intellectually inferior suitor, despite her uncle's assertion that her 'eccentricity and conceit touch the verge of frenzy' and indicate insanity (p. 444). However, Shirley also allegorises the mingled fascination and fear felt by men and women (mainly men) in response to the threatening 'other'. Referring obliquely to Scott's delusional Norna, Shirley and Caroline, while planning to visit the Scottish islands, think of 'Fitful-Head' and a mermaid, a 'monstrous likeness of ourselves!', tempting them with the 'preternatural lure' of its 'wily glance' then diving beneath the waves 'with a wild shriek' (pp. 248-49).

Elsewhere Shirley modifies this 'misapprehension' to one where men see the good woman as 'half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend' (p. 343). She might equally have said fairy and witch, but such a simple division had already been undermined in *Jane Eyre* where references to Jane as a fairy were not used solely to accentuate her difference from the 'witch' Bertha; for example the child Jane, locked in the red-room and filled with anger at the injustice dealt to her, sees her reflected image as a threatening 'phantom' creature, 'half fairy, half imp' (p. 11), thereby foreshadowing the appearance of Bertha's vengeful face in her (Jane's) mirror years later. Rochester is captivated by the 'elfish' thoughts manifest in Jane's elemental paintings (p. 111), but his references to Jane's uncanny abilities form playful markers in their relationship; she is the fairy who bewitches his horse (p. 107), the traveller from the other world, 'I have been with my aunt, sir, who is dead' (p. 215), the fairy who might transform him into a handsome man (p. 215), and the 'mocking changeling – fairy born and human-bred' who inspires him to live again (p. 386). Brontë gives Rochester less control over the inversion when he calls Jane a witch; her action as the 'witch, sorceress' trying to 'drown' him (p. 131) only postpones the successful witch-burning ignited by her dark double; equally, when Rochester declares, on the eve of their wedding, 'How well you read me, you witch' (p. 247), the statement is ironically indicative of the fact that she does *not* know him.<sup>34</sup>

When Brontë introduced magical imagery into her final novel, *Villette*, it was even further removed from the simplistic witch/fairy dichotomy. Its narrator/heroine

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<sup>34</sup> Maureen F. Moran cites Jane and Bertha as examples of the white and black witch respectively to illustrate her contention (which coincides with mine) that even 'ostensibly realistic, [Victorian] fictions ... use witchcraft associations and metaphors to offer contending examples of womanhood, "Light no Smithfield fires"' *Journal of Popular Culture* 33/4 (Spring 2000), p. 124.

Lucy Snowe is no fairy or witch, but, as suggested by her name, she evinces a ghostly opaqueness, through which she ‘others’ and foregrounds the ingenuous fairy Paulina, the shallow bewitching Ginevra, and even the sinister controlling Madame Beck, whose character as a spider-like ‘watcher’ of those within her sphere of influence is in turn watched and emulated by Lucy.<sup>35</sup> Of course all those characters mentioned are simply mortal women, characters in Lucy’s Bildungsroman, whose fairy tale imagery is suggested by direct or indirect allusion in the text. In contrast, the phantom nun who haunts Lucy’s consciousness is Brontë’s clearly marked uncanny creature; she is a conflation of mythologised folk-memory, Lucy’s imagination, and Ginevra’s impish machinations. When Gilbert and Gubar offer the nun and the witch as oppositional representatives of the saintly and the demonic in their study of *Villette* they risk oversimplifying Brontë’s complex use of the image of the nun.<sup>36</sup> In *Shirley* the confining walls of the nunnery have long been softened ruins, broken and assimilated into the primordial womb of Nunnwood, a place spiritually inaccessible to men. Charlotte compares Emily to an unworldly nun in the introduction to *Wuthering Heights*, just as Rochester imagines Jane’s nun-like youth; yet, Emily’s naiveté is offered as an excuse for the unwitting creation of a disturbing text, while Rochester alludes maliciously to novices who worship their priest.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, Miss Snowe’s black-robed ‘other’ in *Villette* not only presents a phantom mirror of the virginal buried life, but also evokes the erotic sensuality which writers such as ‘Monk’ Lewis had already assigned to their wicked or defiled fictional nuns.<sup>38</sup> In *Villette* Lucy Snowe refers to the elderly grotesque Madame Walravens as ‘Malevola, the evil fairy’ and as ‘Cunegonda’.<sup>39</sup> Sally Minogue explains in her notes to *Villette* that Cunegonda is ‘a character in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) who transfixes the hero with her beauty’ but eventually ‘becomes ugly and withered’ (p. 471), but Lewis’ *The Monk* also features a ‘Cunegonda’ who is an aged nun in possession of a dark secret. As Brontë’s surreal hag, Madame Walravens, passes through the painted figure of the nun, symbolising the way in which the nun became, in Gothic fiction, a fantasy figure whose

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<sup>35</sup> Lyndall Gordon notes a line in an undated fragment of *Villette* in which the child Paulina refers to Lucy as ‘something strange – I think a witch’, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (London: Virago, 1994), p. 247.

<sup>36</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 406.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 278.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Gregory Lewis was known as ‘Monk’ Lewis after the publication of his Gothic novel *The Monk* in 1796.

<sup>39</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, [1853] (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1993), p. 364. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

ambivalent persona was interchangeable with that of the fiend or phantom, witch or fairy of folklore and fairy tale.

Two of the strangest interludes in Charlotte Brontë's fiction are centred upon people presented as fairy tale figures, and occur when the heroine is in a state of deep emotional uncertainty. In the first Rochester enters his own home, unrecognised, in the guise of a gypsy fortune-teller, a 'Mother Bunch' as someone calls her, and insists on reading the destinies of all the young women present.<sup>40</sup> The fairy tale imagery is convoluted. Jane sees (sceptically) a 'sibyl' in a red cloak and black bonnet (p. 172), while Blanche Ingram, dissatisfied with her predicted fortune, mocks those who see 'a genuine witch ... in close alliance with the old gentleman [the devil]' (p. 170). But, the significance of this dream-like section is that Rochester becomes a witch in order to affirm the true nature of Blanche (who fails to *see* him) and to test Jane and indicate his feelings for her. Seeing through the witch-image Jane finds Rochester trying to draw her 'out – or in' (p. 227). In *Villette* the fairy tale interlude has the quality of an actual dream in which fragments of images are jumbled and rearranged by the questing mind. Following a night in which Lucy is tormented by the emotional inconsistency which makes her both yearn for and fear to hear the words she believes Paul Emmanuel wishes to speak, she goes, like the heroine of Madame D'Aulnoy's 'The Yellow Dwarf', to carry a gift of exotic fare (fruit not crocodile-egg cakes) to Madame Walravens, a mysterious old woman as grotesquely shaped and bizarrely dressed as D'Aulnoy's Desert Fairy. The princess in D'Aulnoy's fairy story makes her perilous journey in order to discover her destiny. Lucy undertakes a physical errand to the ominously named Rue des Mages, which is also a metaphysical journey to 'elf land', where she meets 'Malevola', the 'old witch' (p. 367) and discovers that the irascible Yellow Dwarf (M. Paul) has a generous heart, but that heart belongs to an angelic nun, so he can never marry.

But the messages received by Jane and Lucy in both mystical interludes are contorted, cryptic predictions. Jane's God-Mother Bunch implies that, Cinderella-like, she will win the hand of her prince, but fails to see or predict the tortuous journey they must undertake before that happens. The nature of Lucy's 'fortune' is more ambiguous still; the translucent Miss Snowe may supersede the 'pale-faced' nun

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<sup>40</sup>The name and image of 'Mother Bunch' which adorned collections of fairy tales was often assumed by fortune-tellers, who traded on the aura of wisdom and dark magic which (as I argued in the previous chapter) surrounded the figure of the 'godmother'. See also Davies on 'Mother Bunch' in chapbooks and as a gypsy fortune-teller, in *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, pp. 133-4.

(p. 371) in Paul's heart, but Brontë's readers never learn whether she becomes Madame Emmanuel. However, both Lucy and Jane become themselves, not wraith-like 'others' of the witch. Unlike fairy tale, or even Scott's novels, witch-imagery in Victorian fiction is seldom clearly didactic or clearly delineated. When, like Jane and Lucy, the main protagonists of Victorian fiction look at and through the image of the witch as reflected in a fragmented crystal, they come face-to-face with the 'other' side of their nature.

### **Elizabeth Gaskell's witches.**

It has been argued by Felicia Bonaparte that Elizabeth Gaskell, who recorded the life of her 'dear friend, Charlotte Brontë', also saw her dark 'other' through the witch-imagery of her fiction despite the fact that she, like Brontë, had a deeply-felt Christian belief. As the wife and helpmeet of a Unitarian minister, closely involved with the concerns of an increasingly complex and urbanised society, Gaskell views her witches with compassion and empathy. Like those of Scott, the witch-figures who appear in her fiction are essentially victims, with no actual magical ability, but Gaskell, who shared Brontë's enjoyment of Scott, also understood the appeal of the supernatural, using it with relish in her short stories and novellas. Gaskell once joked that as she was 'half Scotch' she had 'a right to be superstitious'.<sup>41</sup> A simplistic extension of this claim might suggest that the sceptical English half directed her realist novels while the superstitious Scottish half inspired her Gothic stories. One might deduce that she was an even more emotionally fractured being than Scott by noting her light-hearted comment to a friend about the difficulty of reconciling the various roles she had to play and the various aspects of her nature; the great number of 'mes' as she called them included not only a minister's wife, but a mother and a successful author.<sup>42</sup> Her work is examined here because of the diversity of its witch-imagery, but also to demonstrate the ways in which she used that imagery to highlight areas of social iniquity, and to address dilemmas encountered by her various 'mes'. She is *not* the subject of inquiry because she longed to become a witch, as Bonaparte contends.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Elizabeth Gaskell cited in J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (eds.) in *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 442.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Chappel and Pollard (eds.) *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>43</sup>Felicia Bonaparte argues in *The Gypsy Bachelor of Manchester: The Life of Mrs. Gaskell's Demon* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992) that the divided Gaskell projected an outer persona of 'Mrs. Gaskell' the philanthropist, loving mother and all-round 'angel in the house', while the coded messages in her fiction recorded her 'struggle to become a witch again', pp.49 and.54.

However, as Jenny Uglow notes, there are implications within Gaskell's fiction that 'there is some "wild" element in women that both attracts and frightens men, some force that links them with dangerous depths, with the untamed and primitive', and which I contend both attracts and frightens Gaskell herself.<sup>44</sup> This 'element' might be related to the classical 'daimon' described as the 'divine voice in man... characterised by [its] unpredictable, whimsical nature' which 'often takes possession of the mental powers of people'.<sup>45</sup> Such a demon could personify the exhilarating, dangerous, inspirational force described by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her poem 'A Musical Instrument' (1860) and as such it might indeed appeal to a clergyman's wife for whom 'home duties' were 'paramount', but who found in 'the hidden world of Art' not only a refuge from the 'Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares', but an outlet for her passions.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst I do not disagree with Bonaparte's view of the 'demon' as a metaphor for art and intellectual freedom, I cannot accept her claim that Gaskell's fiction records her 'struggle to become a witch again'.<sup>47</sup> The flaw in this argument is that the word 'witch' is not a positive one in Gaskell's work. I suggest that, in contrast to Bonaparte's interpretation, a Gaskell witch is not 'a woman who has kept her demon' but a woman who has failed to keep her demon (her passion) under control.<sup>48</sup> Gaskell's fictional witches include those whose demons escape in passion and overwhelm them, or those falsely demonised by the passions of others. In Gaskell's work a woman whose demon is distorted by violent passion in the form of anger, hate, lust or perverted love, becomes demonic in the diabolical sense of the word and thereby unintentionally hurts the innocent, specifically the child or child-like. Bonaparte suggests that Gaskell's final desire was to become 'as Bridget', the witch-figure of Gaskell's short story 'The Poor Clare' (1856). In view of the fact that Bridget's fit of rage invoked the demon-double of her grandchild this claim is hardly compatible with the image of the author who, regretting a display of maternal

<sup>44</sup> Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 478.

<sup>45</sup> Udo Becker, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols* (New York and London: Continuum, 1994), p. 81.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'A Musical Instrument' [1860], in which the 'Great God Pan' plays his wild music through the 'reed' of the human artist, (ed.) Abrams, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol.2, pp. 1048-9. See also Gaskell on 'world of Art', quoted in Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Bonaparte, *The Gypsy Bachelor of Manchester*, p. 54.

<sup>48</sup> Bonaparte, *The Gypsy Bachelor of Manchester*, p. 52.

impatience towards her daughters, wrote in her diary ‘Oh God, in whose hands are all hearts make me more even tempered’.<sup>49</sup> The role of loving mother was surely more than a projected outer-self for Gaskell who lost her own mother at the age of four, lived with a loving aunt while her father’s love was diverted to his second family, and soothed her sorrow at the death of her infant son by giving ‘some utterance to the agony’ of the poor through her first novel *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* in 1848.<sup>50</sup>

Gaskell, as a local minister’s wife, was painfully aware of the suffering experienced daily in a city where fifty thousand workers were on short-time employment and the Irish potato famine brought an influx of hungry immigrants to compete for what work there was. Storms and a long winter meant ruined harvests and consequential high food prices; people pawned their household goods and queued at soup kitchens. Typhus carried off the vulnerable, hospitals overflowed, but hunger and insanitary living conditions exacerbated the effects of any illness for those for whom doctors and hospitals were beyond physical or financial reach. The role of ‘healer’ in *Mary Barton*’s community of narrow streets is undertaken by Alice, the urban equivalent of the village Wise Woman, displaced in terms of environment but still occupying the same essential niche as she would in a rural setting. Like the witch of folklore and fairy tales she is a creature of the edge, materially poorer than any of her impoverished neighbours and alone in a community of families. Yet, she is loved and respected, although Gaskell adds that the window of her meagre cellar is protected by shutters in case ‘boys might throw stones’ at it (pp. 16-17). Historians from Reginald Scot (in the *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 1584) to Owen Davies have listed old age, widowhood or spinsterhood, and poverty as elements common to the majority of accused witches down the ages, but also in common with those women Alice is portrayed as being privy to the mysteries of life and death, and cognisant of the malign, as well as the benign, power of words. Equally, while her use of the harvest of ‘hedge-row, ditch and field’ transposes the role of the healer-witch to a time and place where nature supplied ‘the only druggist’s shop within reach’, Gaskell (like Dasent) warns that such potions may ‘have a powerful effect either for good or evil’ (p. 17). Yet despite Gaskell’s implied caveat regarding the fine difference

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<sup>49</sup> Gaskell, quoted by J.A.V. Chapple and Anita Wilson (eds.) *Private Voices: The Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophie Holland* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), p. 70.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Preface to *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* [1848], MacDonald Daly (ed.) (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 3. Subsequent page reference will be cited in the text.

between wise women and wicked witches, she portrays Alice only in positive terms as the personification of the innocence, healing unction and benign mysteries of a romanticised countryside, which Gaskell regarded ‘with a deep relish and fond admiration’.<sup>51</sup> Alice’s male counterpart old Job is the wizard-like, self-taught natural philosopher, whose interest in ‘such things as most folk know nothing about’ (p. 40) provides the active counterpoint to Alice’s passive obedience to the will of God and trust in physical and spiritual salves inherited from generations of grandmothers. Job the Wise Man and Alice the Wise Woman are two figures translated from the rural past to carry nature to Victorian Manchester, and to illuminate the angel, not the demon in human nature. They are minor characters in *Mary Barton* but, despite Alice’s profound belief in God and Job’s professed atheism, they provide a link with the fin-de-siècle paganism of Thomas Hardy and twentieth-century neo-paganism, as does the life-affirming escape made to Green Hays Field by the Barton family and their neighbours. Despite the reality that poverty, disease and back-breaking labour were not confined to Manchester or any other city it seems that ‘Hays’, the ancient term for hedges, might also define the comfortingly misty green haze through which Gaskell viewed the rural past. The links between gentle Alice and those who were called, or called themselves, witches are touched upon very lightly in this work, but they would have been recognisable to the Victorian who still bought charms and cures or even avoided a neighbour’s ‘evil eye’, and they might also resonate with the modern pagan who views nature, as Gaskell did, through a Romantic lens.

Hutton claims that modern paganism is ‘the belated offspring of the Romantic Movement’ which found inspiration in the deities of Greek and Roman mythology who personified the natural world rather than the values of civilisation.<sup>52</sup> Margo K. Louis also addressed the eighteenth-century change of focus from the gods of Olympus to those of the Mysteries, but she noted the need of early Victorian mythographers to ‘conciliate a strong Evangelical lobby’ with the Romantic view that ‘some religious sensibilities informed both ancient Greek and modern Christian’ values.<sup>53</sup> This need to reconcile Romantic nature with Christian virtue is also evident in Gaskell’s merging of the pagan and Christian in the character of Alice, but even more so with her treatment of the eponymous heroine of her second full-length novel

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<sup>51</sup> Gaskell, Preface to *Mary Barton*, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. viii.

<sup>53</sup> Louis, *Persephone Rises*, p. 2.



*Ruth* (1853). Gaskell united her own Unitarian and Romantic ‘selves’ by creating in Ruth a character who embodies the ethereal qualities of a mythical nature goddess with those of a child-like innocent, but who is alienated from, demonised, and finally martyred by materialistic urban society. Yet, Ruth’s demonisation is not purely the result of social inequality and intolerance, although these were clearly Gaskell’s primary targets. The narrative is driven by the release of perverted demons from within other women, as when the domestic irritations of Ruth’s employer ‘boiled over with intemperate pleasure’, or when her seducer’s possessive mother blames Ruth’s ‘profligacy’ for her son’s behaviour, or when the demon of envy escapes from the heart of Ruth’s friend Jemima, exposing Jemima’s ‘capability for evil’, and inadvertently precipitating Ruth’s ultimate victim-hood in redemptive death.<sup>54</sup>

Ruth’s story was supposedly inspired by that of the orphaned daughter of an Irish clergyman, seduced by her doctor, driven to a life of crime, and finally confronted again by her seducer in his role of prison doctor.<sup>55</sup> Such a case is a far cry from the fertility-goddess image of Ruth, which is intensified by a temporary idyll in the Celtic Otherworld of Wales where she becomes Bellingham’s snow-pure mistress, crowned with water-lilies beside the green depths of a woodland pool.<sup>56</sup> Opinions of the novel, and particularly of its ‘fallen’ heroine, were polarised at the time of its publication, but also reflect the extended dichotomy between classical and medieval images of paganism; in 1853 Chevalier Bunsen, the Prussian ambassador, saw Ruth as ‘Psyche in the purifying fire of ordinary life’, while two members of William Gaskell’s congregation ceremoniously burned the first volume of *Ruth*, doubtless impelled by the same righteous fervour as that which ignited cleansing fires beneath convicted Early Modern Continental witches.<sup>57</sup> Louis notes the mid-nineteenth-century ‘gap’ between ‘scholars of myth and the general public’ with the latter retaining ‘pre-Romantic conviction’ long after the former had ‘abandoned them’.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, late-Victorian converts to the positive image of classical paganism might more readily

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* [1853] Alan Shelston (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 54, 85, 245. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>55</sup> Gaskell wrote about this case in a letter to Dickens, who shared her concern for ‘fallen women’, *Letters*, pp. 98-100.

<sup>56</sup> Bonaparte notes that ‘if we see her in pagan terms we see her, not as a fallen Magdalen, but as the fertility goddess Persephone’, *The Gypsy Bachelor*, p. 89.

<sup>57</sup> Chevalier Bunsen cited, and reference to the burning of a copy of *Ruth* in Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, pp. 324 and 338 respectively.

<sup>58</sup> Loius, *Persephone Rises*, p. 9.

see Ruth as a sacrificial nature goddess, as might a modern critic or a modern pagan.<sup>59</sup> Possibly Gaskell *does* consciously use ‘the myth of the vegetation goddess’ to present Ruth as Persephone, as Bonaparte claims, but she clearly sees her heroine as a child of nature, who is a victim in the city and a fairy-queen/goddess in the country. Ruth is both a symbol of an idyllic rural past sullied and destroyed by sordid urbanisation, and a literary creation born prematurely during a time when the link between woman, witch and earth goddess was not as clear as it became to the late-Victorian or modern Romantic.

Neither the meek ‘wise woman’ Alice, nor Ruth who ingenuously radiates ‘something bewitching’ (p. 33), are ever identified directly as ‘witches’ by Gaskell. The women openly accused of witchcraft belong to her Gothic tales. Her novellas or short stories differ from her realist fiction in their darkness and their hyperbolic dramatic quality. While Alice in *Mary Barton* vows to put a bridle on her tongue because she recognises and fears the destructive power of the word which may never be recalled, Bridget, the old and powerless witch-figure in ‘The Poor Clare’ (1856) unleashes a curse upon her enemy from *her* unbridled tongue, thereby releasing the power of her demon as an uncontrollable malignant force. As Uglow notes ‘men can curse’ but the female witch ‘is the classic embodiment of this terrible power.’<sup>60</sup> The characters in Gaskell’s works who utter words with dire, usually unintentional, consequences are those in whom an outpouring of passion occurs, and they become unbalanced or demonic.

Gaskell’s Gothic short stories are also distinguished from her realist fiction by temporal and geographical displacement which intensifies the level of menace. Bridget’s story begins in ‘another’ time and place; in 1747 in a bleak English landscape whose ‘ghastly white’ forest is the remnant of a pagan past.<sup>61</sup> Bridget herself is ‘other’ as an Irish woman who lived in France and Belgium, a Jacobite and a Roman Catholic. Bonaparte notes that the demon-self of the rational Unitarian Mrs Gaskell was ‘drawn to the ‘passion and poetry and mystery’ of Catholicism.’<sup>62</sup> The dilemma of the rationalist who craves magic and mystery echoes today in Tanya Lurhmann’s description of Wicca as the ‘perfect religion for the romantic

<sup>59</sup> See Hutton on ‘the positive language of paganism’ in late-nineteenth-century culture, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 27, and Louis on Ruskin and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Persephone Rises*, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p. 475.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘The Poor Clare’ [1856] Laura Kranzler (ed.) *Elizabeth Gaskell: Gothic Tales* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 50. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>62</sup> Bonaparte, *The Gypsy Bachelor*, p. 101.

rationalist'.<sup>63</sup> Bridget's religiosity is demonstrated continually as she blesses Starkey Manor house, venerates the picture of Our Lady of the Holy Heart and when her little dog, the only consolation in her loneliness, is shot, she calls upon the saints for vengeance: 'are not the armies of heaven for the likes of me?' (p. 59). However, unlike Alice's submission to the will of God, Bridget demonstrates an increasingly fevered and self-serving 'devotion'. She is the archetypical despotic village crone, toothless, with nose and chin nearly touching, who mutters to herself. Yet she is simply an old woman labelled by neighbours as an 'old witch' who needs a 'ducking', until the moment when Gisborne, in a fit of pique, fatally wounds her little dog. Fixing him with a 'dark and terrible eye' Bridget curses him to see 'the creature you love best... become a terror and a loathing to all' (p. 59).

The curse rebounds cruelly because the loved and loving creature is Bridget's grandchild, whose own demon is apparently released by Bridget's curse, to appear as a wanton doppelganger haunting the demure Lucy and causing her father to drive her away. In contrast to Gaskell's distancing from the occult in her novels everyone in this story believes in witchcraft, from the narrator's uncle to the coarse country clergyman who couples Papists and witches together in their 'black doings' (pp. 86-7) and the kindly priest who helps Bridget to expiate her sin by becoming a nun, a Poor Clare (pp. 91-2). Even the narrator's professed scepticism is overcome as he looks on Lucy's 'ghastly' likeness, its eyes 'in turns mocking and voluptuous' (p. 78). Significantly, he cannot see his 'grave and tender Lucy' as he watches this creature in horrified 'fascination' and when Lucy returns to his sight she appears almost 'shrunk in size' (p. 78). A salacious subtext of desire for transgression on the part of both the emotionally constrained young people is manifest in the wild shadow-self of Lucy. If Bonaparte had identified the supernatural Lucy, rather than Bridget, as Gaskell's secret fantasy self her argument would have been more convincing; Lucy exemplifies the wild, dangerous female nature found by Uglow in Gaskell's work, and might well have presented an exciting 'other' to Mrs Gaskell from whom so many of her 'mes' demanded propriety.

When Lucy the Vamp rose again forty years later in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* her story provided modern scholarship with a plentiful supply of metaphors, but Stoker demonstrates no desire to cast doubt upon the vampire nature of the characters in his

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<sup>63</sup> Cited in Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 392.

excursion into fin-de-siècle decadence. Gaskell, in contrast, even in this most Gothic of her stories, allows the voice of mid-Victorian social Evangelicalism to whisper a warning that witchery is in the eye of the beholder. Although ‘The Poor Clare’ abounds with sable-hued supernaturalism in eerie settings, Gaskell’s rational message underlies a Gothic drama which might equally be read as a study of psychological delusion. The narrator, who professes love for demure Lucy and disgust at her erotic other-self, reveals that he is recovering from total physical and mental collapse, thereby disclosing his unreliability as a narrator, and allowing Gaskell to distance herself from superstition. Gaskell demonstrates that characters disposed by fear or fascination to see Lucy’s demon, will do so, but she also acknowledges the self-destructive power of a guilty conscience, as when Gisborne, realising that he has deprived Bridget of her daughter as well as her dog, accepts the potential of a curse uttered by a woman so deeply wronged, ‘She may have power – no one else could’ (p. 60). Gaskell’s rational voice demonstrates the means by which a domineering and increasingly eccentric and isolated woman becomes a witch in the eyes of her neighbours, but Gaskell the teller of spine-chilling tales also spins a fog of eerie imagery to muffle the voice of sanity for the benefit of those readers who wish to imagine that a woman might hurl effective curses at those who anger her, or dance without shame as the bewitching object of desire.

The balance between sensationalism and rationalism is spread more evenly in ‘Lois the Witch’ (1859), which could either be read as the tale of a curse fulfilled, or that of an innocent young woman destroyed by superstition and religious bigotry. Its ambiguity is again enhanced by displacement; Lois is hanged for witchcraft in another time (in 1692) and in another place (New England) by members of a sect who were ‘other’ to the majority of Christians in Britain.<sup>64</sup> However, during the year in which ‘Lois’ was published, the hysterical young women of Salem with their cries of ‘witchcraft’ and displays of physical torment became symbolic of contemporary threat. They were presented by the press as synonymous with violent public displays by female religious revivalists in Ulster, which according to Deborah Wynne, sent ‘shock waves throughout Britain’.<sup>65</sup> Journalistic devices fuelled public fears still further by comparing the self-professed chosen elect with women howling for

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<sup>64</sup> The residents of Salem were descendants of Puritans who had left England in order to practice and preserve their specific type of Christianity.

<sup>65</sup> Deborah Wynne, ‘Hysteria Repeating Itself: Elizabeth Gaskell’s ‘*Lois the Witch*’, *Women’s Writing* Vol.12 No.1 (2005), p. 87.

aristocratic blood during the French Revolution. Wynne notes that ‘Lois the Witch’ appeared in Dickens’s *All the Year Round* alongside his own story of revolutionary France, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and a factual study of centuries of religious unrest entitled ‘Hysteria and Devotion’.<sup>66</sup> Gaskell had in fact already contributed three stories to *Howitt’s Journal* in 1847 under the pseudonym Cotton Mather Mills, a near appropriation of the name of Cotton Mather, the notorious American witch-finder, so it is not unreasonable to deduce that the author had an interest in New England witch-persecution early in her writing career. Uglow suggests that the name results from Gaskell’s long-held fascination with witch-hunts combined with her residency in the land of cotton mills, plus an unconscious conflation between the words ‘Mather’ and mother, while Christine L Krueger notes the unsettling nature of the juxtaposition between the ‘two worlds comprised in this name’ which evokes ‘on the one hand spiritual fanaticism, delusion, and witchcraft trials, and on the other materialism, political economy, and exploited labour’.<sup>67</sup> Gaskell’s only use of a male nom-de-plume seems perversely emblematic of her divided self, the contrast between the supernatural and realism in her fiction, and the doubled women who appear in that fiction.

The irony of the title ‘Lois the Witch’ is that Lois is not a witch. She is the gentle orphaned daughter of an English country clergyman, sent at her dying mother’s wish to her uncle’s family in New England. The atmosphere is overwhelmingly claustrophobic. The fevered intensity of Salem’s Puritan township builds remorselessly to a crisis, under real or imagined threats from wild Indians, bloodthirsty French pirates, and ungodly outsiders, until the nightmarish infection of ‘witchcraft’ spreads throughout the community as ‘Satan...is let loose’.<sup>68</sup> Lois is one of the terrified and bewildered victims hanged by neighbours, whose own demons escape in anger and fear, howling for the destruction of witches. Uglow refers to the formative effects on Gaskell of her childhood reading of magic and mystery in poetry, fairy tales and old folk stories, combined with didactic works from children’s authors.<sup>69</sup> This is a common brew of nineteenth-century nursery fiction which might predispose Gaskell and her readership to travel freely between the worlds of the

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<sup>66</sup> Wynne, ‘Hysteria Repeating Itself’ *Women’s Writing*, p. 85.

<sup>67</sup> Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p.172 and Krueger *Reading for the Law: British Literary History and Gender Advocacy* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2010), p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘Lois the Witch’ [1859], Kranzler (ed.) *Elizabeth Gaskell; Gothic Tales* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 183. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>69</sup> Uglow, *A Habit of Stories*, p. 27.

supernatural and social dysfunction, and readily accept the merging of the two. Yet, if Alice, Ruth and Bridget are, respectively, the manifestations of the hen wife, fairy/goddess and crone of fairy tale, the role of the diabolical wicked witch in 'Lois' is not played by any individual; she is the fearsome phantom image conjured within the minds of the superstitious, hysterical or self-serving citizens of Salem.

Lois' dread that she might actually be a witch has its genesis in her nightmarish childhood memory of an old woman being 'ducked' as a witch, 'her grey hair streaming down her shoulders...face bloody and black...her cat tied around her neck; eyes 'glaring with fury' she calls to Lois, 'Parson's wench ...thy dad hath never tried for to save me, and none shall save thee when thou art brought up for a witch'

(p. 150). Lois is haunted by dreams of herself in the pond with, 'all men hating me with their eyes because I was a witch' (p. 150). Incidents during her short life in the New World might be seen either as signposts to the fulfilment of the curse, or as moments when adolescent innocence sows the seeds of the hemp which will hang her; one character suggests that the cursing crone had power to infect her mind with 'deadly sin', another jokes of 'bonny' Lois' ability to bewitch (p. 150), while Lois' talk of childish Halloween divination games provokes her cousin Prudence's attention-seeking screams about the 'wicked English witch' (p. 166). Yet Prudence's speculation over how long she 'might wriggle, before great and godly folk' would notice her (p. 190), indicates evil fermenting within the mind of the 'victim' rather than within the alleged witch. Gaskell's Salem reflected the actuality of the seventeenth century in the Old and New Worlds where witchcraft accusations were parochial and, as Purkiss notes, 'most witches were accused by women, and most cases depend at least partly on the evidence given by women'.<sup>70</sup> The novella's witchcraft accusations were primarily initiated by pubescent girls, whose 'womanhood' was in the emotionally volcanic fervour of emergence.<sup>71</sup> On one level Gaskell is simply reproducing the situation as it was recorded in seventeenth-century Salem, but she also articulates the nineteenth-century fear (expressed by women as well as men) of women who aspired to demonstrate their intellectual parity with men. While Purkiss provides evidence to undermine the claims by twentieth-century witches and feminist historians that seventeenth-century witch-hunting was impelled by misogyny, Gaskell creates in Salem a microcosm of her own misogynistic society

<sup>70</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 8.

<sup>71</sup> As were those of Salem.

wherein the witch becomes a metaphor for women who are 'other' to the idealised domestic angels defined by their demonstration of grace, faith, prudence and obedience.

Gaskell's use of Salem in her fiction reflects a fear of the prospect of society dominated by women, with their implied propensity for 'hysterical' behaviour as indicated by the intertwining of fiction and journalism discussed earlier. Within a scenario coloured by images of seventeenth-century British witch trials, and permeated by the subtext of projected nineteenth-century fears of the female fanatic, Lois is demonised by the unrestrained passions of the women around her. Her brooding, obsessive, cousin Manasseh is a damaged individual, whose 'visions' support his conviction that Lois must either 'obey' a divine ordinance and become his bride, or disobey and be consigned to the flames of hell. In contrast the women of the Hickson household harbour truly malevolent demons. Lois' Aunt Grace coldly tolerates the girl to salve her son's mania, then cynically blames his madness on Lois' 'witchcraft', and finally convinces herself that Lois is indeed a witch with whom she would make an unholy alliance to free him from torment. The child Prudence is the poisonous fruit of an unwholesome and repressed community which is psychologically if not physically incestuous and inbred, and she hungers for any form of excitement, even the thrill of seeing a woman hanged. Her sister Faith's anger and jealousy is motivated by the need to believe that only witchcraft could have destroyed the love story she had composed in her imagination, while she is also consumed with guilt over the 'pagan' magic she brewed with the Indian servant Nattee. Violent love and hate ferment silently within the hearts of Faith and Nattee, like yeast in the bread which rises illuminated by lurid firelight, as Nattee terrifies the girls with her tales of human sacrifice (p. 160). Her story-telling and potion-mixing provide Nattee with the last shred of power over the oppressing white race, thereby offering a degree of mitigation for her actions. No such exoneration could be applied to the actions of Grace, Faith, and Prudence whose names are ironically indicative of the inverted morality of their society. The witch is a key element in the internal narrative of each woman in this novella; whether being weighed down with an individual woman's sins, or embraced in an attempt to regain some vestiges of power, or, in Lois' case, feared as an unholy 'other'.

Amongst the clamour of angry, vindictive, malicious, opportunistic and genuinely fearful voices, as woman turns against woman in a wave of accusations as

serpentine as the writhing of the ‘possessed’, Lois’ appeal to Grace, ‘am I a witch, Aunt Hickson?’ (p. 206) is not simply a plea for vindication. Lois believes in and fears witchcraft. She is horrified by the possibility that she might be a witch without knowing it. One might read a connection beneath this expression of apprehension and Gaskell’s response to the outrage generated by *Mary Barton* and then by *Ruth*, when she wrote to Eliza Fox, ‘I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do so manage to shock people’.<sup>72</sup> If Gaskell did detect any hidden impropriety within herself it was the impropriety attached to creativity which plagued so many female authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, compelling them to begin their writing careers as ‘Anon’ or ‘A Lady’, or under male pseudonyms. Fear and malice are generated in ‘Lois the Witch’ within a household where paternal control is absent due to Lois’ uncle’s illness, and within a community bereft of beneficial patriarchal influence when ‘venerable men ... of ripe wisdom and sound counsel ... had rapidly followed each other to the grave’ (p. 181). Gaskell also hints at possible conflict within the mind of a gifted female author, attempting to balance the traditional gender-specific demands of contemporary society, with a career in a profession supposedly guided by male wisdom. Gilbert and Gubar note the dilemma of nineteenth-century women writers, metaphorically compelled to ‘inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men’; Gaskell, through Lois, addresses the deep apprehension of the female artist faced with the possibility of escape from the constraint *and* the security experienced by a woman inhabiting a male dominated environment.<sup>73</sup>

Lois is a storyteller. Her tales of Halloween in Old England soothe Faith’s distress and the act of telling them brings joy to Lois. This balance between providing succour to others and finding personal satisfaction could justify authorship for Gaskell, whose claim that ‘if self is to be the end of exertions, those exertions are unholy’ is interpreted by Kranzler as a criticism of artistic self-indulgence.<sup>74</sup> However, Lois’ storytelling also inspires Patience to denounce her as a witch. Gilbert and Gubar argue that ‘unsupplied with any socially acceptable channel, the independent and creative woman is dubbed ... a witch’.<sup>75</sup> But Gaskell ensured that her talent for storytelling found channels acceptable to her society. She allowed her inner-

<sup>72</sup> Gaskell, *Letters*, p. 223.

<sup>73</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. xi.

<sup>74</sup> Gaskell quoted by Kranzler (ed.), *Gothic Tales*, p. xxx.

<sup>75</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 433.



witch to have the freedom of Lucy's doppelganger in her Gothic works, but never to become a demonic 'Self', overwhelming the wife, mother, and advocate of social reform. Bonaparte writes of Gaskell's 'failure' to 'escape' becoming 'the epitome of the ideal Victorian Woman.'<sup>76</sup> I contend that success in accommodating and controlling her creative 'witch' formed her many 'mes' into 'Mrs' Gaskell, whose title denoted both the respected minister's wife and the matriarchal 'wise-woman' of mid-Victorian fiction. She distanced herself from superstitious belief in witchcraft by presenting her 'witches' as deluded or stigmatised victims, yet she made them and their stories irresistibly engaging to her Victorian readers. She did not die, as Bonaparte declares, 'as Bridget the witch', she died as Mrs Gaskell the wife and mother, taking tea at the house she had bought as a gift for her husband from the proceeds of Mrs Gaskell's stories; a satisfactory symbolic conclusion to her part in the dilemma identified in Gilbert and Gubar's metaphorical equation of architecture with literature.

Although Charles Dickens referred to Gaskell as his 'dear Scheherezade' when she produced a regular abundant and entertaining supply of stories for his magazines *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, her true fairy tale counterparts are not to be found in the tales of the *Arabian Nights*, but in such figures as the Godmother of Mrs Molesworth's *Christmas Tree Land*: if Gaskell became a witch she was the witch as story-telling mother-figure, wearing a cloak of homely wisdom over a gown of otherworldly, sinister moonshine.

### **Charles Dickens' witches**

Dickens, unlike Gaskell, Eliot or Hardy, does not veer between gentle allusion and Gothic melodrama in his use of witch-imagery; nor does he need, like Scott, to assure his readers that his witch-figures have no magical powers. The coven of weird women who inhabit Dickens' fiction are recognisable descendants of the fictional witches of folklore and traditional fairy tales, but they are all also as clearly mortal as the witch-women of Scott's novels. Hags, enchantresses, wise-women, ogresses, fairy-godmothers disguised as evil witches and evil witches disguised as fairy godmothers, all haunt the borderland between Victorian 'reality' and what Harry Stone defined as

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<sup>76</sup> Bonaparte, *The Gypsy Bachelor*, p. 1.

*The Invisible World* which permeates Dickens' work.<sup>77</sup> Dickens was born in 1812, ten years after the publication of *Mother Bunch's Fairy Tales*. Six years later stories from Perrault, D'Aulnoy and *The Arabian Nights* appeared in Benjamin Tabart's *Popular Fairy Tales*, and when Dickens was eleven the dark legends of the Grimms' *German Popular Stories* arrived in Britain. He was also blessed with a plentiful supply of oral material at an early age; as Stone notes, 'Born in an age where fairy tales were considered rubbish and wild stories pernicious, he had a grandmother who excelled in one and a nursemaid who excelled in the other'.<sup>78</sup> Dickens' delight in these stories is evident in the imagery pervading his adult writing, and it is tempting to agree with Stone that 'all Dickens' books are fairy stories'.<sup>79</sup> Allusions are covert, as in Charles Darnay's (*A Tale of Two Cities*) claim that his family name is D'Aulnais, a whisper away from that of the courtly French storyteller Madam D'Aulnoy, or overt as in *Great Expectations* where the image of Andersen's *The Snow Queen* glistens as Miss Havisham, the pale ruling spirit of frigid Satis House, confesses that she has stolen Estella's heart, 'and put ice in its place'.<sup>80</sup>

Fairy tale imagery in Dickens' novels acts as a displacement from their (often painful) hyper-reality, but when presented through a startlingly unexpected lens, the impact of that reality is also intensified. For example, the horror which middle-class Florence Dombey feels as she is suddenly isolated in London's dark otherworld is heightened by the power of metaphor as she becomes Red Riding Hood, the victim of a wolf/witch in a sinister urban forest. The relationship between the witch and the child is a familiar motif in fairy stories and in Dickens' novels. His witches are either benign fairy godmothers in disguise or wicked witches who threaten the child or the childlike. Some are metaphors for universal, timeless sins such as selfishness and greed, while others are the tools and victims of specific demons from Dickens' contemporary Pandemonium, including heartless law, soulless industrialisation, and merciless revolution. Of the seven Dickens novels examined here a simplistic division might be made, defining the witches of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844) and *Dombey and Son* (1848) as representing 'universal sins', and those of *Bleak House* (1852-3), *Hard Times* (1854) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) as the servants of specific social

<sup>77</sup> Harry Stone, *The Invisible World: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Novel Making* (London: Macmillan, 1979)

<sup>78</sup> Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World*, p. 68

<sup>79</sup> Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World*, p. 69

<sup>80</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859] (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 185. and *Great Expectations* [1861] (London: Everyman, JM Dent, 1994), p. 356.

demons, while *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1860-61) could both be read as human life stories transposed to fairy tale. However, Miss Flite, Mrs Sparsit, and Madame Defarge differ greatly in the degree of culpability and wicked-witchery with which they serve their specific social demons: Miss Flite (*Bleak House*) is a direct victim of what Angus Wilson defines as a ‘ramshackle’ and ‘parasitical’ legal system, and as such her naïve and indirect culpability is treated pityingly by Dickens; Mrs Sparsit (*Hard Times*) as aide to the unsavoury face of industrialisation is mocked with savage humour; but Madame Defarge (*A Tale of Two Cities*) is the implacably deadly witch of nightmare, symbolising irrational mob-rule, so feared by Dickens and many more of his era.<sup>81</sup> The same disparity is evident between the witchery of Betsy Trotwood in *David Copperfield*, the optimistic tale of a child guided to manhood by a witch who is really a fairy godmother, and Miss Havisham, the witch masquerading as a fairy godmother in *Great Expectations*, where the human psyche is uncovered most realistically while fairy tale imagery is most verdant.

Fairy tale is not so clearly evident in Dickens’ early novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* where Mrs Sarah Gamp, the midwife, layer-out of the dead, and ‘carer’ (in the broadest sense of that word), like Gaskell’s Alice (*Mary Barton*), barely qualifies as a witch at all by Victorian standards. The modern eye is probably more attuned to detect in her rotund figure and links to reproduction and the afterlife, the reflection of an ancient female fertility idol, incongruously elbowing her way through the nineteenth-century cityscape.<sup>82</sup> Wiccans might also recognise her as a descendant of those defined as medieval martyrs to male medical tyranny, whose ‘function as midwives and healers of the community has been usurped’, although the sanitised Wiccan model has more in common with Gaskell’s saintly Alice than with Sarah Gamp’s urban earthiness and casual cruelty.<sup>83</sup> Even in the nineteenth century such women were creatures of the edge, dealing with the subterranean mysteries of life, death, and reproduction. Two images of Mrs Gamp’s clothing demonstrate the ambiguity of her role; outfits bought by grieving relatives to improve her appearance and protect their dignity hang in various pawn shops like her ‘very fetch and ghost’,

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<sup>81</sup> Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 231.

<sup>82</sup> See Hutton on Neolithic female figurines dubbed ‘Venuses’ by nineteenth-century archaeologists ‘largely in mockery’ before being elevated to representative of the ‘mighty goddess’ in the twentieth century, p. 36.

<sup>83</sup> Rae Beth, *Hedge Witch: A Guide to Solitary Witchcraft* (London: Robert Hale 1992), p. 16

while an expectant father sees the dresses hanging each side of her bed as angels.<sup>84</sup> Her sense of justice is primitive, with choice food and drink identified as added payment for her work, while her appropriation of a patient's pillow to improve her own comfort is acceptable if he is unconscious, so hardly needs it (p. 401). Her appetite for food and drink is matched by her appetite for her employment, where she attends a 'lying in or a laying out with equal zest and relish' (p. 307). She is primarily a figure of fun in her 'rusty black gown, rather the worse for snuff' (p. 306), and her accompanying 'peculiar fragrance ... borne upon the breeze, as if a passing fairy had hiccupped, and had previously been to a wine-vault' (p. 392). She carries a wayward umbrella, not a crutch or broomstick, and her familiar spirit is an invisible friend named Mrs Harris, who sings Mrs Gamp's praises to remind others of that lady's true worth. However, she is also a sinister figure, capable of casual murder as well as casual cruelty, with a blindness to the feelings of others which makes her a comic/grotesque personification of Tennysonian nature 'red in tooth and claw', sharing Mother Nature's attitude towards those unfitted to survive unaided. She is not only part of the 'sisterhood' of nurses; she is the ugly sister of the innocently heartless amoral sirens whose relationship with nineteenth-century poets and artists will be examined in the next chapter.

Paradoxically, the 'natural' callousness which links her with the animal and the goddess places her nearer to the angels than to men like Seth Pecksniff, the pompous and hypocritical hollow man for whom she provides a positive foil. Both speak reams of nonsense, but while Pecksniff's pseudo-religious jargon is described by Angus Wilson as 'empty rhetoric', hers is elevated as a 'mosaic' of the 'folklore of the age'.<sup>85</sup> While Pecksniff's middle-class hypocrisy is breath-taking in its blatancy, hers is either laughable, as in her insistence that she barely drinks, or shocking, as when she muses on the joy of making 'sick people happy in their beds', while half choking a patient in order to administer his medicine (p. 401). There may be humorous ambivalence in the undertaker's heartfelt assertion that 'She's the sort of woman now, one would almost feel disposed to bury for nothing' (p. 397), yet her gluttony, brutality and selfishness are mere shadows of the ruthless, murderous avarice

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<sup>84</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* [1844] (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1997), pp. 306-7. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>85</sup> Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens*, p. 177

demonstrated by Pecksniff and his kind, who are motivated by sheer greed rather than by a daily battle for survival in a world where life and death are a breath apart.

Victorian readers familiar with Scott's novels may have been alerted to Sarah Gamp's witchery as her words that a young patient would 'make a lovely corpse' (p. 400) echo Ailsie Gourley's yearning to lay out the living hero's 'bonny corpse'. The greed implicit in the words of both women could be read as erotic desire, but in the case of Gamp with her gluttonous tendencies it invokes images of cannibalism, thereby linking her to the woman who, despite her evident wickedness, styles herself 'Good' Mrs Brown, and metaphorically devours her own daughter in *Dombey and Son*. Brown represents exploitation of the young at the lowest rung of the social ladder in a novel in which exploitative parenting touches every level of society. Stone notes that Brown is both 'a witch out of folklore and fairy literature' and 'a realist Victorian ragpicker'.<sup>86</sup> The fairy tale imagery is abundant in *Dombey and Son*, particularly in the early chapters where much is viewed through the eyes of young children. Florence, fleeing pandemonium in the streets of London, experiences a situation as terrifying as that of countless lost children in fairy tales when alone in a grim, alien 'underworld' she encounters Brown, an 'ugly old woman', with red rimmed eyes and 'a mouth that mumbled and chattered of itself when she was not speaking'.<sup>87</sup> Brown's home is a filthy hovel, not a gingerbread house or grandma's cottage, but the Red Riding Hood allusion deepens as the wolfish witch emits an anguished animalistic howl when the 'furious pleasure' with which she would cut Florence's curls is overcome by remembrance of the hair of her daughter, 'beyond seas now' (p. 79). Although Florence escapes with her life (and her curls) her identity is stolen temporarily by the urban wolf-woman, and the child becomes a ragged changeling wandering unrecognised through the city streets. Consequently a realist novel is transformed into a fairy tale where an encounter with a witch reveals that parallel worlds exist, but also that the difference between people may be as insubstantial as their clothing. Middle-class Victorians read, with horrified fascination, of Henry Mayhew's excursions into the neighbouring 'otherworld' inhabited by the poor, in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851-61), where he defined the city's 'nomadic' inhabitants as being nearer in nature to animals than

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<sup>86</sup> Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World*, p. 177

<sup>87</sup> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* [1848] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.74. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

man.<sup>88</sup> Dickens brought that world directly into middle-class homes through a portal on the nursery bookshelf, which connected the Grimms' forest with grim reality. For Dickens a child, whether rich or poor, is equally valuable and vulnerable, but the symbolic hags who threaten children in his novels are not just the products of poverty, and social status is not a defining factor among parents who treat their children as commodities.

Florence's little brother Paul finds *his* witch in Mrs Pipchin, an 'ill-favoured, ill-conditioned old lady' with a 'hook nose and a hard grey eye', wearing black forty years after her widowhood, the owner of the 'infantine Boarding School' to which Paul is sent at the age of six (pp. 104-5). Dickens paints the 'Castle of this ogress and child-queller' (p. 106) as a flinty, airless edifice, with a goodly supply of spiny plants, spiders and earwigs. The tyrannical parent who imprisons his child in a 'flinty' educational system or establishment is a recurring character in Dickens' novels, from *Nicholas Nickleby* to *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times*. Pipchin, in her role as surrogate parent, is a fairy tale caricature of compassionless Mr Dombey. Even the use of the word 'ogress' indicates her role as part of the process (including his subsequent education by Mr Feeder) by which Paul might have been consumed and assimilated into a commercial body whose survival in its existing form depended upon the perpetuation of 'Mr Paul Dombey'. Despite his initial apprehension, Paul and Pipchin develop an 'odd' mutual attraction for each other and sit beside the fire with an old black cat, like 'a witch' and 'her two familiars' (p. 113). Paul's supernatural qualities are signalled by his likeness to changelings, those aged and 'terrible little Beings in the Fairy tales' (p. 98), and by his nurse's belief that he is watched over by his dead mother, and thereby possessed of an evil eye which might bring death to those he looks on with affection. But this is another instance of Dickens' diversionary irony. Paul is not a witch-child: he is a doomed innocent, watched over until *his* death by an avaricious paternal eye, just as his sister is overlooked (ignored) by that same blinkered eye.

This novel concentrates primarily on the malign influence of parent upon child. When Good Mrs Brown re-enters the narrative accompanied by her 'lost' daughter Alice, as the lowly doubles of the faded aristocrat Mrs Skewton and *her* daughter Edith, the imagery used to depict Brown includes an allusion to *Macbeth* when the old

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<sup>88</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* Vol.1 Chapter 1, Section 2. <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=Ma>, Accessed 19/6/11.

rag-picker, thwarted in begging and blackmail, is described as scowling like the witch who asked for chestnuts in vain (pp. 403-4).<sup>89</sup> Hablot Browne's illustration, captioned 'A Chance Meeting', which shows Mrs Skewton and Mrs Brown each looking intently into the mirror of the other's face, with their daughters Edith and Alice doing the same more circumspetly evokes the meeting of the witches on Shakespeare's 'blasted heath' (p. 608). Nonetheless, the younger women with their attendant associations of flowing hair, dead children, and loveless sexuality, have more in common with Lilith than with medieval crones. With childhoods blighted by unnatural mothers who turned their daughters into child-women, 'laying snares for men' (p. 417), they are both enveloped in a miasma of futile anger and despair, intensified by Alice's blazing passion or Edith's searing frigidity. When Good Mrs Brown exclaims, 'Show me Mrs Dombey, and I'll show you my Alice's first cousin' (p. 869), she is not only revealing one of the convolutions of plot for which Victorian novels are renowned. The mirroring of Brown's witch-imagery in the character of Skewton emphasises Dickens' message that the child-devouring hag or ogre lurks in all levels of society. Skewton, condemned by her own words, 'What I want is Heart...we are so dreadfully artificial' (p. 307), and Brown, bestial in her hovel, are at worlds removed, and yet both aristocrat and urban peasant are examples of parents, in all ages and all social spheres, who use their children as tools to achieve their own ends. Dombey, as a representative of the new mercantile middle-class, grounds such behaviour in a contemporary setting, and widens Dickens' critique of bad parenting beyond the bounds of gender, cupidity, and stupidity outlined in the characters of 'Good' Mrs Brown and Mrs Skewton.

Brown and Skewton as 'wolf-witches' and Gamp as the petty-villainous healer/wise-woman who will open the portal of death for a fee, all symbolise the age-old universal sins of self-interest and avarice. But examples of specific contemporaneous concerns are represented by Madame Defarge whose overwhelming thirst for revenge makes her the phantom witch of bloody revolution haunting the Victorian mind in *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Mrs Sparsit whose hunger for self-esteem encourages her to help mask the ugly face of industrialisation in *Hard Times*, and by Miss Flite whose blind faith in a corrupt legal system transforms her into the tamed bird whose singing entices free birds into the net of Chancery in *Bleak House*.

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<sup>89</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act I, Scene III

John Jarndyce, who offers sanctuary to those befogged by the phantom promises of Chancery in *Bleak House*, is included in George Orwell's list of worthy gentlemen 'acting the fairy godmother' who appeared as Dickens 'grasped the helplessness of well-meaning individuals in a corrupt society'.<sup>90</sup> The relative ineffectuality of these 'fairy godmothers' also illustrates the difference between the powerful godparents of fairy tale and the limited power of their counterparts in realist fiction, even fiction as interwoven with fairy tale as that of Dickens. Orwell also highlights Dickens' talent for seeing with the child's mind from within and without, but Dickens also demonstrates how imagery established in childhood leaps unbidden into the adult mind.<sup>91</sup> Consequently, Miss Flite is coloured with Grimm witchery as Esther, Ada and Richard meet the 'curious little old woman' when they are abandoned briefly in the fog around Lincoln's Inn, 'half laughing' at their resemblance to 'the children in the wood'.<sup>92</sup> However, Flite (unlike Good Mrs Brown) is not the wolf-witch of *Hansel and Gretel*. Her fairy tale origin is surely *Jorinda and Jorindel* where the witch entices young couples to her ruined castle and turns the young men to stone and transforms the girls into birds which she keeps in cages, although in Dickens' inversion she is ingenuous not malicious. As she names two of her caged birds 'The Wards in Jarndyce' (p. 753) after Richard and Ada, her fellow Chancery suitors, the oracular significance of such naming is chilling in its implications as they join her other birds who personify the descending spiral of life 'in Chancery': 'Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach' (p. 753). Unlike the witch's victims in *Jorinda and Jorindel*, these birds are to be freed on what Miss Flite calls 'The Day of Judgement' but they inevitably 'die in prison' awaiting that day (p. 51). The cruel irony of her situation is emphasised by her name which mocks her inability to use the witch's facility of flight. Like her pets in their cages, Miss Flite is one of the innocents caged by Chancery.

She is constantly referred to as 'crazy', 'cracked', 'mad', but equally 'as cordial and full of heart as sanity itself can be' (p. 585). Speaking nonsensical words in her

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<sup>90</sup> Pickwick and the Cheerybles are assigned to Dickens' earlier optimistic period by George Orwell in 'Charles Dickens', *The Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), p. 85.

<sup>91</sup> Orwell, *The Decline of the English Murder*, p. 93

<sup>92</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* [1852-3] (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 30. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.



garret-room she is another mad woman in the attic, rendered incoherent (although not violently so) by the irrationality of Chancery law. Yet, despite the loss of a rational voice Flite, like Bertha Rochester, has the predictive potential of the classical witch-figure, the Sybil, to convey gnomic oracular messages: on being assured that Caddy Jellyby is not awaiting a judgement she predicts that Caddy will ‘still grow old. But not so old’ (p. 45). Her words gain clarity as Richard’s youth ebbs away in his pursuit of a hopeless dream. She warns of the destructive magnetism of ‘The Mace and Seal’ yet, like the Grimms’ fairy she encourages others to enter that sphere (pp. 456-7). Of all Dickens’ witches Miss Flite’s wicked-witchery is the most illusionary and allusive. Whether in long periods of insanity or brief moments of lucidity she is, unlike ‘Good’ Mrs Brown, a good woman, yet Dickens deliberately triggers Grimm symbolism in her first meeting with the ‘children’ of Chancery, not only to heighten the threatening atmosphere of fog-shrouded city streets, but to signal the danger Flite poses to the childlike and trusting. Unlike Mrs Gamp she does not demonstrate a cruelly self-serving attitude towards the fate of the foolish or helpless, nor is she impelled by the lupine rapacity of Good Mrs Brown or the destructive vulpine cupidity of Mrs Skewton. She represents the fate, powerlessness and self-delusion of innocents caught in the Chancery net and devoured in the maw of litigation, but her unconscious maleficium works through the example set by her unwillingness or inability to free herself from that net, and the consequent nourishment she provides to the system which weaves such snares.

The characters within *Hard Times* are drawn with less subtlety than those of *Bleak House*. Consequently, Mrs Sparsit’s malevolent qualifications are announced emphatically at every appearance. As a penniless ‘relict’ of the world of ‘old money’ she sustains a parasitic existence by bolstering the ego of industrialist Josiah Bounderby, a bombastic symbol of ‘new money’. In their symbiotic relationship Bounderby’s self-created rags-to-riches fairy tale is enhanced by the manufactured nobility of the woman who waits upon him, while Sparsit’s vanity feeds greedily upon the kudos provided by Bounderby’s image of her. The ‘born lady’ paid one hundred pounds a year to ‘worship the ground’ Bounderby walks upon is described as being ‘in her elderly days, with a Coriolanian style of nose and ... dense black eyebrows.’<sup>93</sup> Dickens conflates classical and medieval witch-imagery in his presentation of Sparsit;

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<sup>93</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times: For These Times* [1854] Kate Flint (ed.) (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), pp. 244 and 48. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

Bounderby calls her a ‘devilish sensible woman’ (p. 107), but she looks into her steaming cup of tea ‘as if her classical countenance were invoking the infernal gods’ (p. 50), and once spurned in favour of Louisa she employs vengefully unrelenting ‘compassion’ to reduce Bounderby to the role of ‘Sacrifice and Victim’ rather than ruling deity (p. 109).

She emulates a malevolent spider, working at her netting, watching, plotting, and spinning a metaphorical ‘mighty Staircase, with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom’ (p. 202) into which she imagines her rival slowly descending day by day, while *she* displays an uncanny ability to ‘shoot with consummate velocity from the roof to the hall’ (p. 194). Diabolic animal imagery is further invoked as, hoping to witness Louisa’s downfall, she creeps serpent-like through the undergrowth where ‘the smaller birds might have tumbled out of their nests fascinated by the glittering of Mrs Sparsit’s eyes in the gloom’ (p. 210). Her ultimate decline from priestess to crone follows the trajectory outlined by Dasent as she is left soaked, noisome and coated in ‘stagnant verdure’, like the victim of a village witch-ducking (p. 214). In a final irony Sparsit’s own witch-finding inadvertently explodes Bounderby’s fairy tale of childhood neglect by a ‘drunken she-wolf’ by revealing that the mysterious old woman, whom Bounderby sarcastically describes as apparently ‘flying into town on a broomstick’ (pp.186-7) is actually his self-sacrificing mother.

The primary focus of *Hard Times* is Dickens’ heartfelt belief that hard ‘Facts’ must be ameliorated by ‘Fancy’, and that mechanical commodification of human life is ultimately destructive. However, he also attacks those like Bounderby (and Cruikshank) who pervert the use of fairy tale for their own ends, as well as issuing a gentle warning to those who view industrialisation from a distance, like travellers on an express train who see illuminated factories as ‘Fairy palaces’ (p. 69). Yet Kate Flint illustrates Dickens’ ambivalence towards industrialisation and the accompanying education of factory workers by comparing *Hard Times* with *American Notes* (1842), where Dickens praises working conditions in Massachusetts’ factories along with, in Flint’s words, ‘cultural practices which bind their practitioners into hermetically sealed happiness with their lot’.<sup>94</sup> While critics of social injustice, including Dickens, might find hope in the humanised face of the industrial revolution, they and he were

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<sup>94</sup> Kate Flint (ed.), Introduction to *Hard Times*, pp. xxiii-xxiv. The consequences of industrialisation are also viewed as beneficial in *Bleak House*, where the ‘Ironmaster’ presents a positive alternative to the moribund power of the aristocratic Deadlocks and the outmoded governmental and social practices sustained by their ‘old money’.

of a class and generation whose hearts were chilled by the spectre of the bloody eighteenth-century French Revolution which still haunted nineteenth-century England. Flint suggests that Dickens' decision to omit from *Hard Times* Stephen Blackpool's speech denouncing dangerous working practices was 'an evasion of anything which might appear to support working-class radical behaviour'.<sup>95</sup> Flint's argument highlights the dilemma of a reformer who, desiring improvement in the lot of the poor, wishes for rapid evolution but fears revolution.

Madame Defarge is the chilling face of bloody (French) revolution, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, where her zeal for unending, irrational destruction, is exemplified by her defiant cry, 'tell the wind and fire where to stop, but don't tell me'.<sup>96</sup> Dickens sympathises with the peasantry who are treated as vermin by members of a heartless aristocracy, writing of the father lifting his dead child from the dust, the mother told to let her starving baby suck grass, or the young woman raped and her family slain. Yet, despite a degree of empathy with the 'bloody-minded anger' of the men, his comparison of the female revolutionaries with the howling Furies (p. 221), those implacable, maniacal agents of vengeance in classical myth, betrays the deep unease aroused by female rebellion which accompanied the publication of this novel and Gaskell's 'Lois the Witch'.<sup>97</sup> Madame Defarge, who knits a coded 'register' of her enemies' 'crimes' (p. 174) is also linked to those other female symbols of primordial power, the Fates, namely Clotho who spins life's thread, Lachesis who measures the thread, and Atropos who cuts it.<sup>98</sup> The Furies and Fates (and their equivalents in other mythologies) belong to an ancient matriarchy whose stygian authority overshadows that of the shining gods and heroes of Olympus or Valhalla. The thread of myth and fairy tale linking the Fates to the fay or fairy, and thence to a myriad of witch-fairy spinners including Sleeping Beauty's wicked fairy spinning in the tower and George MacDonald's Old Princess Irene, and at its most mundane and tangible level to the predatory spider, is also woven into all Dickens' witch-figures who ply their threads as they work their mischief. Mrs Heep knits a net with the sinister monotony of an

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<sup>95</sup> Kate Flint (Ed.), *Hard Times*, p. xv. *Hard Times* and *A Tale of Two Cities* are linked by the former's dedication to Thomas Carlyle (the author of *The French Revolution*), and the echo in both texts of Romantic sorrow and horror at the nightmare disintegration of the liberal dream of positive Revolutionary social evolution.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859] (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 334. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (London: Cassell Ltd., 1981), pp. 42-3 on the Erinnyes or Furies.

<sup>98</sup> Graves, *Greek Myths*, p. 14.

hour glass pouring out the sands of time in *David Copperfield*, while Mrs Sparsit sits at her needlework watching Bounderby's domain, but Madame Defarge is the most powerful of Dickens' web-spinners, who knits on 'with the steadfastness of fate' (p. 117) as the Marquis kills a child under his flying carriage wheels, just as she knits 'shrouds' as the King and Queen pass by (p. 175). She leads the revolutionary 'sisterhood' of her village calmly hewing the head off the fallen governor of the Bastille, and her 'knitted register' lists the lives to be 'swallowed up' by the guillotine (p. 297). She refuses to separate the innocent Darnay from his aristocratic name, and even marks with her 'finger of fate' (p. 265) his father-in-law Manette, his wife Lucie and their little child. Like the Furies, Madame Defarge is implacable and relentless in her irrational demands for vengeance, and thereby, among all of Dickens witch-women she poses the most directly mortal threat to the innocent. While Mrs Gamp may take an active part in Nature's elimination of the unfit, Madame Defarge's contribution to the elimination of those she deems unfit to live is bereft of compassion, fuelled by hatred, and directly and irrevocably lethal in its consequences.

Madame Defarge's Nemesis, and Lucie's protectress, is Miss Pross, the 'wild red woman' (p. 100). Overt and covert witch allusions surround her; a hoydenish nature indicates a great deal of Scott's witch-imagery in her pedigree, while her reaction to the idea of crossing the sea touches folklore concerning a witch's inability to cross water. Yet, having made the Channel crossing and returned she becomes 'a sorceress, or Cinderella's godmother' (p. 105) to the servants who admire her Anglo-French cuisine. However, she proves her nearness to the 'angels' (p. 102) in the otherworld of France as Madame Defarge, the 'wife of Lucifer', armed with dagger and pistol searches for Lucie and her child (p. 358). The verbal parrying, as Ogress addresses Fury in mutually incomprehensible tongues, becomes a deadly physical struggle, ending in what Dickens called Defarge's 'half-comic' death, an 'act of divine justice', designed to counterpoint Carton's dignified death.<sup>99</sup> Dickens uses the contrast between Defarge and Carton, and the contest between Defarge and Pross, to illustrate the adage that 'love, [is] always so much stronger than hate' (p. 360), but he also uses the latter example to demonstrate a difference between what he hopes is the British way of combating injustice and the 'foreign' way of violent revolution. Pross and Defarge speak different emotional as well as linguistic languages. Eccentric, comical,

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<sup>99</sup> Dickens quoted in Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* Vol.2 p. 282

but firm in stoical courage, Miss Pross is (despite her redness) the antithesis of the bloody-clawed Fury. She is the brusque but kindly good-witch-figure of the British nursery, a comforting amalgam of nanny and fairy godmother, using the power of loving-ferocity to defeat the spectral hag of alien revolution.

The image of the witch/fairy-godmother is, however, most clearly highlighted in *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, through the characters of Betsy Trotwood and Miss Havisham respectively. *Great Expectations* is a darker, deeper version of a rite-of-passage narrative, where the narrator's unconscious revelation of the immature elements of his character is exemplified by his belief that an embittered old woman could be a metaphorical fairy godmother with the power and the desire to turn a blacksmith's boy into a gentleman of substance, married to a beautiful fairy bride. The earlier novel, *David Copperfield* is a fairy tale Bildungsroman in which a witch-like fairy godmother helps the hero to overcome childhood tribulations and become a famous author.

*David Copperfield* opens with the interplay between eeriness and humour which hints broadly that the woman initially seen as a black witch may ultimately prove to be a white one; the narrator explains that his midnight birth on a Friday was identified by 'some sage women' as indicative of a person doomed to ill-luck and 'privileged' to see ghosts and spirits; a gift, he declares, he will gladly forfeit.<sup>100</sup> Dickens' playful use of the term 'sage women' instead of 'wise women' with its attendant images of witch-craft heralds the arrival of Betsey Trotwood, a 'strange lady' (p. 15) who strides up to the house in the glow of the setting sun on the night of David's birth. Angered that the new-born child is a boy and not the second Betsey Trotwood as she had predicted, she 'vanished like a discontented fairy' (p. 22). The bad-fairy imagery continues when, orphaned and removed from school to work in Murdstone's warehouse David runs away to the only relative he has, despite his fears she is 'a dread and awful personage' (p. 153). The Dover boatmen mischievously embellish her witch-imagery:

One said she lived in the South Foreland Light, and had singed her whiskers by doing so; another said she was made fast to the great buoy outside the harbour, and could only be visited at half-tide; a third, that she was locked up in Maidstone Jail for child-stealing; a fourth that she was seen to mount a broom, in the last high wind; and make direct for Calais. (p. 163)

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<sup>100</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* [1850] (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 13. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

In these few lines Dickens gathers many elements from folklore and fairy tales to exaggerate, and thereby undermine by humour, Miss Trotwood's wicked-witchery: reference to the 'South Foreland Light' conjures images of sorceresses or spinners in towers; 'sing'd whiskers' suggest that she has an animal 'other' nature which can be assumed at will; a witch tied to the 'great buoy outside the harbour' would be held secure by her inability to cross water; while imprisonment for child-stealing evokes the fabled threat witches pose to children; and finally, not only did she ride a broom, but rode it to 'another' place from which the demonic 'Old Boney' (Napoleon) was still invoked by the mothers of disobedient children.<sup>101</sup> Yet, Betsy Trotwood becomes a fairy godmother who grants David's wish for a loving home and a good education.

In her shirt-like dress and sporting a 'gentleman's gold watch' (p. 167) Miss Trotwood has (like Scott's witches) a degree of masculinity in her appearance and behaviour; she drives her pony 'through Dover in a masterly manner' (p. 186), and berates evil step-father Murdstone so effectively over his mistreatment of David and his mother that he retorts impotently 'if you were a gentleman...' (p. 182). She is superficially unwomanly, un-motherly and thereby un-godmotherly. However, her hatred of men is excused as a consequence of marriage to a violent younger man, whom she ultimately forgives, while her kindness to the innocent and helpless, such as child-like Mr Dick, Dora, the Wickams, and the Micawbers is boundless. She also demonstrates an uncanny ability to read both the future and human nature, despite her early failure to predict David's gender; her saddened response to the news that David is to marry the child-woman Dora is as gnomic in quality as her prediction that 'Agnes is going to be married' (p. 701), while she delights in telling the duplicitous Uriah Heep that her early readings of his character were proved accurate. She rights wrongs, and her predictions answer the secret desires of David's heart: she is the perfect fairy godmother.

The part of the evil hag in this fable is allotted to the grotesque Mrs Heep, who looked on Uriah with a mother's eye which was 'an evil eye to the rest of the world' (p. 468). David is convinced that however repugnant they appear to others, mother and son love each other, but Mrs Heep's insistence that Uriah maintains the charade of humility recalls the malign influence of witch-mothers upon demonic sons in

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<sup>101</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte and his 'child eating army' were still used as a threat by mothers until well into the nineteenth century. See Gareth Glover, 'State Fortifications to Meet the Threat of Invasion 1798-1814', <http://www.napoleonoc-literature.com>. Accessed 19-6-11.

Scott's novels. The Heeps are likened to 'two great bats' (p. 468) hanging over the Wickfield house, or by implication, spiders who keep unrelenting watch on David and Agnes as Mrs Heep prepares her knitted net for casting. This Caliban and Sycorax provide a foil to highlight the moral goodness of other characters, including Betsy Trotwood and David Copperfield himself. Nonetheless, Dickens and Copperfield acknowledge a degree of ameliorating victimhood behind the wickedness of the Heeps as the childhood seeds of that wickedness are revealed. Peter Ackroyd writes of Dickens' dismay at the 'dire neglect of body and soul' exhibited by children he found being 'educated' in the Field Lane 'ragged school' in 1843.<sup>102</sup> Heep claims his mother was raised in such a 'public, sort of charitable establishment', learning 'a deal of umbleness – not much else' (p. 471): a similar education teaches Heep to hide his anger and resentment behind the mask of bogus humility. But, in this fairy story of hope over adversity, pity for the villain must be repressed. It is needful for the son of the wicked witch to be defeated in his bid to win the princess and inherit her father's kingdom, while the hero finds that the bad fairy who attended his birth is actually the fairy godmother who helps him succeed where the villain fails. However, areas of authorial anxiety are discernable beneath the fairy tale elements of this story in which the villain is the serpentine 'other' of the hero, and where the touch of the fairy godmother or the witch-mother might be the defining factor between the man who achieves his ambition and the one who is punished for lifting his head too high. *David Copperfield* avoids addressing this dilemma directly, but in *Great Expectations* the relationship between the ambitious individual and the witch or fairy is scrutinised with bleaker clarity.

Stone suggests that Magwitch's physical inversion of young Pip in the churchyard, as *Great Expectations* opens, signals an 'inverted fairy tale' where 'the 'witch' of [the convict's] surname...proves to be the reverse of what Magwitch at last becomes – a saving fairy godfather'.<sup>103</sup> Yet, at that moment, Magwitch (more an ogre than a witch in the eyes of the child) is a truer reflection of Miss Havisham than the image subsequently created of her by young Pip, and a truer reflection of *Great Expectations'* treatment of magical transformation than is suggested by Stone's words. Both Magwitch and Havisham are lost and isolated individuals; he a spirit of

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<sup>102</sup> Peter Ackroyd (ed.) *Charles Dickens: The Christmas Books, Volume One* (London: Mandarin, 1991), p. vi.

<sup>103</sup> Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World*, p. 310

the dank marsh and she the spirit of a dead house, and both are shackled; he by the law and she by her bitterness. But Magwitch wishes to escape from his shackles. Pip's ugly sister turned wicked stepmother, who bristles with pins and needles as though a witch had turned herself into a living effigy in order to induce and sustain a self-indulgent, angry martyrdom, is a shadow image of Miss Havisham who parades her 'broken' heart with an 'eager look' and a 'weird smile that had a kind of boast in it'.<sup>104</sup> Dickens' most malignant witch-figures are those who embrace and nurture misfortune until the parasitic inner-witch devours the host and constructs an impermeable barrier to deflect any empathic interaction with humanity.

Consequently, by extension Miss Havisham lives in a large, dismal, barred and dark edifice, set in a rank garden, while Miss Trotwood lives in a 'neat little cottage' with a flower-filled garden.<sup>105</sup> But, as with Miss Trotwood, Miss Havisham's true image is only revealed on 'second sight'; Pip initially sees her dressed in 'rich materials...all of white', wearing bridal flowers and sparkling jewels, but on second viewing he sees a shrunken figure draped in a faded, yellowed bridal dress, whose withered body reminds him of a skeleton dug out of the vault of an old marsh church, a symbol of her desiccated hopes, and his (p. 49). The image is a precognitive revelation of the colour of Miss Havisham's witchery; Pip eventually finds that she is not a black witch, or a white fairy, or even a golden godmother, but a woman jaundiced by an excess of emotional bile which contaminates everything within her moribund 'otherworld'. So, in contrast to the love and encouragement David finds in his Aunt's homely cottage, Pip experiences only fear and humiliation in grim Satis House at the hands of Miss Havisham and Estella, the cold arrogant child with whom he is ordered to 'play'. Yet he weaves a fantasy for his family, of Miss Havisham sitting in a black velvet coach consuming cakes and wine from silver plate, while he and Estella play in a candlelit room. Significantly it is Pip, not Miss Havisham, who creates the gingerbread house presided over by a fairy godmother, although she cannot resist the temptation to allow all, including her grasping relatives, to assume she is Pip's mysterious benefactor. Such self-serving manipulation of the delusions of others allies her with those suspected of witchcraft (and with Mrs Sparsit) who embellished rather than denied the image allotted to them, in order to enhance their

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<sup>104</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* [1860] Robin Gilmour (ed.) (London: J.M. Dent, 1994), pp. 5 and 50. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>105</sup> Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 164.



power over the gullible. The fairy godmother allusions in *David Copperfield* are retrospective devices employed by a narrator wishing to present his life as a fairy story with a happy ending. In contrast, the narrator of *Great Expectations* constructs his fairy tale expectations from self-made illusions which his illusionary fairy godmother fails to correct. The subtext suggests that the metaphorical shard of ice in Pip's eye, blinding him to reality and to the love of those who love him, was not necessarily put, or kept, there by the Snow Queen who replaced Estella's heart with ice.

Nonetheless, Miss Havisham's role as malefactor is constantly signposted by other witch images, particularly those evocative of the blood-thirsty, child-eating, villainess in *Hansel and Gretel*; she demonstrates a 'miserly relish' of Estella's moods (p. 83), and looks at Estella 'as though she were devouring' her (p. 269). She reputedly feeds only at night, wandering about the house and laying hands 'on such food as she takes' (p. 214), and she predicts that after death she will lie on the table, among the crumbling detritus of her unconsumed wedding banquet, while her family 'feast upon' her (p. 77). Dickens employs grotesquely surreal images to present Miss Havisham as the embodiment of the witch-wolf, the vampire and the ghoul without naming her as such, but as Pip sees her mirrored in her cobweb festooned bridal cake, he admits that, leaning on her 'crutch-headed stick' she 'looked like the Witch of the place' (p. 74).

Miss Havisham is 'the Witch of the place' in her role as the Genius Loci of a tomb in which her vampire existence is sustained by the hatred she channels through Estella. The curse she murmurs as Estella and Pip meet as children, 'break his heart', is a spell chanted constantly as the girl grows into womanhood (p. 51). Like Betsy Trotwood, Miss Havisham is the witch as a victim of masculine greed and duplicity rather than of superstition or persecution, but her self-indulgent self-pity means that Miss Havisham's victimhood is also self-inflicted. Miss Trotwood lives, overcoming her anger with men in general by her compassionate treatment of Mr Dick, and ultimately by bestowing all the love she had reserved for a goddaughter onto the godson who came in her place. In contrast Miss Havisham's living death is nurtured by its host, and deliberately transmitted like a disease to Estella. Shadows of John Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', with its interweaving of bewitching unfulfilled promises and hopeless mortality, glitter beneath this text in which the hero's delusionary vision of the ironically named Satis House leaves him bleakly

unfulfilled.<sup>106</sup> Yet, despite his emphatic identification of Miss Havisham and her sinister home with all that is diabolical, as Pip leaves for London he still tells himself that the woman he had earlier called ‘the Witch’ made her crutch play about him ‘as if she, the fairy godmother who had changed me, were bestowing the finishing gift’ (p. 140).

It is doubly ironic that Pip’s ambition to become a gentleman is driven not by the encouragement of his fairy godmother, but by her commodification of Estella whose cold bewitching beauty causes Pip’s self-loathing, but feeds his hope that Miss Havisham will transform him into a gentleman worthy of marriage to Estella. The hidden anxieties glimpsed in *David Copperfield* regarding status and self-worth become manifest in *Great Expectations*. David’s indignation and disgust at Uriah Heep’s expression of desire for Agnes suggests that Heep’s greatest transgression mirrors that of Caliban in desiring a being who is ‘as far above *you*, and as far removed from all your aspirations, as that moon herself’ (p. 471). Yet, when the child Pip gazes up at the winter stars he imagines ‘how awful it would be for a man to turn his face up to them as he froze to death, and see no help or pity in all the glittering multitude’ (p. 43); a prevision of his treatment as a crude Caliban by Estella, who seems as far above him as the stars. Dickens emphasises the appropriateness of Estella’s name as he describes her light moving through the darkened house like a star and passing from the upper floor of the old brewery ‘as if she were going out into the sky’ (p. 55). Yet, in a final ironic inversion, Pip discovers that Estella is the child of infernal, not stellar, parentage, the child of Magwitch the convict/ ogre godfather and the violent vagabond Molly, whose face reminds Pip of those rising ‘out of the witches’ caldron’ (p. 188) during a production of *Macbeth*, and whose madness and masculine strength also evoke images of Scott’s toxic witch-mothers.

In a perfect fairy-tale world such destructive parents would be consumed in flames (like Miss Havisham) while cruel ice maidens such as Estella would be ‘bent and broken...into a better shape’ and restored to the arms of those who love them, with ‘no shadow of another parting’ (p. 433). But *Great Expectations* was never intended to be a fairy story with an optimistic ending. After what Robin Gilmour has called Dickens’ ‘reluctant capitulation to the conventions of the day’, the author substituted a happier conclusion from the original in which Pip’s brief final meeting

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<sup>106</sup> See Chapter Three.

with a 'greatly changed' Estella simply gave him the consolation that her suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching (p. 433).<sup>107</sup> The first conclusion seems more in tune with a novel in which the recompense for suffering is not the granting of illusory fairy gifts but an ability to empathise with others, and to forgive and repent. While Miss Trotwood is saved from bestowing a well-intentioned but dangerously ambiguous christening gift that would sequester her goddaughter's affections, Miss Havisham can only repent that her intentions to guard Estella's heart from injury had left the girl heartless. But Pip also has to suffer remorse for the hurt he has inflicted on the innocent in his pursuit of success and love. Miss Havisham talks of him as a 'looking-glass' (p. 355) through which she sees herself and realises what she has done, but he grants her plea for forgiveness, because he has erred in his own 'blind and thankless' life (p. 354). The only woman specifically identified as 'the Witch' in Dickens' novels, provides the lens of realism for Pip, and perhaps for Dickens too.

It is possible that Dickens saw through the Witch of Satis House and her blighted 'godson', a far less assured image of himself and his life than that offered by *David Copperfield*. Michael Slater suggests that Dickens' dismay at his mother's desire for him to return to work in the hated blacking factory may have been retained at the 'deepest level', surfacing again in his fictional 'bad mothers', while his gratitude for the love and learning she gave him was bestowed on his good mother figures.<sup>108</sup> Slater cites Mrs Nickleby and Mrs Micawber as examples of the bad and good mothers respectively, but I suggest that, if there is a biographical element to Dickens' novels, his complex relationship with his mother might have been addressed more effectively through the relationship between the fairy godmothers and 'godsons' in *David Copperfield's* conflation of immature resentment and hope, and *Great Expectations'* analysis of a man who only sees his fairy godmother as a witch when she fails to fulfil his expectations of her power and goodwill. The witches of Dickens' novels echo predictions conveyed more directly by the spirits of *A Christmas Carol* (1843), about the dangers awaiting a society which fails to address its ills and the individuals who inhabit that society. The witches who play metaphorical roles in his social crusades provide an insight into the mind of the author as they indicate, by their varying degrees of dark witchery, his emotional interaction with specific social

<sup>107</sup> Gilmour, introduction to *Great Expectations*, p. xxii.

<sup>108</sup> Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1983), p. 4.

ills, from anger at ill-treatment of children to profound fear of revolution. At the deepest level the witch-figures of his fairy tales also provide a mirror which reflects the darkest aspects of the human psyche.

Yet, none of Dickens' heroes or heroines is tempted to look into the glass and see themselves as the witch, unlike some of the heroines created by the Brontës, Gaskell and George Eliot.<sup>109</sup> Elaine Showalter describes as ground-breaking the pioneering work of such female writers endeavouring to 'participate in the mainstream of literary culture'.<sup>110</sup> While the Brontë sisters wrote as the brothers Bell, and Mrs Gaskell (like others) used her married name as a buffer against the pain involved in 'breaking ground', Marian Evans, who had already established herself as an essayist, reviewer, and editor of the *Westminster Review*, also adopted what Showalter called the 'fig leaf' of a male pseudonym when she began to write novels.<sup>111</sup> She became 'George Eliot', initially through uncertainty about her ability to write fiction but also through fear that her reputation as the partner of a married man could cast the taint of the fallen woman over her books. However, I would contend that the Brontës, Gaskell and Eliot not only share the accolade of being in the vanguard of women entering male-dominated intellectual territory, they also used the witch as a vehicle to explore the position of women in that territory.

### **George Eliot's Witches**

Two other factors besides her literary aspirations and male nom-de-plume caused Marian Evans to be perceived as an 'other' woman in the eyes of mainstream mid-Victorian society. Gilbert and Gubar point to her 'freakish' position as 'the token female' in an intellectual male circle, and suggest that she may have seen herself in the 'blue-stocking' she condemned as 'that most disagreeable of all monsters ... that can only exist in a miserably false state of society' and be 'classed along with singing mice and card playing pigs'.<sup>112</sup> Her extra-marital relationship with George Henry Lewes also led to social ostracism and rejection by her family, most painfully by her brother Isaac. Writing as George Eliot, and living as 'Mrs Lewes' she created, in her

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<sup>109</sup> Or the poet in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's 'The Other Side of a Mirror' which will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>110</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 19.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> George Eliot *Letters* (1: 245) cited in Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 467.

novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) the child Maggie Tulliver, whose intellect and appearance demonise her in her own eyes, growing into a woman whose alleged immorality demonises her in the eyes of others, particularly the eyes of her idolised ‘Rhadamanthine’ brother Tom.<sup>113</sup> When young Tom responds to Maggie’s prediction that she would one day be ‘a *clever* woman’ with the words ‘Oh, I daresay, and a nasty, conceited thing’ whom everybody would hate, he voiced the prejudice that cleverness was unwomanly and ‘other’ (p.131). But the profound empathy which the misunderstood passionate child feels for the old woman pictured in Defoe’s *History of the Devil* also resonates through the novel as a cry against injustice: if the accused survives her trial by water she is a proven witch, but if she drowns, ‘she’s innocent, and not a witch ... But what good would it do her then...?’ (p. 13). The witch’s fate is predictive of Maggie’s eventual drowning, but it also symbolises the fate awaiting many whom society dislikes or fears because of their disturbing ‘otherness’. Eliot uses the figure of the witch to represent women who, by accident or design, fail to conform to the norms of their society and are consequently dubbed either malevolent, immoral or victimised, by those who watch her removal from that society with a triumphant or remorseful eye. Eliot declared that ‘the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves’.<sup>114</sup> Yet as she began to write *The Mill on the Floss* self-doubts about her creative abilities caused her to wonder whether she could replicate the success and, implicitly, the emotional verity of her previous (second) novel: a journal entry reads, ‘Shall I ever write another book as true as “Adam Bede”?’<sup>115</sup> Temporarily abandoning the new novel she produced the novella ‘The Lifted Veil’ (1859) in which (as with Gaskell’s shorter works) compression of text is accompanied by increased dramatic Gothic intensity. The narrator is an uncreative self-designated ‘poet’ who, despite claiming to read the minds of others, is a cold introvert, unable to imagine or feel the pains or joys of anyone but himself. Thus he is the antithesis of Eliot’s authorial ideal. Rosemary Ashton suggests that ‘The Lifted Veil’ was a cathartic exercise which allowed Eliot to ‘give vent to negative feelings’ while she planned *The Mill on the Floss*; a particularly

<sup>113</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* [1860] Beryl Grey (ed.) (London: Everyman, J.K. Dent, 1996), p. 44. Rhadamanthus was a severe judge of the dead in Greek myth. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>114</sup> Eliot, quoted by Pauline Nestor, *George Eliot* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 7.

<sup>115</sup> George Eliot’s journal entry for 17 April 1859, cited in Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 217.

apt allusion to a novella which is the ‘negative’ to the novel in its presentation of the central female character as a witch.<sup>116</sup>

It could be argued that both Bertha Latimer and Maggie Tulliver act as an amalgam of muse and witch to Latimer and Eliot respectively. Bertha enters Latimer’s life as an ‘oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge’ offering the unspoken ‘fascination of an unravelled destiny’ in the one mind which he claims is veiled to him.<sup>117</sup> Yet, ultimately, in a ‘terrible moment of complete illumination’ the veil is lifted to reveal a ‘blank prosaic wall, the ‘narrow room’ of her soul, and a petty, vain, scheming and cruel mind (p. 32). This novella is narrated retrospectively by a dying artist who believes that his creative energy has been poured away at the feet of a false muse intent on his destruction. In contrast, the subtext, symbolised by his periods of blindness and self-justifying ‘revelatory’ dreams, suggests that the mind in which he finds a ‘chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts’ (p. 14) is his own, not that of his demonised muse. It is a mind unable or unwilling to empathise with the pains or joys of others as demonstrated by his irritation at the ‘vagrant, frivolous ideas’ of ‘trivial men and women’ whom he reduces to the status of insects by describing them as a ‘swarm’ who infest the city (p. 9). Passionless and emotionally blind, Latimer initially seeks hope in the veiled mind of his muse, then castigates her for causing the poetic ‘dumbness’ which prevents him from becoming a second Dante or Novalis. In contrast, the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* finds in Maggie’s mind ‘the oddest mixture of clear-eyed acumen and blind dreams’ (p. 98). The child who finds affinity with the witch as she grows to maturity, justifies Eliot’s conclusion (voiced by Philip) that repression of love for literature and music is nothing but a ‘long suicide’ (p. 299), and thereby something akin to Latimer’s emotional and artistic living death, and that the ability to imagine and to empathise with others is both painful and life-affirming. Eliot drowns her witch/heroine, but not before Maggie has experienced the ‘mysterious wondrous happiness that is one with pain’ (p. 472). Eliot’s treatment of Maggie is replicated in Maggie’s own treatment of the mutilated doll kept in her attic retreat as a ‘Fetish which she punished for her misfortunes’, then comforted in atonement for the unjustified punishment (p. 22). The revelation that Maggie

<sup>116</sup> Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, p. 245.

<sup>117</sup> George Eliot, ‘The Lifted Veil’ 1859, *The Lifted Veil [1859] and Brother Jacob* Helen Small (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 18 and 15. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

hammered nails into the head of her 'Fetish' reinforces the gently ironic image of demi-malevolence superimposed on the child whose soul is possessed by 'small demons' during moments of passion (p. 82). By viewing Maggie's supposed diabolism with an indulgent adult eye Eliot not only establishes the naïve innocence of her little witch, but emphasises the immaturity of those who find scapegoats to suffer in their stead. She uses the fairy tale as light-hearted evidence of Maggie's own conferring of witch-imagery and of her reason for doing so, mirroring the self-interested motivation of accusers through the ages: when the child speculated on the 'preternatural wickedness' of her friend Bob Jakin, whose mother was 'a dreadfully large fat woman, who lived at a queer round house down at the river, 'Maggie thought it very likely that the round house had snakes on the floor, and bats in the bedroom' and that Bob might be 'slightly diabolical' (pp. 39-40). Yet Bob's evil was viewed through Maggie's enviously green eye which noticed that 'when Tom had Bob for a companion, he didn't mind about Maggie, and would never let her go with him' (p. 40).

The witch-imagery used in 'The Lifted Veil' is more oblique, although an abundance of supernatural epithets is applied to Bertha. Her transformation, in Latimer's eyes, from a beautiful sylph, elf and 'syren' [sic] (p. 26) into a murderous hag with a 'glittering serpent' brooch as a 'familiar demon' (p. 34) on her breast, is foreseen by him in a painting of the infamous 'cruel-eyed' Lucrezia Borgia (p. 19). However, by equating the overwhelming 'witchery' of young Bertha's presence with the catalyst of a destructive Faustian pact, Latimer casts her in the role of cruel muse who proffers the gift of poetic immortality in exchange for the poet's soul, and thereby implies that the negatively biased ambiguity with which he relates her 'supernatural' nature is of more consequence than the mere disappointment of an over-imaginative man resentful of the effects of time on the person of his once-beautiful wife. Eliot's readers might choose whether to accept Bertha's malign witchery, or apply a cool psychological eye to Latimer's fear of failure and the female. But for Eliot the cold, lethargic Latimer and his heartless, seductive 'syren' provided repositories in which to store negative aspects of artists and of women before she embarked on a novel whose bewitching heroine is shown to be evil only in the eyes of her misguided beholders.

Emblematic of this is the way each time scarlet witch-imagery is applied to Maggie it is rapidly washed away. When she and Philip meet as adults among the

fallen rose petals which strew the ground of the Eden-like erotically named Red Deeps, she calls him a ‘tempter’ (p. 299), but only for arguing that escape from pain could not be found by ‘starving into dulness [sic] all the highest powers of your nature’ (p. 297). Despite his longing for another type of love, Philip is willing to accept the role of ‘guardian angel’ (p. 279) to the woman who loves him as a brother, and whom he sees as a divine ‘Hamadryad’ (p. 296).<sup>118</sup> He is not the Serpent, and Eliot takes pains to demonstrate that Maggie is not Eve. Angelic Lucy also justifies Maggie’s ‘otherness’ by the use of positive witch-imagery, when she recalls cleverness mistaken for ‘witchcraft’ and the ‘general uncanniness’ (p. 351) characteristic of Maggie as a child, plus the ‘witchery’ that makes the adult Maggie look best in shabby clothes (p. 337). In contrast when Stephen first meets Maggie he sees an ‘alarming amount of the devil there’ (p. 341); a statement which might more fairly be applied to himself as, Eliot implies, it might also be to those members of society who, like Stephen’s sisters, apply double standards in their condemnation of sexual ‘sinners’. Yet, although the public reception of *The Mill on the Floss* proved to Eliot that she was not, like Latimer, a poet without a voice, even those such as Elizabeth Gaskell who admired her and her work could only ‘wish you *were* Mrs Lewes’.<sup>119</sup> Fictional Maggie died as the sanctified antithesis to Bertha Latimer, but despite Eliot’s attempts at un-witching the social outcast, Marian Evans lived on behind the veil as the unacceptable ‘other’ Mrs Lewes.

However, as with the works of other canonical Victorian novelists, wider social issues are as important, and more immediately evident, than introspective exploration and self-justification. *The Mill on the Floss* addresses the question of female education through the frustrations of a girl who would clearly relish the schooling which is instead foisted onto her brother, thereby denying him the opportunity to utilise his practical talents. It also addresses gender inequality in the expectations of society regarding sexual propriety. Set against a backdrop of slow but inexorable agrarian evolution, it is more concerned with the author’s desire for the evolution of intellectual and moral parity between men and women. Yet Eliot might have been referring to any or all of these evolutionary arenas when she wrote of the suffering, ‘whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind’

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<sup>118</sup> A Hamadryad is a wood nymph of classical mythology, who embodies the spirit of the tree in which she lives.

<sup>119</sup> Gaskell letter to Eliot, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1859, quoted in Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, p. 237



(p. 246). When Mrs Tulliver refers to her daughter in affectionate exasperation as ‘a small mistake of nature’ who would be ‘drowned some day’ (p. 9) she is not just making a predictive link between Maggie and Defoe’s witch, but she is (unconsciously) equating Maggie with nature’s discarded ‘experiments’ on the path of natural selection. Herbert Spencer, part of Eliot’s intellectual circle, coined the phrase ‘the survival of the fittest’ in his work on social evolution *Synthetic Philosophy* in 1855, and Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, a year before *The Mill on the Floss*. Allusions to evolutionary selection permeate the novel. Whilst I would not disagree with Beryl Gray’s perception of the pervasive ‘passionately sensuous imagery’ of water in the novel as symbolic of sexual desire, I would contend that it could also represent an evolutionary process.<sup>120</sup> The role of Maggie’s life and martyrdom in that process is symbolised by her metaphorical naiadic merging into the ‘lovely the little stream ... with its dark, changing wavelets’, the ‘brimful’ (p. 3) river which subtly changes the landscape, and the final overwhelming inundation which consumes her entirely. The constantly moving waters inhabited by the naiad are dangerous *but living*, and thereby form a positive antithesis to the stagnant, uncreative, unchallenging environs of Bertha the ‘water-nixie’ whom Latimer sees as ‘born from some cold, sedgy stream, the daughter of an aged river god’ (p. 12). The short interlude of Maggie’s life in the greater evolution does end in a moment of gender equality with Maggie and Tom undivided in death but, like the witch in the picture book, what good would it do her then? Yet the beneficiaries of any martyrdom are the un-martyred whose hearts and minds are touched by it.

It was a connection made again by twentieth-century campaigners who claimed the title ‘witch’ and justified the righteousness of their cause by identifying with the perceived martyrdom of women seen as ‘uncanny’ and ‘other’ in the ‘Burning Times’.<sup>121</sup> These new witches found (and still find) their witch-self by association with the female aspect of divinity whilst empathising with the victims of persecution although many make a clear distinction between the vulnerably human victim and the divinely powerful goddess.<sup>122</sup> For the modern witch, the figures of goddess and victim

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<sup>120</sup> Beryl Gray, introduction to *The Mill on the Floss*, p. xxxiv

<sup>121</sup> ‘To be a Witch is to identify with nine million victims of bigotry and hatred and to take responsibility for shaping a world in which prejudice claims no more victims’, Starhawk (Miriam Simos), *The Spiral Dance*, p. 32.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Most [victims] were innocent, for those with the true knowledge ... took care to be hidden if the inquisitors came along’, Marian Green, *A Witch Alone: Thirteen Moons to Master Natural Magic* (London: Thorsons, 1995), p. 12.

do not merge as they do in two of Thomas Hardy's most memorable characters Eustacia Vye (*The Return of the Native*, 1878) and Tess (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, 1891). Hardy, unlike Scott or Dickens' empathises with his 'witches' Eustacia and Tess, and explores the psychological motivation behind the witchery of Elizabeth Endorsfield (*Under the Greenwood Tree*, 1872) or that of Rhoda and Gertrude ('The Withered Arm', 1888). While many of the witches created by Charlotte Brontë, Eliot and Gaskell symbolise the conflicting emotions generated by female incursion into androcentric social or intellectual territory, those of Scott, Dickens and Hardy symbolise specific geographical and/or socio-historic environs.<sup>123</sup> Scott's witches represented, in their creator's eye, a redundant spirit of place whose continued existence threatened the progress of that place. Dickens condemned his witches (apart from Betsy Trotwood) because they represented, in his eye, noxious and redundant aspects of society without whom humanity (in both senses of the word) would progress more readily. Hardy's Eustacia and Tess are also creatures who stand between the past and the future but, for Hardy, progress is the evil which threatens to destroy all that is both human and natural. Hutton places him among the 'creative writers of the first rank' who served the late nineteenth-century 'cult of rural nostalgia' which found a new religiosity in 'an organic continuum' with the past.<sup>124</sup> Yet while Hardy, Gaskell and Eliot meld the victim and goddess in Eustacia, Tess, Ruth or Maggie, each witch becomes essentially the dying goddess bearing a fragile seed of hope for gender equality or the survival of the green Earth. Tess and Eustacia, as manifestations of the spirit(s) of place, specifically Hardy's rural Wessex, are presented by him as variously divine, wild, pure, innocently dangerous, outside the bounds of conventional morality, vulnerable, and essentially doomed.

### **Thomas Hardy's Witches**

In his fiction Hardy responds to the upheaval caused by religious uncertainty, urbanisation and challenges to the social order, by retreating to a countryside where the membrane between the lives of elemental characters and the elements surrounding them is as insubstantial as mist. Both Eliot and Hardy had lost their faith, but while Eliot's widened horizon led her from Evangelical Christianity to a purposeful

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<sup>123</sup> Catherine Earnshaw, another embodiment of the spirit of place, is the creation of Emily whom John S. Whitley describes as the Brontë 'most rooted in ... the West Yorkshire moors' in his introduction to *Wuthering Heights*, p. vi.

<sup>124</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, pp. 118 and 120.

humanistic agnosticism, Hardy's youthful speculation on a career in the church sank into the bleak disillusionment of his sonnet 'Hap' (1898) where, bereft of hope, he longs for the existence of a vengeful god whom he might blame for his suffering.<sup>125</sup> A similar darkness overshadows the joyous amorality of Eustacia Vye, and falls even more heavily over the equally pagan innocence of Tess d'Urberville. But before Hardy transposed the spirit of Persephone, as the dying goddess, into the sacrificial 'virgins' of Wessex, he drew upon folklore witch-imagery for the character of Elizabeth Endorsfield in his early novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

In what would prove to be an uncharacteristically light-hearted work Hardy introduced a village healer who did not become one of the 'secular martyr[s]' whom Purkiss identifies in current 'feminist fantasy' about the 'healer-witch'.<sup>126</sup> Mrs Endorsfield actually has more in common with the witches of Terry Pratchett's more recent comic *Discworld* fantasies in her use of psychology (or 'headology' as Pratchett's Granny Weatherwax calls it) rather than magic to help those seeking advice.<sup>127</sup> Hardy was writing at the chronological mid-point between Scott and Pratchett, but in this novel his view of witches is nearer to the latter than the former, as he looks with a knowing and admiring eye on a woman who commits the crime of pretending 'to exercise' witchcraft.<sup>128</sup> Hardy's witch clearly belongs to a time and social milieu where the perceived power of witches was being countered by rationalism rather than persecution, as illustrated by the narrator's comment on the decline of 'mysterious characteristics' under the influence of a new young clergyman, in a parish which had previously 'proved extremely favourable to the growth of witches'.<sup>129</sup> Yet, in common with many 'witches' of all eras, she happily accepts the title of 'witch' from those who believe in the power of charms which work by nothing more than faith and 'common sense' (p. 175). One suspects that the name 'Endorsfield', with its echoes of the powerful biblical Witch of Endor, was used ironically by Hardy for the witch with a reputation 'between distinction and notoriety' among, he implies, credulous women (p. 173). Nevertheless the 'items of character'

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<sup>125</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'Hap' [1898] Abrams (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p.1694

<sup>126</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 22

<sup>127</sup> 'A psychiatrist, dealing with a man who fears he is being followed by a large and terrible monster, will endeavour to convince him that monsters don't exist. Granny Weatherwax would simply give him a chair to stand on and a very heavy stick', Terry Pratchett, *Maskerade* (London: Corgi, 1995), p. 345

<sup>128</sup> See Davies on the Witchcraft Statute of 1736, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p.2.

<sup>129</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* [1872] (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 174. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

upon which her reputation is founded comply quite neatly with those listed by Owen Davies as indicators of a witch for the credulous of either gender in the nineteenth century:

She was shrewd and penetrating; her house stood in a lonely place; she never went to church; she wore a red cloak; she always retained her bonnet indoors; and she had a pointed chin. Thus far all her attributes were distinctly Satanic; and those who looked no further called her, in plain terms, a witch... to more intimate acquaintances she was simply a 'Deep Body'. (pp. 173-4)

It may also be significant that the 1736 Act which made pretence of witchcraft a crime was supported by 'Anglican clergymen [who] now preached that the ... Witch of Endor was nothing but a mere imposter'.<sup>130</sup> Yet, Hardy's portrayal of sagacious Mrs Endorsfield suggests that the power of even the whitest witch is enhanced by the dark shadow which may be glimpsed behind her.

But the combination of psychology and wry, understated humour applied by, and to, Mrs Endorsfield is totally absent from the characterisation of Rhoda in Hardy's short story 'The Withered Arm'. Nathalie Oussaid argues that Rhoda's position as 'an unwed mother whose child had been fathered by her employer' defined her: 'For all her fellow-workers at the dairy she is a witch, in other words, she is too different to be one of them'.<sup>131</sup> Yet, Rhoda's witchery is more than a metaphorical reading of her exclusion; she becomes a witch in her own eyes as jealousy causes her to be haunted by demonised images of her employer's reputedly beautiful young bride Gertrude, who is transformed in dreams into a suffocating incubus, cruel eyed and wrinkled faced, sitting upon Rhoda's chest, and flashing its wedding ring mockingly in her face. Waking, she can still feel the 'flesh and bone' of the arm she grasped in order to hurl the creature away.<sup>132</sup> It is the nightmare of a socially isolated woman embittered by the thought of the young beauty living a life of ease, while she struggles for existence in a mud hovel whose rafters show through the thatch 'like bone protruding through the skin' (pp. 59-60). Her shame at finding only kindness in Gertrude when they meet turns to apprehension at the sight of a hand-like mark on Gertrude's arm. The arm withers as though grasped by 'some witch or the

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<sup>130</sup> Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 3, although the predominant Nonconformist view, as expressed by John Wesley, was that 'the giving up of [belief in] witchcraft is in effect giving up the Bible', p. 12.

<sup>131</sup> Natalie Oussaid, 'A Reading of Wessex Tales', *The Thomas Hardy Journal* Vol xix No.2 (May 2003), p. 26.

<sup>132</sup> Hardy, 'The Withered Arm' [1881], *Wessex Tales: Strange, Lively and Commonplace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 63. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

devil himself' (p. 66), causing Rhoda to fear she possesses unconscious malignant powers. When the local 'white wizard' reveals an image of the culprit Gertrude believes she sees Rhoda, thereby confirming Rhoda's own fears, but also arousing in Rhoda a 'horrid fascination' that she might be 'something greater in the occult world' (p. 70). Hardy uses the tale to demonstrate and to empathise with the way in which lonely, helpless, insignificant women might enjoy the attention, notoriety and even self-esteem such accusations could bring. It echoes the fears expressed by Scott's Norna that her self-hood is dependent upon her uncanny reputation; a fear that is justified by Norna's translation into the submissive Ulla once she ceases to be defined by herself and others as a witch, just as Gaskell's Bridget becomes a passive nun when she is no longer Bridget the witch, and Dickens' Miss Havisham literally ceases to be once she discards her cloak of hatred and allows Pip to see her not as source of benign or malign magic but as a frail and repentant old woman.

However, Rhoda's 'horrid fascination' is momentary. She is not a woman choosing whether to maintain or reject her witch-self but, like Gaskell's Bridget and Lois, Rhoda is appalled at the shade of a destructive force which she detects within herself. Hardy's brief excursion into the Gothic follows Gaskell's 'The Poor Clare' and 'Lois' in its exploration of the perception of witchery, by both the external and internal eye. Although the implications of the mark on Gertrude's arm terrify Rhoda, it is conceivable that if Rhoda had related her dream to neighbours that mark could equally have branded *Gertrude* as a hag who flew by night to torment her victims. Instead Gertrude becomes an embittered, prematurely aged woman, prepared to regain her husband's affection by placing her withered arm on the neck of a newly hanged man, and praying, 'Oh Lord, hang some guilty or innocent person soon!' (p. 76). Thus the subtext also becomes a debate about the nature of evil, exploring areas of self-vilification and self-justification which Hardy would address in greater depth in *Tess*. Yet, no one, guilty or innocent, is reprieved in 'The Withered Arm'. Gertrude's husband loses his heir because his disowned son is the hanged man; Gertrude dies of shock at discovering the hanged man's identity, and the 'witch' Rhoda loses, in the death of her son, her only reason for living. But, as with Gaskell's 'The Poor Clare' or Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil', Hardy's neo-Gothic tale offers a variety of interpretations. Perhaps either or both of these women were 'witches' at heart; perhaps they were simply martyrs to male-dominated sexual and social demands, or innocent victims of superstition, just as the hanged son who had simply watched a hay-rick burn, may

have been a victim of a witch's wish, but he was also a victim of, and a martyr to, the agricultural unrest manifest in an agrarian society in flux.

Hardy was writing at a time when rural life was being scourged by disastrous crop failures, the mechanisation of farming, and the growth of towns. The itinerant 'red tyrant' threshing machine and its accompanying engineer, 'a creature from Tophet' in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, personify Hardy's vision of the hellish threat to rural life, but also mirror the demonic nature of Alec who is, like the engineer, 'in the agricultural world, but not of it'.<sup>133</sup> In contrast, urbanisation in the form of the local town or the bright lights of Paris is simply a focus for the dissatisfaction and ennui of Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native*. The stories of Eustacia and Tess are those of commonplace human failings and injustices, seamlessly interwoven with an unbroken mythological thread, which transcend time and place. Hardy's fictional Wessex is, on one level, readily discernible in the map of Dorset, but it is also a mythical land permeated with fin-de-siècle mourning for something intangible sacrificed to 'historical advancement'. Like his heroine Tess he is expressing 'feelings...of the age – the ache of modernism' (p. 135).

Both tales take place within the framework of the pagan seasonal cycle. *The Return of the Native* begins with the autumn bonfires of Samhain; Clym arrives with the Winter Solstice with the promise of new life; and the book ends at Beltane with a flower-garlanded Maypole, where symbols of 'merry England' seem to have 'survived medieval doctrine'.<sup>134</sup> In contrast, Tess moves from the May Day dance, 'a survival' from a time when 'cheerfulness and May-time were synonyms' (p. 34), loses her virginity in the heady mid-summer, and returns home, pregnant in the Samhain darkness of 'late October' (p. 92). Once again, after the death of her child in February (Imbolc), Tess finds hope in May at fertile Talbothays, but by October she bonds only with avian victims of man, and a landscape of desolation, at Flintcomb-Ash. The Winter Equinox is for her a bleak time, bringing the death of her father; another Imbolc (the time of the Maiden) sees her hopeless submission to Alec; May brings brief joy with Angel, and the period between May and July (Summer Solstice?) leads

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<sup>133</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* [1891] (ed.) P.N. Furbank (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 309. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>134</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* [1878] (ed.) Derwent May (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 347. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

her to the Stone of Sacrifice at Stonehenge.<sup>135</sup> Eustacia's Annual Wheel moves around the little world of Egdon and around Eustacia herself while Tess follows the sun around the diverse landscape, but both are bound to the wheel, and irrevocably entwined with that landscape. They each, like Persephone, embody the seed which must be buried in darkness before emerging once more into fecund regeneration.

*Tess*, with its beginning in a May Day 'Cerealia' and conclusion at Stonehenge, embraces an amalgam of cross-cultural pagan ritual. Louis focuses primarily on the Greco-Roman aspect of Tess in her chapter entitled 'The Virgin with the Sheaf', although she notes that 'the reawaken[ed] interest in the rituals of disappearing agricultural societies' stemmed from the work of the folklore movement as well as the publication of Fraser's *The Golden Bough* (1890), with its 'almost obsessive emphasis on fertility cults and the cycles of vegetative growth'.<sup>136</sup> Yet, reference in *The Return of the Native* to 'outlandish hamlets' where 'the symbolic customs which tradition has attached to each season were yet a reality' (p. 347) demonstrates that Hardy was already attuned to the significance of that cycle at least a decade before the publication of Fraser's study.

Eustacia exudes primeval sexuality from 'Pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries' (p. 82), and she is unable to resist the 'sensual emotion' generated by village revellers dancing under the spell of music and moonlight. With her 'flame-like' (p. 82) soul she is a creature of fire and darkness who enters the novel in a night of bonfires likened to 'Maenades', and 'scalding caldrons' (p. 40), and she summons her lover by fire 'as the Witch of Endor called up Samuel' (p. 80). Her greater self, the Heath, is described as 'a near relation of night' which awakens at that time (p. 31) in that, 'Egdon was her Hades', her prison and her domain (p. 82). Hardy highlights the symbiosis between a sentient Egdon Heath and Eustacia who embodies its spirit, but also hates it. Yet, as her surname suggests, when she fights the heath she fights herself, and she cannot escape from herself. She enters the novel as 'an organic part' (p. 38) of Rainbarrow, as the link between nature and the prehistoric dead who have been re-absorbed into the land but, when she tries to leave, Egdon extinguishes her flame beneath its waters and she is absorbed to be reborn again in the pagan cycle of life, death and rebirth, possibly in the new baby who carries her name.

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<sup>135</sup> The modern cycle of the pagan year is marked by eight celebrations – Samhain (31 October), Mid-Winter Solstice (21 December), Imbolc (2 February), Spring Equinox (21 March), Beltane (1 May), Mid-Summer Solstice (21 June), Lughnasadh (1 August), Autumn Equinox (21 September).

<sup>136</sup> Louis, *Persephone Rises*, p. 86.

Hardy uses the word 'pagan' in both novels not as a derogatory term but as one defining the wild, untamed or unsophisticated: in *Tess* he suggests 'women whose chief companions are the forms and forces of outdoor Nature, and who retain in their souls far more of the Pagan fantasy of their remote forefathers than any of the systematised religion taught their race at a later date' (p. 118). Tess, a descendant of the aptly named Sir Pagan d'Urberville, is the true heir to the *The Chase*, the 'venerable tract of forest land' (p. 56), with its primeval Druidical oaks and yews where she is ruined by the man who now holds both land and name. The images surrounding her are (in contrast to those applied to Eustacia) that of a passive sacrificial spirit of earth. Subtle images of the blood of the innocent continually prefigure her death. The legend of the killing of 'a beautiful white hart' is told before the May-Day dancers begin their 'Cerealialia', to ensure fertile earth and a good harvest; various degrees of 'virginity' might be indicated by the various shades of white worn by the dancers, but only Tess wears a red ribbon, metaphorically marking her as the sacrificial virgin creature in this echo of ancient rites (pp. 34-5). Blood splashes over her as Prince, the horse, dies from the injury which makes her a murderess in her own eyes; a thorn from Alec's rose pricks her chin and draws blood; and as the harvest nears completion small animals flee to the last remaining stands of wheat stubble, unaware of 'the doom that awaited them' (p. 103). The Winter Solstice sun sets its mark on her with a 'golden staff' (p. 215) before Izz's rebuke to Angel that Tess 'would have laid down her life for 'ee' (p. 261) is vindicated as Tess rises from the altar stone declaring, 'I am ready' (p. 371).

Four different faces are worn by both Eustacia and Tess: those of the flawed mortal woman, the goddess, the witch, and Eve. With the irony which permeates Hardy's characterisation of Eustacia he notes that she 'had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those which make not a model woman' (p. 81). He has in mind the infantile, vindictive immortals of Greek myth, and claims that if Eustacia was given control of the distaff, spindle and shears 'few in the world would have noticed the change of government' (p. 81).<sup>137</sup> As a woman Eustacia has no appreciation of the 'value' of work or of a good reputation. The promise of a life in the 'bustle' and 'luxuriousness' of Budmouth pales when employment is involved, and as for rumour that 'might show her to disadvantage' she was 'as unconcerned at

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<sup>137</sup> A reference to the disinterested Fates, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropo.



that contingency as a goddess at a lack of linen' (pp. 104-5). In contrast Hardy presents Tess as an ideal woman, a 'pure woman' as the subtitle to the novel states, and 'a fresh and virginal child of Nature' (p. 132) at every stage of her life. To Angel Clare she appears as Artemis and Demeter, 'a soul at large', a 'visionary essence of woman' (p. 141); and she takes on the aspect of a 'divine personage' (p. 110) in the innocent eyes of her little siblings as she conducts an improvised, candlelit baptism for the aptly named baby Sorrow, whose body nonetheless joins the other 'conjecturally damned' 'in the shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow' (p. 111).

Eustacia's witch-credentials might have seen *her* among the 'conjecturally damned'. John Paterson's examination of changes made to *The Return of the Native* between its 1878 serialisation and its 1895 edition suggests that Hardy initially intended Eustacia to be far more of a witch than she finally appears.<sup>138</sup> In the final version the reputation of 'the lonesome dark-eyed creature' whom 'some say is a witch' (p. 68) is founded on the conjecture of neighbours, and fuelled by an amalgamation of her 'outsider' status, her eccentric behaviour and her inclination to avoid others. While describing accusations of witchcraft as 'absurd' (p. 162), Clym's mother also uses them discredit Eustacia in his eyes by remarking that 'Good girls don't get treated as witches even on Egdon' (p. 176). Perversely, Clym responds by pitying the 'young witch-lady' as a 'romantic martyr to superstition' (p. 177), particularly when she 'is pricked' by a mother fearful for her child's life (pp. 174-5).<sup>139</sup> Then the despairing mother performs a counter-spell, a 'ghastly invention of superstition', by making a wax image of Eustacia, impaling it with pins, and melting it over the fire, intoning the Lord's Prayer backwards as she does so (pp. 322-3). The death of Eustacia soon afterwards is, as in 'The Withered Arm', an invitation to readers to suspend disbelief if they so wish. Like Eliot, Hardy implies that witchcraft may exist in the eye of the beholder, and like Gaskell (in 'Lois') he recognises that, while a woman may be called a witch by many voices, each voice emanates from an individual mind with a specific desire or need to use that appellation.

The only two people who call Tess a 'witch' are Alec and Angel, with positive or negative bias which alters to mirror each man's changing perceptions of her. Alec first

<sup>138</sup> Derwent May refers to Paterson's study in his introduction to *The Return of the Native*, p. xxi.

<sup>139</sup> Davies notes that drawing blood 'was considered one of the most potent methods of breaking a witch's power', *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. xii.

uses the term when Tess refuses to let him kiss her, but it is simply the equivalent of calling her a 'tease' (p. 70). Angel lovingly calls Tess the 'most bewitching milkmaid' he has ever seen (p. 195), and their deepening relationship is accompanied by references to the effects of rural witchcraft on milk yield and butter-making. Poor yield is attributed to having a 'new hand' among the milkers (pp. 122-3), or new love in the house, but when Tess decides that her 'sin' will not permit her to marry Angel (p. 142), the significance of the 'sin' is obliquely equated with seemingly 'bewitched' butter which proves to have been tainted by garlic eaten by the cattle (p. 147). Alec in his new guise as preacher invokes totally negative witch imagery, 'O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you' (p. 288). He tries to exorcise the influence of Tess by ordering her not to look at him 'like that', implying that some black art of hers had led him into fornication as he asks her to 'swear that you will never tempt me - by your charms or ways' (pp. 296-7).

Many allusions to Genesis occur in this novel. Angel and Tess are 'Adam and Eve' in the 'preternatural' dawn of Talbothays (p. 140), but the wild garden in which they are first drawn to each other is unnaturally fecund, with rank grass, noisome weeds, and secretions which stain Tess as she moves among them (p. 134). However, this Eve already carries the stain of another garden, ripe with strawberries and roses, the symbols of erotic love, where she met the demonic Alec, who repeatedly uses the word 'devilish'. As Tess awakens, a time 'when a woman's soul is incarnate', Angel unconsciously also sees the serpent; her hair is 'coiled-up' and as she yawns he sees 'the red interior of her mouth as if it had been a snake's' (pp. 173-4). As she makes her post-marital confession, secure in the knowledge that he has also sinned, he sees her face lurid in the fire-light, her shadow darkening the wall, and the diamonds around her neck winking like toads; the woman he loved becomes 'another woman in your shape' (p. 225). Tess is driven back slowly but inexorably to her seducer, who, pitchfork in hand and illuminated by the bonfire's flames, conflates images of the fallen mother of mankind and the Devil, as he laughs about their resemblance to Eve and 'The Other One' (p. 330) and tempts her with help for her destitute family in exchange for her favours.

Satanic indicators are less clearly defined in *The Return of the Native*, although Christian's warnings that the 'demonic measure' trodden by the exuberant bonfire dancers is 'tempting the Wicked one', is a cue for the entrance of Diggory Venn the 'reddleman', stained red 'from top to toe', reminding Christian (a Hardy-esque name

for one who constantly sees omens and portents) of the Devil in the picture of the Temptation (pp. 52-3). Although Venn's ilk are later described as 'Mephistophelian' individuals whose sheep-marking pigment stains them 'as if with the mark of Cain' (p. 91), Diggory demonstrates a purely noble desire to draw Eustacia's malevolent attentions away from Thomasin, and thereby to ensure Thomasin's happiness. The narrator muses that any man who walks Egdon Heath 'could imagine himself to be Adam' (p. 115), but it is Diggory the Red Man, not Clym, who takes the role of the Adam as he begins a new life with the saintly Thomasin and the new, innocent, baby Eustacia.<sup>140</sup> Angel too begins a New Day with Liza-Lu, 'the spiritualised image of Tess' (p.372) who, Tess claimed, 'has all the best of me without the bad of me' (p. 369). When Hardy charts the evolution of Tess from 'a divinity who could confer bliss to ...a being who craved it' (p. 141), then from a demonic creature to one who, like the garnered corn-maiden, earths the power of the fertility goddess, he also charts (like Dasent) the descent of the Goddess into the person of Eve and then into the malevolent Witch. However, in a cyclical pagan world Persephone will rise and fall, die and be reborn endlessly, but the bleak nature of Hardy's work emphasises her fall and death rather than her resurrection.

Hutton cites the paganism attributed to Eustacia when he argues that the word 'pagan' had 'become equipped with connotations of freedom, self-indulgence, and ancient knowledge, which were instantly recognisable to a Victorian reader' by 1878.<sup>141</sup> More circumspectly, Louis finds 'deep ambivalence' in Hardy's portrayal of Tess in a 'gloomy revision' of the myth of Persephone during a period of fin-de-siècle pessimism, although she concedes that Persephone subsequently emerged as one of the goddess figures deemed 'capable of shaping and embodying genuine spiritual potencies that have affected contemporary women's spirituality and neopaganism'.<sup>142</sup> For the neopagan Persephone represents the green nature goddess whose spiritual potency embraces a positive view of the cycle of life and death, while even her shadow of victimhood inspires defiance rather than submission. The victimhood of the Persephone of Victorian fiction, whether she is called Ruth, Maggie or Tess, has a more pessimistic tone; she is branded as a scarlet bewitcher by other characters determined to see evil in her story, while her creators present her as the victim of

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<sup>140</sup> 'Adam' means Red Earth.

<sup>141</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 27.

<sup>142</sup> Louis, *Persephone Rises*, pp. 86-7 and 135.

prejudice, and the symbol of green-witchery in a period when Nature was being tamed, constrained and even buried by urbanisation, industrialisation and social convention. Ruth is the birch tree trapped within the city's paving slabs; Alice is the village healer confined to the Tartarus of a noxious urban cellar; even Shirley Keeldar, the greenest of white witches, surrenders her ancient wilderness to industrialisation, while wild Catherine of the heath is reborn as Catherine of a tamed Eden, where thorny fruits are uprooted to make space for garden flowers. Equally, those female writers who address their ambitions through the images of the witch demonstrate an uneasy dichotomy of fear and exhilaration as they emerge from literary inhumation.

While the journey of the witch-goddess from Scott to Hardy begins with Scott's attempt to separate himself from the untamed maternal spirit, the primordial mother, who represents the irrational, romantic side of his country's history and of his own imagination, it concludes with Hardy's joyful affinity with those who danced in the train of 'outdoor' nature. But it also ends with a sorrowful echo of Dasent's lament for demonised goddesses and their witched followers. Unlike the thread woven by the writers of neo-fairy tales that of nineteenth-century realist fiction only leads to the dying goddess, but fails to reconnect completely the link to a powerful female deity.

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### Chapter Three

## Witches in Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Art

**Not a drop of her blood was human,  
But she was made like a soft, sweet woman.<sup>1</sup>**

Perhaps it is not surprising that Thomas Hardy, who was a poet as well as a novelist and short story writer, should create Eustacia and Tess; women whose artfully or innocently bewitching natures place them nearer to the immortal sorceresses of Victorian poetry and art than to the fairy godmother of neo-fairy tale or the victim-witch of Victorian fiction. Yet, despite their relationship with both the witch and the goddess, Hardy's enchantresses are mortals dusted with fantasy, as were other 'witches' through whom his fellow writers of realist fiction sought to represent contemporary social issues by combining rationalism with fantasy. Creators of neo-fairy tales raided myth, folklore and traditional fairy tales to find purely magical beings, but even those wicked witches and fairy godmothers, despite their supernatural nature, were then used as vehicles designed to convey parables of correct behaviour to the young. In contrast, in the age of the novel, poets were no longer burdened with the responsibility of being 'the unacknowledged legislators of the World', just as the second generation of Pre-Raphaelite artists no longer deemed it necessary to produce didactic, realist works.<sup>2</sup> Much of the witch-imagery included in this chapter emanates from a nineteenth-century revision of the immortals, which saw the Augustine use of Olympian gods as metaphors for nobility and statehood superseded by the anarchic Romantic paganism of Leigh Hunt and Shelley, and ultimately by the chthonic paganism focused on gods of the underworld by poets such as Algernon Swinburne. Hutton and Louis have analysed the progress of these changes in the journey towards a new post-Victorian spirituality; however, I am also interested in those nineteenth-century poets and artists who wandered unconstrained amongst Classical, Celtic and Arthurian myths and legends to find the sorceress, faery, or shape-changer who became the muse through whom subterranean anxieties

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Eden Bower' [1869], Paul Negri (ed.) *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry: An Anthology* Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 32, (ll. 3-4).

<sup>2</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' [1821. Pub.1840] M.H. Abrams (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 765.

could be expressed, or new spirituality explored. The witch of poetry and art was primarily the bewitcher, rather than the hag or the godmother. Her magic was often of a sensual nature and her relationship with the poet or artist was intimate. For some she inspired devotion or vilification, but for many, including D.G. Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Rosamund Marriott Watson and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, the Sirens, Sybils, Gorgons and ferocious shape-shifters whose names have become synonymous with witch-craft, provided a mirror which reflected the 'other' of conventional nineteenth-century propriety and morality.

The mediums of poetry and pictorial art could have been examined separately in this thesis but it became apparent to me that specific paintings and poems were given added depth by an interchange of the imagery created by pen and brush, in art forms which are both characterised by their emotional immediacy. Much is also revealed by comparison of different depictions of a single specific subject when she is represented in both paint and word; her superficial allure may be emphasised in the painting, while the dark power which lies at the root of words such as 'glamour' and 'charm' is revealed in the poetry. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, poet and artist, often wrote a sonnet to accompany a painting (as he did with *Lady Lilith* in 1868), thereby giving added force to the comparison between the mediums.

This chapter is divided into four sections. 'The Witch in the Garden of Eden' looks at the idyll of Genesis transplanted into Arthurian Camelot, with Guinevere and Vivien as Eve and Lilith, and examines the conflicting voices of Alfred Tennyson and William Morris as they condemn or absolve Guinevere of culpability in the fall of England's Eden. Tennyson's condemnatory view of the witch(es) Vivien/Lilith is also compared with that of Burne-Jones and Rossetti. The next section examines the Pre-Raphaelite use of 'Classical Sorceresses' as mirrors of the differently moral, or as scapegoats for male fear of women, or as precursors of Robert Graves' deadly muse, *The White Goddess*. Finally, 'Crones and Faeries of the Northern Mist' focuses on those who explored the hidden aspects of human nature through the demonised witch-woman of northern folk-lore, and those such as William Butler Yeats who sought a new religiosity through engagement with the dark goddess of ancient Celtic myth. However, the chapter begins with a brief review of the witch-imagery used in the work of some of the Romantic poets who still had a considerable following during Victoria's reign. While the blood-thirsty female demon, the victim-hag, the bewitcher (wicked or ingenuous), the fatal muse and the demonised goddess all appear in

Victorian poetry and art, their prototypes had already been established by Scott, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley.

### **The Romantic Witches**

As already noted, Walter Scott was a poet before he became a novelist, and delighted in penning magical re-workings of folklore, such as the ghoulish ‘Glenfinlas’ (1803), where two hunters encounter a pair of bewitching sirens in the ‘Glen of the Green Women’. Feckless Ronald, who goes into the night alone in search of female company, is torn apart and devoured, while pious Moy resists the allure of the green robed ‘huntress’, is alerted to her true nature by her refusal to pray, and thus survives. These green witches are the obverse of the green nymphs of earlier pastoral poetry, or twentieth-century sylphs who interweave magic and nature; instead they foreshadow and personify Tennyson’s fearsome image of untamed ‘Nature, red in tooth and claw’.<sup>3</sup> Possibly the older, less magically-inclined *Sir* Walter might simply have relayed this piece of folklore as a parable of Christian virtue overpowering the diabolical, but his younger self cloaks example of Christian piety with mysticism, as when Moy offers his nightly prayer as a sacrifice to his lost love, and the pure man’s occult and musical faculties are intertwined when the strings of his harp ring untouched in the presence of the demon who is overcome by its ‘wildest witch notes’.<sup>4</sup>

The link between magic and the creative arts is a theme visited by artists throughout the ages, often in works concerning the relationship between the creator and his supernatural muse. Unlike Scott’s Green Women the Queen of Elfland in his ‘The Ballad of Thomas the Rhymer’ (1802-3) neither threatens nor cajoles, but simply proffers an invitation to her other-world. However, her invitation holds the dangerous promise of every siren, ‘if ye dare to kiss my lips, / sure of your bodie I will be’.<sup>5</sup> She offers him three paths, the narrow path of righteousness thick with thorns and briers, the broad path of wickedness, and the fair road to Elfland; the third (which Thomas chooses) providing an alternative to the choice between vice and virtue. The images

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, [1850] Abrams (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 1105, stanza.56, l.15.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Scott, ‘Glenfinlas: or, Lord Ronald’s Coronach’ [1803] <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/glenfinlas-or-lord-ronald-s-coronach/> l.130. Accessed 24-2-12.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Scott, ‘Thomas the Rhymer’ [1802-3] Stanza 5, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/thomas-the-rhymer-3>, ll.19-20. Accessed 24-2-12.

of the bewitching female created by the same writer during the same year could not be more dissimilar. Although in 'Glenfinlas' and 'Thomas the Rhymer' the sexuality of bewitching women overwhelms the unwary male, the green harpies in the former are wantonly destructive, while the Queen of Elphamie in the latter bestows the gift of inspired speech upon the man who must willingly sacrifice his earthly life as payment for that gift. The Queen is at once the lover, the bestower of wisdom and the destroyer, who elevates the Poet to a special place outside the accepted bounds of morality, in a relationship explored by many poets from Shelley and Keats to Yeats, and more recently by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*. Yet, even the fiendish green women of 'Glenfinlas', like Circe in Victorian poetry, can only destroy or transform those whose natures are already lustful or swinish, while only one who already possesses the heart of a poet would enter into such a mortally destructive pact with his muse, however physically alluring she appeared to be.

A few Victorian poets addressed the plight of the unglamorous victim-witch, as had Robert Southey in 'The Witch' and William Wordsworth in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'.<sup>6</sup> Southey's uncharacteristically bleak poem 'The Witch' (1798) empathises with the destitute and unprepossessing female, but also recognises the superstition and fear which inspired hatred in Old Margery's neighbours. Historians from Reginald Scot (1584) onwards demonstrate that accusations often followed incidents of uncharitable behaviour by the 'victims' of 'witches'.<sup>7</sup> While Southey is evidently familiar with charms used to ward off witches, such as horseshoes, stones with holes in, and silver bullets to lame shape-changing hares, he uses irony as *his* weapon. The farmer's son who sees a neighbour's horse lose a shoe, nails that shoe to his barn to ward off the witch's 'evil eye' rather than returning it to the man who 'has a plaguey road' to travel (ll. 19-20). The father laments the wickedness of society which no longer sees 'vermin' such as Margery hanged 'without mercy' (l. 70); he reminds the curate about the Bible's condemnation of witches, before concluding that

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Southey, 'The Witch' [1798] <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOn Line/20229>. Accessed 24/2/12

William Wordsworth, 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' [1798], R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (eds.), *Wordsworth and Coleridge Lyrical Ballads*, (London and New York; Routledge Classics, 2005), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Thomas contends that 'it was above all the poor and the injured whose curses were believed likely to take effect', *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 604.



no man could pity the ‘witch’ and be a Christian.<sup>8</sup> Margery’s symbolic crucifixion is complete as another nail is hammered into the horseshoe.

The cold Christianity of uncharitable neighbours is mirrored by the intense physical coldness driving Margery to ‘crawl abroad and pick the hedges’ (ll. 96-7), as it is in Wordsworth’s ‘Goody Blake and Harry Gill’ (1798) where the poet enters the sub-culture of those he called ‘the miserably poor’ living the lives of ‘savages’.<sup>9</sup> Wordsworth also highlights the petty vindictiveness of Gill who, leaving his warm fireside, waits for hours in freezing darkness to catch an old woman taking dead wood from his hedge. Gill’s ferocious triumph is silenced as the natural becomes supernatural: frozen earth, leafless branches and gnarled emaciated woman with ‘wither’d hand uprearing’ (l. 97) merge under the ‘cold moon’ (l. 101), and the Almighty is invoked to exact pagan vengeance, ‘God! Who art never out of hearing,/ Oh may he never more be warm!’ (ll. 99-100). The poem concludes with cold-hearted Gill, cursed by natural or supernatural justice, enveloped in layers of clothing but forever icy-cold. Erasmus Darwin, who first related the story of the farmer shivering in bed for twenty years before dying, argued that he was the victim of an ‘insane idea’ rather than a victim of witchcraft or divine intervention.<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth makes no such attempt at rationalisation. The startling imagery of a withered arm superimposed upon the twisted branches of an elder tree and thrown into stark two dimensional relief against the full moon, is the creation of a poet who understood the power of association on the excited mind.<sup>11</sup> Both poets emphasise the victimhood of the village ‘witch’, but while Southey’s poem bitterly undermines rural superstition, Wordsworth revels in the integrated ‘otherness’ of woman and landscape. Margery and Goody Blake are characters who would not be out of place in Victorian realist fiction, but Wordsworth’s treatment of Goody Blake prefigures the imagery used in Victorian Gothic short stories such as Hardy’s ‘The Withered Arm’.

‘Goody Blake’, the product of Wordsworth’s stay in the Quantocks, is a rare instance of his work in which human passions are incorporated with the sinister and transitional forms of nature, unlike those composed in the Lake District where, he

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<sup>8</sup> Echoing John Wesley’s claim that belief in witchcraft equates with belief in the Bible and his complaint that ‘compliant Christians’ aided ‘the infidels’ who ‘have hooted witchcraft out of the world’, cited in Ankarloo and Clark (eds.) *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe, Vol.: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Brett and Jones notes to *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 325-6

<sup>10</sup> Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia*, cited in Brett and Jones notes to *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 325.

<sup>11</sup> Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* [1800], cited in Brett and Jones’ edition, p. 290.

wrote, 'the passions of men are incorporated [more readily] with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's predatory Geraldine, the villainess of 'Christabel' (1797-1801), is the sinister elementary spirit of a death-blighted Lakeland landscape, where midnight chimes and hooting owls awake the crowing cock, portending betrayal of the lovely, loved heroine whose name reflects her Christ-like purity.<sup>13</sup> Christabel prays for the safety of her 'betrothed knight' (l. 28) under a druidic oak festooned with mistletoe and lit by the rays of the full moon. Her vulnerability is accentuated by the hopeless frailty of the last oak leaf hanging 'so light ... so high' (l. 51), while the symbolic relationship between the beautiful parasitic mistletoe, and glittering, white-robed and apparently helpless Geraldine, signals *her* true nature. Geraldine's evil is confirmed by feigned incapacity which requires the kindly Christabel to lift her over the castle threshold and through the 'ironed' gate. Witches were reputedly unable to cross blessed thresholds, and iron was an age-old charm against the witch or fairy. Although Geraldine pleads that weariness renders her unable to thank the Virgin Mary for her deliverance, Christabel wakes with an indefinable feeling that *she* has sinned during a night spent in Geraldine's arms.

Geraldine is thereby emblematic not just of aggressive female sexuality, but of a sexuality both hidden and threatening to the role of men. After her spellbound night Christabel even experiences symptoms indicative of pregnancy when her 'girded vests / Grew tight beneath her heaving breasts' (ll. 379-80). Coleridge reinforces the lesbian imagery in the bard's dream of a dove (symbolising Christabel) heaving and stirring in the embrace of a green snake, which represents the fearsome aspect of women and of nature. This poem ends bleakly with Geraldine's seduction of Christabel's father, and his rejection of the daughter who finally sees the reality of Geraldine's withered bosom and serpent-eyes. Coleridge claimed he had envisaged a longer poem with a positive ending where the siren, foreseeing the exposure of her demonic identity, assumes the shape of Christabel's absent lover, whose fortuitous return saves the girl from marriage to a 'man' for whom she feels inexplicable revulsion.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless 'Christabel', even if incomplete, provides a fascinating background text for an

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Christabel' [1797-1801] in Abrams (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 349. Line references will be cited in the text.

<sup>14</sup> James Gillman, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, [1838] cited in <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/stc/Coleridge/poems/notes.html>. Accessed 4/1/12.

exploration, later in this chapter, of the work of a late-Victorian Coleridge (Mary Elizabeth) who embraced the lesbian witch rather than shunning her, in *her* poetry.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'lady-witch' in *The Witch of Atlas* (1820) is, in contrast, profoundly untypical of either eighteenth or nineteenth-century witch-imagery.<sup>15</sup> She is not a hag, demon or seductress. As the daughter of a nymph and the sun-god Apollo her origins are classical rather than medieval or gothic. Despite being named a 'Witch' she is no Hecate or even Persephone, but, like Aphrodite, she emerges from the foam as a 'lovely lady garmented in white' (l. 81). But, unlike contemporaneous white witches her whiteness is not synonymous with death. She effortlessly engenders peace among the 'gaunt / and sanguine beasts' (ll. 92-3) drawn into the 'magic circle of her voice and eyes' (l.103), where young lions learn the message of vegetarianism. Nature's demi-gods flock to her cave, and simple mortals gather before her emerald throne, shielded from 'the splendour of her love' (ll. 51-2) by a 'subtle veil'. In *Mont Blanc* (1816) Shelley envisaged wandering thoughts finding rest in the cave of the witch Poesy, but the relationship between the witch-muse and the poet is revised in the role of the 'wizard Maid' of Atlas who has a sensory treasure trove hidden deep within her cave. Here sounds are encased in crystal cells, visions sleep in chrysalises, odours are caged in an aviary of 'Eden-trees', healing liquors preserved in 'crystal vials', and scrolls contain the lore of peace and love (ll. 153-208). While the witch sits alone reading these scrolls, her spirit travels in an enchanting, enchanted boat, seeing the dreams and souls of sleeping mortals, bringing healing visions to those with beautiful souls, and delivering improving lessons to others.

Despite Shelley's protestation that the poem is an inconsequential frolic, his witch (like the witch fairy godmothers of neo-fairy tales) is a channel for the author's moral messages.<sup>16</sup> She transplants Shelley's dreams into the minds of those *he* deems needful, so misers give their hoard to beggars, priests become as atheist as Shelley when gods are stripped of divinity, fawning courtiers kiss the feet of apes clothed as emperors (a truly republican vision), while soldiers beat their swords into ploughshares, and liberals are liberated. The Witch learns, and her poet demonstrates, that powers to awaken the senses and inspire wisdom are worthless when locked

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<sup>15</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas* [1820] Donald.H. Reiman and Sharon Powers (eds.) *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 347. Line references will be cited in the text.

<sup>16</sup>The introductory stanzas gently chide Shelley's wife Mary for criticizing the poem's lack of narrative and absence of moral message.

within the cave or the poet's mind. Clearly there *is* a narrative and a moral imperative within the journey of the witch from her sequestered existence to interaction with the imperfect world. Yet the most intimate sense, that of touch, is absent from her collection. She passes among sleeping mortals 'like a sexless bee' (l. 589), while the force literally moving her is Hermaphroditus, an androgynous creation of fire and snow, powering her magical boat. Unlike most other bewitching females discussed in this thesis, the Witch of Atlas is not an erotically sensual being. Far from being 'the woman who knows', she is as unknowing as a 'claw-less kitten' learning the dangerously beguiling ways of a cat, but Shelley implies that she could learn those ways, and is already 'not so sweet a creature' as Wordsworth's Ruth or Lucy (ll. 33-4). As the poem closes Shelley invokes the age-old fear of things which move unseen among sleepers, who 'little thought a Witch was looking on them' (l. 568). Once again, the urge to cast a sinister shadow behind the most innocent witch emerges in Shelley's witch imagery as in that of Wordsworth and of Victorians from MacDonald to Gaskell and the Pre-Raphaelites. While the Witch's actions among mortals in this sunlit summer tale are described as pranks, Shelley hints at darker deeds in her dealings with sprites and gods, which he promises would make a tale 'more fit for the weird winter nights' (l. 670).

John Keats' ballad 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1820) contrasts sunlit seduction with grim winter rejection.<sup>17</sup> Graves notes similarities between Keats' knight and Thomas the Rhymer, although the knight returns to the cold hillside without the compensatory gift of poetry. Graves relates that Keats composed this piece when he was doubting his poetic abilities and feeling overwhelmed by a 'loitering indolence', aggravated by his love for the 'frivolous' and 'elfish' Fanny Brawne, to whom he dare not propose for fear of the 'doom' threatened by consumption.<sup>18</sup> While the lily on the knight's brow and the fast fading rose upon his cheek are flowers of summer 'meads', they are also signs of the consumptive fever, destined to cool to a moribund state where the 'sedge has wither'd from the lake/ And no birds sing' (l. 4) Without speculating upon the author's emotional and physical state, Victorians may have read the text as a warning against the hollow promise of easy life, or as a secular parable wherein strong men might be enthralled and destroyed by merciless women, yet the

<sup>17</sup> John Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' [1820] in Abrams (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Verse*, p. 787.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A historical grammar of poetic myth* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 430-31.

Pre-Raphaelite painters who were particularly 'in thrall' to 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', focused on her persona as 'a faery's child' (l. 14) with light foot and wild eyes, rather than as a merciless beauty.<sup>19</sup>

In Keats' 'Lamia' (1820) the fatal enchantress is drawn with greater ambiguity and greater sympathy. Initially the snake goddess of Greek myth appears as a serpent of dazzling bitter-sweet beauty, with a mortal woman's mouth, eyes and selfish sensibilities, 'rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries' (l. 54), prepared to throw 'the goddess off' (l. 336) and endure 'scarlet pain' (l. 164) in order to ensnare the man she desires. Both lovers are portrayed as flawed but not evil. This Lamia, despite the demonic reputation of her serpent-kind, is a seductress who simply wishes to enjoy the love of her conquest in peace, while Lycius is branded a fool, prepared to sacrifice 'warm cloister'd hours', to the gaze of 'common eyes' (l. 149). Keats, through the words of Lycius, allocates the evil of 'demon eyes' (l. 289) to the philosopher Apollonius whose 'cold philosophy' can 'clip an Angel's wings' and 'Unweave the rainbow' (ll. 230-7), and also penetrate Lamia's human form and vulnerability with a look as deadly as a serpent's fang. Philosophy bereft of imagination or compassion sees only the serpent in the woman, not the woman in the serpent (ll. 221-8). 'Lamia' contains no explosive destruction of the demonic as in 'Glenfinlas', and no clear battle between the profane and the virtuous as in 'Christabel'. Instead, Lamia, who claims she was a woman before she became a demon (ll. 117-8), is transformed under the gaze of love into a loving woman who, on seeing the image of the serpent reflected from the eye of Apollonius once again becomes a serpent, but a serpent who feels the pain of lost love. Lamia and Goody Blake or old Margery represent polar extremes of witch imagery, but all three are equally cursed or blessed by the vision of the beholder.

This selection of witch figures is intended to illustrate the range of witch imagery produced by pre-Victorian poets. The downtrodden victim, so dominant in the Victorian novels, occurs rarely. Even Wordsworth lights the withered hand of Goody Blake with eerie moonshine, thereby, to a degree, counteracting her victim-hood, while Shelley's playful precursor of the twentieth-century teen-witch has an Olympian heritage and an implied sinister capability. The majority of Romantic

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<sup>19</sup>These artists included Arthur Hughes, Frank Dicksee, Walter Crane, Frank Cowper and John Waterhouse.

witches are agents of love and death. They are elemental beings whose beguilingly dangerous witchery cast a powerful spell on Victorian poets and painters.

### **The Witch in the Garden of Eden**

Alfred Lord Tennyson is arguably the Victorian poet most clearly associated with the conservative spirit of his age, and the one least inclined to find affinity with the dangerously beguiling female. In his epic *Idylls of the King* (composed between 1856 and 1885) he portrays, under the guise of Arthurian myth, an image of idealised mid-Victorian society and masculinity.<sup>20</sup> As Gertrude Himmelfarb notes, the virtues celebrated in this work are not those of the battlefield but those of domesticity, ‘love, sweetness, gentleness, faithfulness, chastity, yet, it is the knights, not the ladies of the court, who are enjoined to cultivate these virtues’.<sup>21</sup> Prince Albert, to whom *Idylls of the King* was dedicated, wrote to Tennyson in 1860 that they ‘quite rekindle the feelings with which the legends of King Arthur must have inspired the chivalry of old, whilst the graceful form in which they are presented blends those feelings with the softer tones of our present age’.<sup>22</sup> The Tennysonian view of the ideal relationship between man and woman was outlined in *The Princess* (1847) when the hero’s father, who defines man as the hunter and woman as his willing prey, is compared with ‘an old-world mammoth bulk’d in ice’, while in contrast, mutual respect is lauded as the means by which two lovers, significantly ‘Distinct in individualities’, may restore ‘the statelier Eden’ to mankind.<sup>23</sup> Yet, it appears that the achievement of such equilibrium in a Victorian Eden was still more dependent upon the compliance of Eve than Adam. In the *Idylls* Guinevere, the new Eve whose foremother was reviled as a witch in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, causes the destruction of Camelot and the downfall of the most perfect man ‘since Adam’ by her failure to conform to the role of a respectable Victorian wife.<sup>24</sup> Details of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 provide insight into the predominant contemporary view of adultery in marriage; after its passage a man

<sup>20</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* [1888] in George Barker (ed.) *Alfred Lord Tennyson, Idylls of the King and a Selection of Poems* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1961).

<sup>21</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, ‘Household Gods and Goddesses’ in R.W. Hill (ed.) *Tennyson’s Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1999), p. 673.

<sup>22</sup> Prince Albert to Alfred Tennyson, May 17, 1860. C.Y. Lang and E.F. Shannon (eds.) *The Letters of Lord Tennyson 11 1815-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 257.

<sup>23</sup> Tennyson, *The Princess* [1847], in *The Poetical Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson: Poet Laureate* (London: Macmillan & Co. Limited, 1906), Stanzas V. 1.142, VII. 1.275, VII. 1.277.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The most perfect man since Adam’ was a proposal for the title page of the 1859 edition of *Idylls of the King*, mentioned in a letter from Emily Tennyson to James Field, *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, p. 232.

might divorce his wife for her adultery, while a woman had to prove her husband guilty of incest, bigamy, cruelty or desertion as well as adultery if she wanted to divorce him. Tennyson demonstrates his own bias in this debate when he identifies the source of corruption in Camelot, and implicitly in Britain, as an aberrant force within the *female*, which precipitates an ultimately destructive unbalancing between co-dependent ruling elements within home or nation.<sup>25</sup> Tennyson's identification of Guinevere as the primary source of destabilizing malignancy is subtly previewed in his pre-*Idylls* poem 'Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere' (1842), which opens with the image of prelapsarian natural equilibrium as the couple ride together with the innocence of children through the tender greenery of 'the maiden Spring', in 'the boyhood of the year'.<sup>26</sup> Guinevere becomes the Green Woman as the year ripens, but her 'gown of grass-green silk' (l. 24), and 'light-green tuft of plumes' (l. 26) are confined by golden clasps and a golden ring, as befits a married woman. Yet, in the final stanza she rides recklessly through the trees with her hair freed by the 'happy winds', blowing 'the ringlet from the braid' (ll. 38-39). As Jan Marsh explains, for most of the nineteenth century 'loose hair was only worn by children...Its appearance [on women] in art has therefore an intimate, erotic significance'.<sup>27</sup> The woman with unbound hair exhibits the naivety of a child, intertwined with the sexual awareness of an adolescent. Guinevere's progress through the poem and the landscape also grows increasingly unconstrained. The natural imagery grows darker and more threatening, but Guinevere's beauty and delicacy are such that a man would sacrifice 'his worldly worth' (l. 43) for one kiss. She is portrayed as a reckless temptress who might sway the emotions of any man as lightly as she directs her steed with 'dainty finger-tips' (l. 41).

When Tennyson's Guinevere eventually appears in her eponymous section of the *Idylls* she is no longer a wild, bewitching Green Woman, or a controlling force. The unearthly, beguiling young wanton has become a lonely, broken woman, hiding from her husband and weeping over the bitter harvest of her careless Spring-time. The

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<sup>25</sup> Such natural distemper is a theory familiar to the twentieth-century 'New-Age' which strives to avoid an imbalance between male and female elements of the cosmos, but was also familiar to Shakespeare in whose *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* the balance of nature is disturbed by the 'progeny of evil' engendered by the 'dissention' between Oberon and Titania.

<sup>26</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Launcelot and Queen Guinevere' [1842] l. 3 and l. 27. <http://poemhunter.com/poem/sir-launcelot-and-queen-guinevere> Accessed 9-3-12. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1987), p. 48.

verdant woodland and the vibrant court at Camelot are replaced by a cheerless nunnery and the chattering of a little novice. The child-nun now symbolises artless innocence, while Guinevere is the repentant woman who has tasted the fruit of knowledge, and felt it turn to ashes in her mouth. The full moon, hanging unnoticed above woman and child, is not a harbinger of erotic magic but a partner of the dead earth; a mist hangs like a shroud between moon and earth, mirroring the sundered union of King and Queen. The bewitching Guinevere of the first poem is now a cursed being, haunted by dreams in which her shadow blackens the land. Fleeing from the court she is no longer part of the uncanny landscape but, instead, a victim of the real or imagined ‘Spirits of the waste and weald’.<sup>28</sup> The Fairy Queen image of the first poem is blighted by the little maid’s recitation of a childhood story in which celebration of a perfect couple who might change the world becomes the sad tale of a ‘good King and his wicked Queen’ (l. 209).

When read in conjunction with Arthur’s accusation that Guinevere had destroyed ‘the flower of men’ (l. 464), and undermined ‘all that makes a man’ (l. 483), Arthur’s protestation that ‘I was ever virgin save for thee’ (l. 557) discloses an inversionary subtext. The Queen who ‘spoil’ the hopes of her virginal husband is portrayed as an unnatural woman: the Witch-Eve of the second Eden displays masculine qualities akin to those of the witches in Scott’s novels, or the dominatrices of ‘Thomas the Rhymer’, ‘Glenfinlas’ or even Keats’ ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’. Arthur’s bitter declaration that ‘Well it is that no child is born of thee’ (l. 424), not only emphasises Guinevere’s barrenness, but touches upon nineteenth-century fears about the dangers posed to children by adulterous mothers. Tennyson, through Arthur, fulminates against such women in an explosive concoction of contemporaneous Victorian divorce law and the invective of a medieval witch trial:

I hold that man the worst of public foes  
 Who either for his own or children’s sake,  
 To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife  
 Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house: (ll. 512-15)

He conflates the relationship between the serpent and the witch-wife who:

Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and saps  
 The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse

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<sup>28</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, ‘Guinevere’ in *Idylls of the King*, George Baker (ed.) l.128. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.



With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young. (ll. 520-22)

In contrast William Morris challenged this misogynous reading of the myth in 'The Defence of Guenevere' (1858), a poem which portrays the Queen as sacrificial victim as she faces her accusers and imagines the heat of the flames to come. She displays vulnerability and dignity as her hand touches the tears on her burning cheek, while her defiantly uplifted gaze challenges the knights to cast the first stone. She counters their simplistic perception of sin by arguing that her passionless arranged marriage to the cold King Arthur, who bought her, was the immoral pairing, but that the kisses and affectionate words she shared with Launcelot did not constitute the sin of which they are accused. If she was an adulteress, she claims, she would live hatefully, 'slaying and poisoning' without weeping.<sup>29</sup> Traditionally the inability to shed tears marked a woman as a witch, so, Guenevere's tears not only show the repentance demanded by her accusers, they also imply that she is not a witch.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, by alluding to the murder of Gauwaine's mother by his brother, she associates herself with the vengeful witchery of adulterous Morgause; her plea for pity is combined with a curse that, if denied, her voice might haunt the lone rider and scream with the wind through castle locks, or her tears rust a sword before battle. Yet, despite elements of dark witchery in Morris' Guenevere, his positive evocation of the 'glorious lady fair' (l. 56) merges the image of the fairy queen with that of the sacrificial victims of the witch-hunts, and like the latter she uses the threat of magical capability in combination with her appeals to the compassion of her judges.

David Cody's *Victorian Web* biography of Morris compares the poet's wife Jane with Arthur's queen. Morris and Jane Burden were married in the year following the publication of this poem, but Cody argues that Jane was soon 'playing Guenevere' during her long affair with Rossetti.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, Pamela Todd describes Morris' response to the relationship between Jane and Rossetti as 'extraordinarily forbearing'; a tolerance not displayed by Tennyson's Arthur or by the husband in George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> William Morris, 'The Defence of Guenevere' [1858] in Negri, *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry*, p. 155 ll. 145-150. Morris uses a different spelling to Tennyson.

<sup>30</sup> See Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 187. and Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 552. Tennyson's Guinevere weeps as she is un-witched by repenting her wickedness, *Idylls*, p. 240.

<sup>31</sup> David Cody, 'William Morris: A Brief Biography' *The Victorian Web: Literature, History and Culture in the age of Victoria*, <http://www.victorianweb.org/morris/wmb>. Accessed 4/2/12.

<sup>32</sup> Pamela Todd, *The Pre-Raphaelites at Home* (London: Pavilion Books Ltd, 2001), p. 123.

Despite a total absence of allusions to Camelot, *Modern Love* begs comparison with the Guinevere poems in its depiction of the adulterous woman. Conflicting emotions of love and hate are symbolised by the initial image of husband and wife who lie in their marriage bed as motionless as ‘sculptured effigies’ upon ‘their marriage-tomb’.<sup>33</sup> This tale of modern marriage uses no other direct transposition to the medieval, but its imagery contains a multitude of allusions to the Old Testament and to classical art, including serpents, erotically flowing hair and the poisonous capabilities of women, exemplified by the wife’s sobs which are likened to ‘little gaping snakes, / Dreadfully venomous’ to the husband (stanza i. l. 5-6). The husband’s voice, angrily hyperbolic with demonic imagery, dominates the central body of the poem, in which the wife’s allure is likened to the ‘gold-eyed serpent’ which dwells ‘in rich hair’ (stanza vii. L. 7). Like the adulterous Guinevere she is seen by her husband as toxic, but while he claims he is ‘sickened as at breath of poison-flowers’ (stanza ii. l.6) by the bitter taste her beauty still holds for him, his murderous urges are subdued by a draught from the ‘poison-cup’ of her eyes (stanza ix. l. 11). The secrets her tongue might hide or tell give him ‘a glimpse of hell’ (stanza xxii. l. 4.), while her angelic looks belie one ‘prepared to scale an upper sphere’, by ‘stirring up a lower’ (stanza vii. ll. 1-2). By taking a mistress he experiences feelings of ‘Satanic power’ (stanza xxviii. l. 15), but he fears to cast a ‘glory’ around the head (stanza xxix. ll. 1-2) of another woman who may also prove to be another ‘Devilish malignant witch’ (stanza ix. l. 13). The husband sees the fallen angel or the witch in his wife, while she releases a demon in him which demands that she and her sex must ‘bear all the venom of his tooth’ (stanza xxx. l. 16).

Meredith’s own marriage to Mary, the daughter of Thomas Love Peacock, has been described as ‘a highly-strung and economically hampered’ one, culminating in Mary’s elopement with the artist Henry Wallis.<sup>34</sup> Meredith only allowed Mary to see their child when she was dying, and he refused to attend her funeral. *Modern Love* was begun 1858 when Mary left and completed in 1861, after her death. The anger, sorrow and cynicism displayed in the poem might be seen as a cathartic unburdening of emotions by an embittered husband who remembers both the ‘May-fly pleasures’ of a past where an ‘early goddess was a country lass’ (stanza xviii. ll. 9-10), and the

<sup>33</sup> George Meredith, *Modern Love* [1862] Keith Hanley (ed.) *George Meredith: Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1988). Stanza i. ll.14-15. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

<sup>34</sup> Hanley, *George Meredith: Collected Poems*, p. 7.

subsequent marital strife born from the sin of Eve. However, the poem closes under the narrator's compassionate, unbiased vision, which accepts that the failure of marriage is probably due to human frailty, not demonic traits in either partner. It is a narrative in which a husband sees the witch Eve mirrored in his wife, but eventually also acknowledges the negative elements of his own nature.

The works examined here demonstrate the divergent use of witch imagery to illuminate conflicting attitudes towards the woman accused of adultery in the mid-nineteenth century. Intriguingly, Meredith, the writer who clearly defined his subject as 'modern' seizes upon the hyperbolic vocabulary of an Early Modern witch-finder to express the husband's sense of betrayal and hate, while William Morris uses a medieval setting to argue for marriage based on love rather than social expediency, but also empowers his Guenevere with suggestions of occult powers; meanwhile Tennyson's Guinevere is portrayed unambiguously as a corrupting Eve, the product of a 'bent rib' and the medieval foremother of adulterous wives who, from his perspective, threaten the stability of the Victorian home and, thereby, the Victorian state.<sup>35</sup>

However, the role of Lilith, the original witch of Eden according to Hebrew mythology, is played in the *Idylls* by the 'wily' Vivien, as Tennyson calls her in 'Merlin and Vivien'.<sup>36</sup> She cynically urges womankind to punish Guinevere's infidelity by flirting venom at her eyes, pinching a murderous dust into her drink, or making her 'paler with a poison'd rose' (ll. 607-9), yet the toxic witchery Vivien herself uses is the petty venom of rumour which she spreads throughout the court. Equally, the spell with which she imprisons Merlin in the hollow oak is not the product of her witchcraft but of Merlin's wizardry, for knowledge of which she pestered him until 'overtalk'd and overworn' he 'yielded, told her all the charm, and slept' (ll. 963-4). Tennyson allows her a degree of fatal allure and mystery as 'a lovely baleful star / Veil'd in grey vapour' (ll. 260-61), while to Merlin her amorality, artifice, 'petulance and play' (l. 73) are a source of fluctuating amusement and

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<sup>35</sup> '[S]ince she was formed from a bent rib ... she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives', *The Malleus Maleficarum* [1486] Part 1 Question vi, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/mm/index.htm>. Accessed 5-2-12. Malory's fifteenth-century eye sees no witchery, only one who 'while she lived ... was a true lover [to Lancelot?], and therefore she had a good end', *Sir Thomas Malory's Tales of King Arthur*, Michael Senior (ed.) (London: Book Club Associates, 1980), p. 268).

<sup>36</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Merlin and Vivien' in Baker (ed.) *Idylls of the King*, l. 5. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

irritation. The ageing sage is flattered by her attention, but fears she might use the charm not only to bind him, but to injure those who ignite her anger or resentment. He deduces that the attentions paid to him by this ‘wanton’ and ‘harlot’ are provoked not only by her greed for his magic, but by her failed and mocked attempts to seduce the Knights of the Round Table, including Arthur himself. Although Tennyson implied overtly that Merlin was wearied into submission by talk rather than overcome by lust, close reading of the text hints at a more carnal reason for his ‘fall’; the poem opens with reference to a coming storm, and closes as the storm, ‘Moaning and calling’ (l. 960) has subsided, ‘its burst of passions spent’ (l. 959), ending ambiguously, ‘what should not have been had been’ (l. 962).

In a letter to Tennyson in 1856 James Spedding complained of the ‘predominance of harlotry’ in the poem, objecting to the idea that Merlin would have been ‘talked over by that kind of woman’.<sup>37</sup> Stephanie Barczewski notes ‘the near-obsessive concern of religious leaders and moral reformers’ and creators of literature and the visual arts, regarding the threat of harlotry to the Victorian home and thereby to the wider state.<sup>38</sup> Concern about ‘that kind of woman’ during the mid-nineteenth century manifested itself in attempts at their redemption made by luminaries such as Dickens and William Ewart Gladstone, and condemnation by reformers such as William Acton of what Kellow Chesney defines as their role in the clinical as well the sexual and moral ‘pollution’ of Victorian society.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, by naming Vivien a ‘harlot’ Tennyson links her to the murderous medieval hag and to Lilith the destroyer of infants, at a time (1855) when three quarters of those for whom syphilis was recorded as the cause of death were children.<sup>40</sup> Seemingly the phrase ‘the wily Vivien’ was originally written as ‘harlot Nimue’.<sup>41</sup> In 1858 the artist Edward Burne-Jones asked Tennyson to leave ‘the ancient name of Nimue’ in its rightful place with Malory and the writers of French Arthurian romance, where she is a powerful, mysterious, dignified and benign figure.<sup>42</sup> Caroline Fox recalled a conversation with Tennyson in which she asked whether Vivien might not be ‘the old Brittany fairy [Nimue]...and not an actual woman’; yet, in the *Idylls* Tennyson reduces a mythical

<sup>37</sup> Lang and Shannon (eds.), *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, p. 154.

<sup>38</sup> Stephanie Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Legend of King Arthur and Robin Hood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 171.

<sup>39</sup> Kellow Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld* (London: The History Book Club, 1970) p. 355.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> See Lang and Shannon (eds.), *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, p. 180.

<sup>42</sup> See Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p. 112.

magical being to one stained with harlotry and stripped of magical power, whose 'fairy' nostrils flare in anger (l. 847) before she weeps 'like a beaten child' (l. 853).<sup>43</sup>

However, Tennyson draws closer to his Vivien's 'Lilith' nature by his use of serpent imagery during her seduction of Merlin. She becomes another Green Woman who, like her sisters in Scott's 'Glenfinlas', is defined by her poisonous, powerful sexuality. With willow-green samite clinging around 'her lissome limbs', which it 'more exprest than hid' (ll. 220-21), she 'writhed' towards Merlin, 'twined' her feet around his ankle, 'curved' her arm around his neck, and clung 'like a snake' (ll. 37-40). In her anger she stiffens like a 'viper' ready to strike (l. 843), and as she appeals tearfully for his compassion, the 'snake of gold slid from her hair, the braid / Slipt and uncoil'd itself' (ll. 886-87). Finally, entwined in the darkness of the hollow oak, with the storm reaching a crescendo, she is triumphant in her serpent nature as 'in the change of glare and gloom / Her eyes and neck glittering went and came' (ll. 957-58). The duality of Tennyson's Vivien as a foolish childish troublemaker *and* a femme fatale is vivid in the closing stanzas, as the serpent-woman overcomes the mage with 'woven paces and waving hands' (l. 966) and is then reduced to the figure of a maniacal whore, defined by the final word,

Then crying, "I have made his glory mine,"  
And shrieking out, "O fool!" the harlot leapt  
Adown the forest, and the thicket closed  
Behind her, and the forest echo'd "fool". (ll. 969-72)

Even W.B. Yeats, whose inclination was to admire the occult capabilities of mortal and immortal females, rather than condemn them (as shall be demonstrated shortly), seemed initially to see Vivien as intellectually and morally limited in *Time and the Witch Vivien* (1889).<sup>44</sup> In a dramatization set at a remove from Arthur's Camelot, she appears to be as empty-headed, power-hungry and narcissistic as Tennyson's 'harlot' when, with unconscious irony, she likens herself to the beautiful 'little greedy golden carp' swimming in her marble fountain (p. 1), and while not attempting to seduce Time she recklessly tries to win eternal youth in a game of chance. Time, in the guise of an old pedlar, offers to sell Vivien his black bag filled with grey hairs, crutches, memories and mellow thoughts, encompassing the

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<sup>43</sup> Lang and Shannon (eds.), *Letters*, p. 267

<sup>44</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Time and the Witch Vivien* [1889], <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/yeats.htm>. Accessed 5/2/12.

consequences and consolations of long life, but she declines, saying she will never need them. The protagonists gamble with dice for possession of his hour-glass through which the sands of life trickle. She loses the game, but persuades him to play a game of chess for the highest stakes: success guarantees triumph in all her plots, failure means death. Naturally she loses because, as Time reminds her, he will always 'laugh the last' (p. 2). Yet the setting in a marble-clad, pillared courtyard is one which befits a classical immortal, and Vivien's analysis of chess as a game of life serves as a metaphor for her own route to power:

Thus play we first with pawns, poor things and weak:  
And then the great ones come, and last the king.  
So men in life and I in magic play;  
First dreams and goblins, and the lesser sprites,  
And now with Father Time I'm face to face. (p. 2)

They know each other. She recognises the true nature of the 'little light old man' (p. 1), while, when he refers to her as a granddaughter of Eve, he does not simply define her as a woman, but as a witch. Her belief in the wit and craft which overwhelmed Merlin convinces her that she can outwit Time and sidestep death. A foolish assumption perhaps, but her audacity in facing Time as an equal demonstrates a stronger character than the girl of the *Idylls* who invites mockery by her attempts at seduction, or who crawls and slithers coquettishly around the feet of Merlin.

However, possibly the most iconic nineteenth-century image of Merlin and the enchantress, and arguably the most sympathetic to her, was painted in 1874 by Edward Burne-Jones. Yet, the title *The Beguiling of Merlin* casts a shadow behind the fairy Lady of the Lake by recalling and inverting the words of Eve, 'The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat'.<sup>45</sup> The wizard lies 'beguiled' and glassy-eyed at the feet of Nimue in a painting which blends the serpentine symbolism used by Tennyson with elements of myth and magic denied to his domesticated Vivien. Green snakes are entwined in her hair, while the tree branches, which both support and encircle Merlin, writhe away from the contorted trunk. Burne-Jones ignores the convention which identifies Merlin's prison as an oak tree, and places him instead in a hawthorn, a tree which in maturity twists and turns in a serpentine manner, and which is 'ominous and magical' in its association with the Otherworld.<sup>46</sup> Clouds of white blossom surround

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<sup>45</sup> *Genesis* 3:12-13.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Baker, *Discovering the Folklore of Plants* (Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications, 2001), p. 68.

the supine magician, threatening to subsume him. Both figures wear green. Her dress is gossamer-light, clinging to limbs clearly visible beneath, and seeming to move sinuously with her body, like a second skin which might be sloughed off at any time. His clothing is of a darker shade, the folds twist awkwardly, constraining his contorted body. His hands hang powerless, while hers hold the open book containing the secret charm destined to bind him to the earth. She gazes intently into his unfocused eyes as if to ascertain that the spell has worked. The whole painting, lit by a luminescent glow, shows two magical practitioners as reflections of each other, but the power has now passed from the master to the pupil, from the man to the woman.

Both Guinevere and Vivien are presented in the *Idylls* as corrupting and subservient to a greater or lesser degree. In contrast Burne-Jones's beguiler of Merlin bears the emblems of Tennyson's serpent but her genesis is in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Todd describes the delight that young friends Morris and Burne-Jones found in their discovery of a second-hand edition of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and their subsequent immersion in a 'mystical world of chivalry and beauty, lost history and romance'.<sup>47</sup> Malory's Nimue is a very different character to Tennyson's Vivien. Rather than pursuing or seducing a venerable sage she is pestered by a man in his 'dotage', who taught her his craft, but also 'lay about the lady to have her maidenhood'.<sup>48</sup> In consequence her use of enchantment to trap and entomb him is an act of self-preservation rather than wickedness. This could explain why Burne-Jones paints her with an expression of mild apprehension rather than base cunning or triumph. In further mitigation Malory's Nimue twice preserved Arthur from the murderous plots of Morgan le Fay.<sup>49</sup> Curiously, Tennyson virtually ignores the evil sorcery of the 'fairy' Morgan, transferring her wickedness, suitably diluted, to Vivien.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed her disappointment with the *Idylls*, 'The colour, the temperature, the very music left me cold': the same could not be said of the visual imagery produced by the Pre-Raphaelite artists who reanimated the

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<sup>47</sup> Pamela Todd, *The Pre-Raphaelites at Home*, p. 48. In September 1855 Morris and Burne-Jones bought a copy of Robert Southey's version of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

<sup>48</sup> Senior (ed.), *Tales of King Arthur*, pp. 52-55.

<sup>49</sup> Senior (ed.), *Tales of King Arthur*, 'for the love of Arthur' Vivien saved him from the death in battle plotted by Morgan le Fay p. 58, and ensured that Morgan, not Arthur, is burnt to death by Morgan's 'gift' of a magic cloak, p. 65.

sensuality of Malory's numinous women.<sup>50</sup> Burne-Jones' model for Nimue was probably Maria Zambaco, who, according to Marsh, 'combined the irresistible appeal of beauty, sadness and reckless vulnerability'.<sup>51</sup> The security of home and family drew Burne-Jones back from planned elopement with Maria, but *The Beguiling of Merlin* is seen as symbolic of his relationship with the woman whom he claimed 'had his heart in thrall, like Merlin under the stone'.<sup>52</sup> Marsh gives a perfect analysis of the relationship between the Pre-Raphaelites and the witch:

The closest that Pre-Raphaelite art comes to presenting femininity in wicked or ugly guise is in the delineation of woman as enchantress or witch. But even here, womanhood is almost never shown as contemptible or base, and the images of the ensnaring sorceresses are as idealised and beautiful as those of the courtly lady.<sup>53</sup>

When Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted Adam's first wife he did not disguise her as 'wily' Vivien, but presented *Lady Lilith* (1864) as the ultimate courtly lady. She is a vision of bored loveliness, languidly combing her red-gold hair and gazing into a hand-mirror. Her creamy dress slips provocatively off one shoulder, accentuating her barely concealed breasts. A circlet of white flowers bound with green ribbon (possibly a discarded bridal wreath) lies on her lap. The scarlet ribbon around her wrist reflects her red lips and the poppy behind her chair splashes a signal of danger and sexuality across the painting. This is Lilith as a contemporary woman seated in a mid-Victorian boudoir decorated with rose-patterned wall paper. Her dressing-table mirror reflects a wooded vista, lit by dappled sunlight. Yet, a second glance reveals that the trail of roses winds its way *out* of the wallpaper, through the mirror, and into the garden. The trees bend their branches towards the roses and towards the heavy skein of hair which Lilith combs out from her head. The indoor merges with the outdoors as, spider-like, Lilith draws out the threads of her hair, and draws *in* the waving trees. While living roses spring from the wallpaper, the flowers on her lap seem silkily unreal in their glossy symmetry. Lady Lilith at her dressing table is a dual being; a creature of artifice and nature, whose encircling web of flowers, trees and hair recalls Rossetti's

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning cited in Christopher Ricks, 'Idylls of the King 1859-1885', R.W. Hill (ed.) *Tennyson's Poetry: Alternative Texts, Contexts, Criticism/ Alfred Tennyson* (New York and London, W.W.Norton, 1999), p. 661.

<sup>51</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p. 114.

<sup>52</sup> Edward Burne-Jones to H.M. Gaskell, January 1893, quoted in Marsh *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p.114.

<sup>53</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p. 109.



reference to the 'self-absorption' evident in those whose strange fascination draws others into 'their own circle'.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the contemporary setting and the absence of overt magical symbolism, nineteenth-century critics detected the witch within Rossetti's courtly Lady Lilith, with F.G. Stevens referring to the 'haughty luxuriousness of the beautiful modern witch's face' and her 'witching' hair.<sup>55</sup> Rossetti's poem 'Body's Beauty', the companion-piece to this painting, names 'Adam's first wife, Lilith' as '(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve)'.<sup>56</sup> The poem bridges the gulf between Eden and Victorian suburbia. The woman who might inhabit either or both is 'still ... young while the earth is old' (l. 5), self-absorbed and consequently unaware of her fatal fascination as, 'subtly of herself contemplative' she 'Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave (ll. 6-7). Her spell weaves almost imperceptively through the sonnet, with the sibilance of 'shed scent', 'soft-shed kisses' and 'soft sleep' (ll. 10-11) and the imagery of 'rose and poppy...her flowers' (l. 9). Both blooms are found in the painting too, but the roses there are white, the emblem of deadly, not passionate, love, while the poppy is not only the flower of sleep but of *eternal* sleep. Like a hapless fly the youth of the poem is caught, 'heart and body and life' (l. 8) in her web, then penetrated by the barb of her spell, and strangled by 'one...golden hair' around his heart (l. 14). Regardless of her origins in Eden, Rossetti's modern Lady Lilith represents the earthly, sensual and material; her 'enchanted hair' is 'the first gold' (l. 4), the potential source of corruption and destruction, which, like Lilith, seduces softly and leaves its victims hollow-hearted.

Algernon Swinburne wrote of the 'combination of desire and fear' inspired by Rossetti's painting *Lady Lilith*.<sup>57</sup> This duality of emotions is illustrated most effectively in Rossetti's earlier 'Lilith' poem, 'Eden Bower' (1869) where the refrains 'Sing Eden Bower' and 'Alas the Hour' are woven into alternating stanzas, while Rossetti defines within 'the wife of Adam' (l. 1) the ambiguous nature of every Pre-Raphaelite enchantress, 'Not a drop of her blood was human, / But she was made like a soft sweet woman' (ll. 2-3).<sup>58</sup> In this poem Lilith's primacy as the primordial witch

<sup>54</sup> D.G. Rossetti writing to T.G. Hake in 1870, quoted in J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 134.

<sup>55</sup> F.G. Stevens, *Portfolio*: May 1894, quoted in Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 137.

<sup>56</sup> Rossetti, 'Body's Beauty' (ll.1-2) *The House of Life* [1881] in Negri (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry*, p. 57

<sup>57</sup> Swinburne in 'Notes on Some Pictures of 1868', in Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, p. 136

<sup>58</sup> Rossetti 'Eden Bower' [1869] in Negri (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry*, p. 32.

is again emphasised, as she stands ‘on the skirts of Eden’ from which ‘She was the first that thence was driven’ (ll. 5-7). In Hebrew mythology Lilith was created by God, from mud, to become the first wife of Adam, but in Rossetti’s mythology she was initially the lover of ‘the Snake’ before being made ‘a wife for the earth’s new creature’ (l. 16). Sinuous love-making between Adam and his serpentine bride produces demonic off-spring, ‘Shapes that coiled in the woods and waters, / Glittering sons and radiant daughters (ll. 31-36).<sup>59</sup> In Rossetti’s version of *The Fall*, Adam not Eve initially succumbs to the blandishments of a female Serpent, who also speaks ‘In the ear of the snake’ (l. 9). While Tennyson stripped Vivien of the power to enchant, Rossetti’s Lilith is the supreme witch-femme fatale, the ultimate creature of ‘the edge’, standing beyond the gates of Eden and almost beyond the control of the Creator. The combination of ‘fear and desire’ noted by Swinburne is palpable in the erotic, phallic symbolism of generative or destructive power evoked by Rossetti’s descriptions of the sexual intertwining of Adam and Lilith, or Lilith and the Serpent. In keeping with the Lilith of Hebrew mythology who scorned to lie beneath Adam, Rossetti’s Lilith boasts of her subjugation of both Adam and the Serpent: a total inversion of medieval and Early Modern Christian portrayals of the witch in thrall to Satan.

John Collier’s 1892 painting of *Lilith* takes Adam’s first wife still further from the demonic figure of Midrashic literature and closer to the Lilith who became a twentieth-century feminist icon.<sup>60</sup> Collier’s version of ‘the witch Lilith’ stands unselfconsciously naked, hair flowing loose, as the serpent twines itself around her body. Its head rests on her shoulder while her hands gently caress its powerful coils, and they seemingly move in time to the same rhythm. Woman and serpent are equals; their relationship is clearly sensual and implicitly sexual, but the expression on Lilith’s face suggests that it is also affectionate. The serpent is a symbol of wisdom and knowledge in many cultures, but in Genesis it was the source of polluting knowledge. In this painting Collier seems to suggest that Lilith the witch as the ‘woman who knows’ was in possession of knowledge which offered freedom rather than damnation. It is an image of Lilith as a metaphorical reflection of Collier’s anti-religious, humanistic beliefs, and an image which carries Adam’s witch-wife into the

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<sup>60</sup>See Rebecca Lesses, ‘Lilith’ Jewish Women’s Archive, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/lilith>. Accessed 1/2/12.

twentieth century as an icon of confident feminist defiance, reflecting the positive exuberant power of Eurynome, the pre-Hellenic First-Mother whose dance with the Serpent engendered all life in the Pelasgian creation myth.<sup>61</sup>

Yet, Rossetti probably invokes the quintessential Pre-Raphaelite Victorian muse/sorceress in his poem 'The Orchard Pit', written in 1869, where 'she' stands above the secret pit containing the remains of generations of men who have tasted the apples she offers.<sup>62</sup> The poet implies that all those who accept the gift of the Muse accept it willingly, in its entirety. He knows that while her hair, which like that of Lilith, crosses his lips and 'draws [his] burning breath', her song will also, like the song of the Siren, spread 'golden wings upon the air', and he is willing to pay the ultimate price for a taste of the poetic apple, 'Life's eyes are gleaming from her forehead fair, / And from her breasts the ravishing eyes of Death' (ll. 11-15). She links Hebrew to Greek mythology, melding the images of Eve, Lilith, Proserpine and the Sirens in a Pre-Raphaelite form, which portrays her as beautiful, inspirational, death-dealing, and as innocently amoral as every force of nature.

Although the term 'Pre-Raphaelite' was and is applied to a group of artists working in a variety of mediums during the second half of the nineteenth century, the first and second phases of the Brotherhood (founded in 1848) demonstrate two increasingly divergent visions. Andrew Wilton explains that while 'Millais and Hunt turned to scenes from modern life, or from the Bible...Rossetti became...committed to his own idiosyncratic vision of the medieval past' where he 'evoked a blurred almost dream-like world of the spirit'.<sup>63</sup> William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Frederick Sandys and John Waterhouse were among those who joined Rossetti in the dream-world of the second-phase of the PRB, finding inspiration not only in images of the middle-ages, but in the myths of ancient Greece and Rome. Eugene Lee-Hamilton's sparkling poetic gem, 'What the Sonnet Is' (1894), blends the sonnet's powerful distillation of words with the jewel-like intensity of Pre-Raphaelite painting. It begins, 'Fourteen small broidered berries on the hem/ Of Circe's mantle, each of magic gold' (ll. 1-2), then continues, 'Fourteen clear signs of omen in the gem/ With

<sup>61</sup> See Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (London: Cassell, 1981); 'Eurynome ... rose naked from Chaos' and danced until the wind became the great serpent Ophion which 'coiled around those divine limbs and was moved to couple with her', after which she 'assumed the form of a dove ... and in the due process of time, laid the Universal Egg', p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Rossetti, 'The Orchard Pit' [1869] in Negri (ed.) p. 40.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone (eds.), *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), p. 18.

which Medea's human fate foretold' (ll. 3-4), and ends with 'The deep dark emerald that Rossetti wrought/ For his own soul, to wear for evermore' (ll. 13-14).<sup>64</sup> Thereby the Pre-Raphaelite craftsman is irrevocably linked to the bewitching female whom his art placed beyond the lens of orthodox morality.

Even John Ruskin enjoyed a frisson of vicarious, if somewhat timid, enjoyment of the wicked woman; writing of Burne-Jones's painting of the medieval Sidonia von Bork, Ruskin stated 'Edward told me she was only a witch...I saw no more harm in it than his drawings of Medea and Circe, or any other of his pet witches and mine'.<sup>65</sup> The use of the term 'pet' contains connotations of a relationship between the artists and members of another species, existing together in an occasionally uneasy state of familiarity. Rossetti's collection of exotic pet animals caused consternation among his neighbours, but comparisons may also be made with the relationship between the Pre-Raphaelites and the small group of models who appear regularly in their paintings. Elizabeth Siddal, Jane (Burden) Morris, Maria Zambaco, Fanny Cornforth, Alexa Wilding and other so-called 'stunners' shared the looks which encapsulated the Pre-Raphaelite female ideal, but they also shared an inferior social status to the artists who raised them to a degree of celebrity, and often 'kept' or occasionally married, them.<sup>66</sup> Todd traces the affair between Burne-Jones and Maria Zambaco through his depictions of her, from tragic-eyed Psyche to serpent-haired Nimue.<sup>67</sup> Rossetti wrote to Ford Madox Brown in 1869 describing Burne-Jones' sudden attempt to escape to Rome 'leaving the Greek damsel beating up the quarters of all his friends for him and howling like Cassandra'.<sup>68</sup> The Burne-Jones marriage survived, but he continued to paint Maria for many years. The fear and fascination of the bewitching 'other' woman might be detected in Burne-Jones' paintings in 1860 of *Sidonia von Bork* and its companion piece *Clara von Bork*, inspired by Lady Wilde's translation of a Gothic novel, *Sidonia the Sorceress* (1849): the saintly Clara cradles a nest of doves in her hands, while the web embroidered on Sidonia's gown is 'indicative of her wiles'.<sup>69</sup> Clara was modelled in the painting by Georgiana, the newly married Mrs Edward

<sup>64</sup> Eugene Lee Hamilton, 'What the Sonnet Is' [1894] <http://www.sonnets.org/hamilton.htm>. Accessed 5/2/12.

<sup>65</sup> John Ruskin, cited in Wilton and Upstone, *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts*, p. 123.

<sup>66</sup> Siddal was a milliner, Wilding a dressmaker, Burden and Cornforth daughters of a groom and a blacksmith respectively, and Zambaco as a Greek with a failed marriage was also 'other'.

<sup>67</sup> Todd, *The Pre-Raphaelites at Home*, p. 101.

<sup>68</sup> Rossetti writing to Ford Maddox Brown in 1869, cited in Todd, *The Pre-Raphaelites at Home*, p. 102

<sup>69</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p. 110.

Burne-Jones, who remained a faithful loving wife and mother despite her husband's extra-marital interests, while Sidonia's face is that of Fanny Cornforth, who became Rossetti's mistress and later a 'professional prostitute', living in a house provided for her by Rossetti.<sup>70</sup>

However, if the 'witch' figure is the 'other woman' who inspires lust, as opposed to the loving and loved 'angel in the house', Christina Rossetti also identified a symbiotic relationship between the Pre-Raphaelite artist and the 'One face [which] looks out from all his canvases' in her poem 'In an Artist's Studio' (1856).<sup>71</sup> Christina presents the lovely queen, the 'nameless girl' (l. 6), the 'saint' or 'angel' as paradigms of perfection in the eye of the artist, with the model appearing 'Not as she is, but as she fills his dreams' (l. 14). Dante Gabriel Rossetti claimed that Elizabeth Siddal, his model who became his wife, was 'the image of his soul'.<sup>72</sup> The 'true kind eyes' which look back at the artist in Christina Rossetti's poem forgives his failings and reflects only hope, not sorrow or despair. The positive bias may be indicative of the imagery prevalent in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's studio in the 1850s, but the line 'He feeds upon her face by day and night' (l. 9), implies that Christina detects something deeper in the Pre-Raphaelite perception of the doppelganger of the soul. As the century matured, and the witch-sorceress became a familiar figure in their art, the poets' and painters' guilt, anger, fear, despair and defiance of convention seem to pass back and forth between the 'wicked woman' and her portrayer, through the membrane of paper or canvas. Yet, even Rossetti with his eccentricities and passions did not deliberately court a Byronic reputation; Robert Buchanan accused Rossetti of repeating 'morbid deviation from healthy forms of life' in his attack on 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' in 1871, but I argue that the Pre-Raphaelite artist obliquely begs indulgence for his sorceresses' amorality, not immorality, a product of nature not calculated deviance.<sup>73</sup> However, when Christina Rossetti emphasises the positive imagery of the artist's painting she also highlights (unconsciously) the difference between the painted and the written image of the Pre-Raphaelite witch. This is particularly obvious in the work

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<sup>70</sup> Todd, *The Pre-Raphaelites at Home*, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> 'In an Artist's Studio' [1856] (l.1) in Abrams (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 1476.

<sup>72</sup> Cited in Todd, *The Pre-Raphaelites at Home*, p. 37.

<sup>73</sup> The final paragraph of Robert Buchanan, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D.G. Rossetti' *Contemporary Review* Vol.1, October 1871, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/buchanan/flesh>. Accessed 1/2/12.

of her brother, who often produced a painting with an accompanying sonnet. His *Lady Lilith* could, as already demonstrated, be seen simply as the portrait of a bored Victorian beauty, were it not for the accompanying poem. The same ambiguity occurs in his treatment of Classical sorceresses such as the Siren.

### Classical Sorceresses

Despite Wilton's assertion that Rossetti's sirens of the 1860s expressed 'the inner world of the artist himself', his painting of a Siren in *A Sea Spell* (1877) shows little of the isolation and emotional turmoil that Rossetti was suffering at that time he painted her.<sup>74</sup> Despite its marine connotations the painting is not a study in blue or grey, but a welcoming coral and cream evocation of safe sun-kissed sands. Pink roses, uncultivated open-hearted blooms of innocent love, encircle the brow of the Siren, and twine around the lute towards which she leans absorbed in the music she creates. The convoluted folds of her diaphanous dress recall the ripples left on the warm beach by retreating waves, rather than the chill waves themselves. The sea-gull resting with wings half-lifted is the only reminder that the woman in the painting is a sea-nymph, but also emphasises the capacity of her music to charm all creatures. The comforting roundel created as the Siren curves towards her lute is even more beguiling than the circular web woven in *Lady Lilith*. The painting is a composition as ostensibly unthreatening as the music which lured Homer's sailors to their doom. The only signal of possible danger is the crimson apple hanging in the top left corner of the painting. In contrast the accompanying sonnet, 'A Sea Spell', alludes immediately to the dangerous sexual symbolism of the apple tree, and the lute hanging in its shadow.<sup>75</sup> The 'wild' notes the Siren 'weave[s]' (l. 2) into a spell are 'whispers' from the 'netherworld' (l. 6). She is one with her magic as she 'sinks into her spell' then 'soars into her song', which summons all who hear it, from 'creatures of the mid-most main' (ll. 9-11) to the mariner who comes to her rock to die. Yet, despite the sinister tone of the poem, which contrasts so markedly with the warmth of the painting, it is possible to detect again a distancing between the sorcery and the sorceress. The sea-creatures thronging to their deaths are the victims of self-delusion and fate, moving in

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<sup>74</sup> Wilton and Upstone (eds.) *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts*, p. 19.

<sup>75</sup> Rossetti, 'A Sea Spell' <http://www.poemhunters.com/poem/a-sea-spell/> Accessed 5/2/12.

‘furrowed self-clouds to the summoning rune’ (l. 12) while the Siren is, like the lute, an instrument conveying the music of a greater power.

Burne-Jones confessed that he liked two types of women, ‘the very good...and the exceedingly mischievous, the sirens ... Perfect imps they are’.<sup>76</sup> This statement has an incongruous ring if applied to tempestuous beauties such as Maria Zambaco, or even to the Siren of Rossetti’s poem. However, in Violet Fane’s poem ‘The Siren’ (1896), an impish defiance of social convention may be heard in the words of the Siren and in the authorial voice.<sup>77</sup> Fane’s Siren, unimpeded by veils of Pre-Raphaelite angst, chooses the path of greatest pleasure. Initially Fane describes the Siren’s coral-hued lips, pearly teeth, and jewel-bright curls, which ‘Half hide a breast that swells’ (l. 10), in terms that echo the gentle image painted by Rossetti in *A Sea Spell*. The Siren’s eyes are as calm as the deep sea beneath which ‘silent sailors sleep’ (l. 15), but a darker relationship with the amorality of the sea is revealed as the Siren pulls rings from the unresisting fingers of those dead sailors, and spends a ‘merry moon’ (l. 25) with a sailor who wakes, then sends him to permanent sleep when he breathes another woman’s name in his dreams. The ‘land-girls’ loving which culminates in sighing and weeping holds no charm for her, but she keeps mementos of her ex-lover: her harp is made of his breast-bone, and its strings are his hair. Unlike Rossetti’s Sirens whose hair and heart became powerless instruments for the music of savage nature, Fane’s Siren sends her song through the hair and bones of a disempowered man. Fane uses the ghoulish witchery of her classical sorceress in an impish re-balancing on behalf of the section of humanity reviled elsewhere for its origin in ‘a bent rib’.

The Siren is a bewitcher whose witchery, whether conscious or not, is sensuous and ultimately destructive. The Sybil in contrast carries the witch-mark of the wise-woman and the fortune-teller, albeit at the elevated level of prophet or soothsayer. Mary Robinson saw her in a gentle and positive incarnation as ‘Spring’, foretelling the resurrection of the human soul in a subtle juxtaposition with nature’s seasonal rebirth in ‘The Sibyl’ (1878), where ‘unawares the dullest find/ A new religion’ (ll. 11-15).<sup>78</sup> In contrast, Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves’ (1885) evokes the sinister Cumaean Sybil, who prophesied under the influence of volcanic

<sup>76</sup> Burne-Jones, quoted in Todd, *The Pre-Raphaelites at Home*, p. 101.

<sup>77</sup> Violet Fane, ‘The Siren’ [1896] in Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (eds.) *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 474.

<sup>78</sup> A. Mary F. Robinson, ‘The Sibyl’ [1878] in Leighton and Reynolds (eds.) *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 552.

vapours, and relentlessly burned the volumes foretelling Rome's future as the demanded payments remained unpaid.<sup>79</sup> Hopkins was a social outsider, not just a convert to Catholicism but a Jesuit, and an unconventional poet who wrote with syntax and rhythm which were, for his time, as cryptic, disjointed and idiosyncratic as anything produced by the Cumaean Sybil. Consequently, personal circumstances and poetic style dictated that his work would have little influence upon his contemporaries, although this does not negate the possibility that his bleak late poems might be seen as an indicator of the psychology of some men in a period characterised by sexual and religious anxiety. Despite being written in 1885, 'Spelt from Sybil's Leaves' was only published by his executor Robert Bridges in 1918, with Hopkins' other poetry. Its oracular subject, coupled with the imagery of conflict and disintegration into night, give a chilling predictive resonance to its publication at the end of the most destructive war then known to man. Its particular relevance to *this* study lies in its pagan tone. Unlike his other poetry where the Christian God can be found at the heart of every work, here Hopkins presents a female earth and an internal landscape both of which are being torn apart in an upheaval which could precipitate new birth, but only after an agonising night of unmaking. Evening 'strains' to become night, 'womb-of-all, / home-of-all, hearse-of-all' (ll. 3-4), in an interweaving of birth, life and death. As in Christian imagery of judgement, black and white thoughts are separated as two strands in this night-time of the soul, hanging unbound and grinding relentlessly against each other on the rack.

The despair of those who are pulled apart by external or internal conflict is evident in other examples of Hopkins' late works. The novelty in this specific poem is the accreditation of inspiration to an ancient female pagan deity, with allusions to the mythopoeic tradition of the Spinner who works the thread of life, and, in this case, unwinds it at death. Although Hopkins touches on the same idea briefly in the second line of '(Carrion Comfort)' (1885) where he refers to the untwisting of the 'last threads of man', it is in 'Spelt from the Sibyl's Leaves', where man's life is spun as a 'tale', and time's tomb, womb and home lie in the star-filled 'fire-featuring heaven'

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<sup>79</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Spelt from the Sibyl's Leaves' [1885] in Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom (eds.) *Victorian Poetry and Prose: The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (New York, London and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 684. Tarquin ii declined to buy nine volumes of 'Sibylline Leaves' from the Sibyl. She burned three of the volumes prophesying the future of Rome and offered him six volumes at the same price. When he refused again she burned three more. Eventually he paid the initial price for the remaining three volumes.



(l. 9).<sup>80</sup> The imagery echoes the cosmic fairy tale myths of George MacDonald and reveals glimpses of the thread connecting ageless myth, Victorian fairy tale, the poetic muse, fortune-teller, and the all-knowing Mother Goddess of modern witchcraft.

Swinburne also viewed the enchantment of elemental goddesses as the magical, female aspect of nature into which the masculine could be subsumed; an attitude which resonates with the perception of pre-historic mother-goddesses vouchsafed by some female practitioners of modern witchcraft. However, for Swinburne in particular, the Goddess was, as Mother and Lover, also the comforting face of death. When he wrote of her as Proserpine he portrayed her realm as a place of peaceful escape from ‘grievous pleasure and pain’, in contrast to the ancient Greeks who yearned for the daughter of Ceres to return each spring from her winter captivity as queen of Hades.<sup>81</sup> Unlike Rossetti’s Lilith/Siren figures who lure men to their deaths, Swinburne’s goddesses offer after-life sanctuary. The words ‘rest’ and ‘peace’ occur regularly in his inverted world where life is the shadow of death; a death unaccompanied by the deliberate or unconscious cruelty of Lilith or the Sirens. The ‘Great Sweet Mother’, the sea, in *The Triumph of Time* (1866) may be ‘fed with the lives of men’ (stanza 37. L .33), but Swinburne absolves her of destructive seduction by insisting that she has never fed on their hearts. The image of maternal divinity as all-encompassing is conveyed most completely in *The Triumph of Time*:

I will go back to the great sweet mother  
 Mother and lover of men, the sea.  
 I will go down to her, I and none other,  
 Close with her, kiss her, and mix her with me. (stanza 33. ll. 1-4)

However, the enthralling rhythm of lines such as these, coupled with the unease likely to be engendered in many contemporary readers by the intertwining of maternal and sexual love, is illustrated in George du Maurier’s assessment of Swinburne’s poetry as ‘of a power, beauty and originality unequalled’, although ‘the little beast will never I think be acknowledged for he has an utterly perverted moral sense’.<sup>82</sup> The image of Swinburne as an exotic creature from beyond the pale, allies him with the chthonic

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<sup>80</sup> Hopkins, ‘(Carrion Comfort)’ [1885] in Trilling and Bloom (eds.) *Victorian Poetry and Prose*, p. 685.

<sup>81</sup> Swinburne, ‘Hymn to Proserpine: After the Proclamation in Rome of the Christian Faith’ [1866] (l.10), in Negri (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelite Poetry*, p.108. See also ‘The Garden of Proserpine’ [1866] in Negri (ed.), p. 105.

<sup>82</sup> George du Maurier, quoted in Philip Henderson, *Swinburne: The Portrait of a Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 83.

allure of the classical goddesses about whom he wrote with such empathy; unlike Tennyson, of whom Swinburne said he ‘is not a Greek or a heathen: and I imagine does not want to be’, and who distanced himself from his unappealing bewitchers who combined the negative characteristics of immortals with those of flawed and pestilential mortal women.<sup>83</sup>

In contrast, when members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle produced images of specific sorceresses such as Circe, Medusa or Medea (rather than the generic Sirens or Sibyls) they managed to blend immortal glamour and threat with human vulnerability. For instance, in Burne-Jones’ painting, *The Wine of Circe* (1868), the laden table promises a welcome feast for Odysseus and his companions, with the warm domesticity of the scene enhanced by Circe’s glowing orange clothing and the golden sunflowers which reflect the warm tones of window-frame and drapery. But the stooping Circe is mirrored by two prowling panthers at her feet, suggesting a predatory impulse within the enchantress. The familiar androgynous features of Maria Zambaco are echoed by the outline and angle of the head of the panther which gazes up as the enchantress adds her potion to a jar of wine. The juxtaposition of Circe and the panther hints at controlled animal passion within the woman, but also emphasises the superiority of her animal nature over that revealed by the gluttony and drunkenness of her guests. Ruskin reiterated his indulgent view of Pre-Raphaelite witches when he defined the panthers as evidence of Circe’s benign influence over wild beasts, and argued that her transforming potions were mixed with wine, milk and corn, ‘the three great sustainers of life – it’s their own fault if these make swine of [men]’.<sup>84</sup>

John Waterhouse’s *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (1891) differs from Burne-Jones’ version in more than the conventional beauty of its central figure. The fallen leaves scattered about the floor, and the pillars reflected in the mirror, suggest that her home is an ancient temple and her island is little-visited. Unlike the warm domesticity and activity of Burne-Jones’ setting, this Circe sits immobile on her heavy raised throne, the arms of which are two carved panthers. A wild boar lies at her feet. Her arms are lifted as if in invocation and in her right hand she holds the cup. Yet her eyes look beyond Ulysses whose wary face is reflected in the mirror behind

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<sup>83</sup> Swinburne quoted in Henderson, *Swinburne: Portrait of a Poet*, p. 80.

<sup>84</sup> Ruskin, quoted in Wilton and Upstone (eds.) *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts*, p. 41.

her throne. She ‘offers’ the cup yet, despite the virtual transparency of her clothing, makes no attempt to seduce Ulysses and seems uninterested as to whether he accepts or refuses the wine. She is a conduit for the will of the gods. Christopher Wood cites this painting as a perfect example of Waterhouse’s innocent enchantresses who ‘lure and entrap their victims by their wistful beauty and mysterious sadness, as if they can’t help what they are doing, and rather regret it’.<sup>85</sup> She is the classical equivalent of Waterhouse’s interpretation of Keats’ ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ (1893) in which the lady seems a ‘faery’s child’ with as much or as little guile as a mortal adolescent girl.

Despite the title of Waterhouse’s other version of the enchantress, *Circe Invidiosa* (1892) only the intensity with which focuses on the poisoned liquid with which she intends to destroy her rival in love betrays any invidious intent on her part. Set against a background of dark convoluted rocks and the turquoise sea in which she stands, Circe gazes intently into the blue-green contents of the crystal bowl, her blue robe patterned with paler blue circles, merges with the dappled sea and the scales of the writhing sea-serpent just visible beneath her feet. Water spills from the bowl in a slender unbroken stream, connecting enchantress, ‘cup’, and treacherous ocean. Her hair is the colour of the rocks, and her robe mirrors the sea: she is more than the spirit of the island; she *is* the island, standing impassively in and above the surrounding water. However, compared with *Lady Lilith*, *A Sea Spell* or even *The Beguiling of Merlin*, Waterhouse’s enchantresses display a humanity which is absent in those painted by Rossetti or Burne-Jones.<sup>86</sup> The artist who, to quote Wood, ‘lived a blameless and quiet life in St. John’s Wood, happily married and not excessively tormented by nymphs or femmes fatales’, succeeded in turning the witch into a ‘soft sweet woman’, when those with more complicated lives had less success.<sup>87</sup>

The poet Augusta Webster also wrote about ‘Circe’ (1870) in ink coloured by her own experience.<sup>88</sup> Like Violet Fane and other women poets whose work is examined in this chapter, she engages with the mind of the witch, rather than emphasising her external appearance and speculating generally about her relative

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<sup>84</sup> Ruskin, quoted in Wilton and Upstone (eds.) *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts*, p. 41

<sup>85</sup> Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 144.

<sup>86</sup> Despite the noose of hair restraining his resisting body, it is difficult to believe that the knight in Waterhouse’s 1893 depiction of Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ is the victim of dark sorcery. The face looking longingly into his is of a ‘faery’s child’, not a cold-hearted vampire.

<sup>87</sup> Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, p. 142.

<sup>88</sup> Augusta Webster, ‘Circe’ [1870] in Leighton and Reynolds (eds.) *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 428.

wickedness or amorality, as most of the male poets do. Webster, whose Circe is a woman wearied by monotonous isolation, and disillusioned with the nature of men, was deeply concerned about women's exclusion from the franchise and from higher education. Her poetry and articles often dealt with the subject of women as commodities, whether in the marriage market or prostitution. While the myth of Circe could be read from the male perspective as a rite-of-passage wherein an individual's nature defines his fate as man or beast, Webster's feminist re-telling makes it a parable in which Circe must choose between a half-life as cosseted child-woman or a painful but stimulating adulthood. Yet, for Webster's Circe, such growth also necessitates interaction with a man who can respect her as an equal. Despite living like a 'lonely god on a charmed isle' (l. 60) she declares 'I am a woman, not a god' (l.65), and she yearns for the 'one true right man' (l. 190) who can drink as she does from the 'cup of Truth' (l. 172) and meet her gaze. She insists that the cup from which *she* drinks without harm is 'pure and crystal' (l. 169). The swine who creep and glower around her are not the victims of magical transformation, but 'false and ravenous and sensual brutes' (l.98) whose 'disguise [has] gone from them unawares'. (ll. 186-89). By placing the blame for the revelation of their animal natures firmly on the swine-men themselves Webster absolves Circe of wickedness, but 'the most ruthlessly materialistic of all Victorian women poets' as Angela Leighton calls her, converted magical power into a transformative capability in the human mind, rather than a product of the cauldron.<sup>89</sup>

Webster's realignment of the Circe myth in order to give voice to a woman made 'other' by men who fear or despise her, pre-figures twentieth-century American feminist's reclamation of the name 'witch' in what they saw as a battle to abolish a patriarchal society; just as Hélène Cixous reclaimed the figure of the Gorgon in her critique of phallogocentrism, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975).<sup>90</sup> Medusa, with her petrifying gaze, seems the most inhuman of the Classical witches, yet Elisabeth Glitter notes that 'the stylized phallic female' whose image is 'explored with relentless misogyny' by European Symbolists is treated with far greater subtlety and ambiguity by Victorian poets and painters.<sup>91</sup> Glitter contends that 'the Medusa was not a single, universal type: she was a complex, ambiguous figure whose significance

<sup>89</sup> Leighton and Reynolds (eds.), *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 419.

<sup>90</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*: Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), p. 196.

<sup>91</sup> Elisabeth G. Glitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination' *PMLA*, Vol.99: No.5 (October, 1984), p. 951.

shifted with the perceptions of each Perseus who approached her'.<sup>92</sup> I have already argued that such customised imagery is a characteristic of most Victorian witch-figures. Frederick Sandys for instance does not envisage his witches as 'soft' or 'sweet'. His image of *Medusa* (1875), which Marsh describes as 'a fearsome free-floating face', actually gives such an impression of weight that she must surely be the Gorgon after she has seen her own reflection in Perseus' shield and been petrified herself.<sup>93</sup> The serpents writhing from her hair define her as the Gorgon, but they are light and pale in comparison with the heavy brows and full lips, while the terrifying, or terrified, staring eyes dominate the painting. Sandys was a married man whose mistress, a gipsy woman named Keomi, modelled for many of his works including his haunted *Medea* (1868). Another mistress bore him nine children during a life which would seem to have been rather less 'blameless and quiet' than that of Waterhouse. The ambiguity between fearsomeness and fearfulness captured in the final look of Sandys' decapitated Gorgon might be seen as a mirror of the uneasy relationship between some male Pre-Raphaelites and the sorceresses who return their gaze.

Swinburne could return the Gorgon's gaze without flinching because she could excite his emotions without turning him to stone. She might inflict pain, but, as Glitter deduces, for Swinburne the idea of erotic pain inflicted by the burning, strangling or stinging hair of 'cruel and powerful women' was a pleasurable experience which he often re-visited in his poetry, as is evident in his excitement as the 'bitter' lips of Dolores are 'softened and redden[ed]' by the 'cold foul foam' of her snakes in 'Hesperia' (1896), (ll. 64-66).<sup>94</sup> Equally, he was unlikely to be repelled by the phallic symbolism and sexual ambiguity of serpentine tresses thrusting forth from the female body. However, Swinburne's description of the Michelangelo sculpture of a serpent-woman which he saw in Florence demonstrates a degree of circumspection: he writes of the 'innocent' serpentine bracelets and rings which, as they touch her flesh become 'infected with deadly and malignant meaning'; but he does not specify whether malignancy is generated by the physical interaction between Medusa and the serpents, or by the perception of those who view that interaction. However, Swinburne places her beyond human parameters: she is 'beautiful...beyond desire and cruel beyond words; fairer than heaven and more terrible than hell'.<sup>95</sup> Yet, she is also 'pale with

<sup>92</sup> Glitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair', p. 951.

<sup>93</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p. 118.

<sup>94</sup> Glitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair', p. 952.

<sup>95</sup> Swinburne, quoted in Henderson, *Swinburne: Portrait of a Poet*, p. 81.

pride and weary with wrong-doing; a silent anger against God and man burns, white and repressed, through her clear features'.<sup>96</sup> But Swinburne, whose poet-soul is aroused by the fierce phallic beauty of the serpent-woman does not condemn or pity the Florentine Medusa, or speculate upon whether the anger which feeds her 'wrong-doing' is justified by the wrong-doings of gods or men, or is born of her own malignancy.

In contrast, William Morris's Medusa in 'The Doom of King Acrisius' (1868) is clearly a wronged immortal; wronged by Neptune who seduced her, and unjustly cursed by Minerva for being ruined within the vicinity of the goddess's temple, as a Victorian woman might be ostracised by a society which looked more leniently on her male abuser.<sup>97</sup> Morris's Medusa is no serpent-woman but one whose body is infested with serpents, as is the dead land upon which she lives. Her hair is golden, although, as Glitter explains, in the ambivalent imagery of Victorian culture golden hair might represent either the aureole of an angel or the snare of a demon.<sup>98</sup> Morris' Medusa, who is repelled by the serpents writhing among her golden locks, is clearly aligned with the angels. Equally, his Perseus is not a monster-destroying hero or a tool of the gods' vengeance, but a man whose compassionate blow answers Medusa's plea for an end to her torment. Even more emphatically than Morris' Guinevere, his Medusa is defined as the scapegoat.

While Swinburne's Medusa is the erotic scarlet witch, and Morris sees her as a victim, Eugene Lee-Hamilton's interpretation of her story, 'The New Medusa,(1882)', cloaks a psychological drama with a web of dark classical imagery, thereby creating an exploration of the damning of a woman which is nearly as sophisticated as Meredith's *Modern Love*.<sup>99</sup> Lee-Hamilton's vilified 'Medusa' is the victim of a 'Perseus' whose narration betrays a fragile mental state which transforms his bride into a sight capable of 'turned flesh and blood to stone' (l. 336). The degeneration of love into fear and loathing is related through a distorted and fragmented monologue in which the woman is the subject of constant re-visioning by the narrator. His

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> William Morris, 'The Doom of King Acrisius' *The Earthly Paradise* (March-August) [1868], pp. 259-261 <http://www.sacredtexts.co/neu/morris/ep1/ep109>. Accessed 5/2/11.

<sup>98</sup> Glitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair', p. 936.

<sup>99</sup> Eugene Lee-Hamilton, 'The New Medusa: A.D.1620' [1882], J. Collin and R.V. Rundle, *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory* (Hertfordshire: Broadview Press, 1999), p. 1058. Line references will be cited in the text.

admiration of her leopard-like grace and beauty, her insightful understanding of his moods, her 'wild and weird' (l. 111) singing, and her skills in medicine are all transposed into reasons for fear on his part. The recurrent nightmare in which her hair becomes snakes encircling his hands and throat, culminates in his attack upon the woman whose death-throes are likened to those of a snake, as she 'coils' in a 'heap' (l. 364) around his sword; a fearsome episode which is followed by the narrator's admission of his 'awful doubt' that such images might be 'a mere figment of the brain' (l. 265-69). Both Meredith and Lee-Hamilton use temporal and/or geographical displacement in the setting of their 'new' or 'modern' reassessments of the Medusa myth, both of which expose the unreliable perception of male narrators who, like the medieval witch-hunters (of the *Malleus Maleficarum*) or Keats' philosopher (in *Lamia*), see the Serpent(s) rather than the woman.<sup>100</sup> Timeless persecution of woman whose 'otherness' inspires hope, awe and fear is thereby transposed from the communal macrocosm to the domestic microcosm, through the medium of Old Testament imagery or Classical myth.

The phantom of the victim as a personal Medusa also haunts the dreams of the murderer who begs for absolution in Rossetti's 'A Last Confession' (1849). This 'Perseus' charts his protracted love, which at first is paternal, then fraternal, then amorous, and is marked at each point by her laughter, until finally a harsher laugh excites his murderous jealousy. Now, in sleep he hears 'the blood between her fingers hiss; / So that I sat up in my bed and screamed/ Once and again ... she laughed.'<sup>101</sup> When Cixous wrote 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in 1975 she urged women to express themselves as women, to articulate their incredible 'stream of phantasms' without denigrating themselves as monsters.<sup>102</sup> She warned her female readers to 'stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men)' and to look directly at the Medusa to see 'she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing'.<sup>103</sup> Her feminist inversion of Classical myth casts men in the seductive role of Sirens who sing the song of phallogentrism, while she argues that women should assume the persona of the most phallic, physically horrifying, and silent sorceress, and thereby celebrate their

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<sup>100</sup> Meredith opens his work with the image of a medieval tomb on which are carved the figures of a knight and his lady which, like the bodies lying beneath them, do not embrace. Lee-Hamilton evokes a maritime Aegean setting for his poem which is subtitle 'A.D. 1620'.

<sup>101</sup> Rossetti, 'A Last Confession' [1849] (l.437-9) <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-last-confession-2>. Accessed 5/2/12.

<sup>102</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 197.

<sup>103</sup> Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 201.

difference from the male ‘Sirens’ who demonised that difference. Most Victorian poets can be absolved from demonising the Medusa in their re-telling of the fable. In ancient Greek myth Perseus destroyed the Gorgon by reflecting her petrifying image back to her; in most Victorian poetic retellings Medusa is a victim destroyed by the distorted image created in the minds of men.

Medusa, unlike her two Gorgon sisters, is mortal, despite her monstrous appearance and capabilities. In contrast Medea is a woman rendered monstrous by infanticide. Augusta Webster, who took her readers into the mind of Circe, did the same with ‘Medea in Athens’ (1879), using the monologue to follow the train of thought initiated when Medea envisages Jason dying, shipwrecked, friendless and alone. In her mind she feels his remembrance of her beauty, and his bitter regret at discarding her fascinating witchery for the ‘yellow curls / and milk-white softness’ of her rival.<sup>104</sup> She imagines his sorrow at the loss of the sons who would have supported him in old age and honoured his name after death, and she ‘hears’ her name on his lips as he dies. Yet it is unclear whether these thoughts and words are true visions, or just the wishful imaginings of a sad and bitter woman who vacillates between indifference and sorrow at Jason’s death, regret for her actions and anger at his destruction of her life. In an inversion of popular serpent imagery she depicts Jason as a ‘smooth adder’ whose ‘fanged kisses’ turned her ‘natural blood / to venom’ (ll. 200-203). She accuses him of perverting her wholesome white witchcraft and binding her to the black arts with ‘dreadful marriage oaths’ (l. 220), and precipitating the murder of their sons who, she dreads, will flee from her shade in the next life (ll. 207-8). Rational and insightful, Webster avoided direct reference to the magic employed by Medea in the search for the Golden Fleece and instead focused on the emotional turmoil of a woman who committed acts of homicidal madness, when hate subsumed love and the black witch overwhelmed the white.

In Frederick Sandys’ painting, *Medea* (1868) the eyes of the sorceress dominate the composition, as they do with his Medusa, but the eyes of his Medea are even more disturbing in their human vulnerability. They seem focused on a terrible stultifying pain outside the present reality of her surroundings. Marsh comments upon the fact that the composition is ‘filled with details of witchcraft’, yet such ‘details’ as henbane

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<sup>104</sup> Augusta Webster, ‘Medea in Athens’ [1879] <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/medea-in-athens>. Accessed 5/2/12, ll. 84-85. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.



berries, copulating toads, magic potions and scarlet cords are all eclipsed by the figure which Swinburne described as ‘Pale as from poison, with the blood drawn back from her very lips, agonised in face and limbs’.<sup>105</sup> This is the face of a woman suddenly realising the enormity of the infanticidal climax to a life-journey of death-stained love and hate. It is also the face which came unbidden to my mind when I read the poem ‘The Other Side of a Mirror’ by Mary Elizabeth Coleridge (discussed in the following section) which addresses the internal torment of a poetess who contemplates stifling her own poetic progeny. Medea, in her representation by Webster and Sandys is the woman who sees herself as an evil witch, not simply one who is perceived as demonic by others. Her dark inner-witchery is echoed by Mary Coleridge and Rosamund Marriott Watson as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter.

However, Swinburne’s words, written to accompany Burne-Jones’ painting of Circe, encapsulate the dual image of the prototype Classical Sorceress presented in this section. He writes of golden wine to which Circe adds the black drops of her potion, and asks, ‘Doth Helios here with Hecate combine’ (l. 5).<sup>106</sup> The vibrant Victorian visual images of classical witches belong primarily to the realm of the Sun God, but the destructive power of the Goddess of midnight witchcraft emerges more readily in the poetry of the period, where the ‘inhuman’ blood within the ‘soft sweet’ woman inspires masculine fear of the seductive female who may bring out the beast in a man, or lure him to destruction. The Pre-Raphaelite painters used their ‘stunners’ to manifest immediate images of coquetry, mischief, secrecy or sorrow, but examples of memento-mori in these works are confined to beautiful and subtle examples such as white roses. Yet the ‘stunner’ was also representing the poets’ ‘other’, the Muse who demanded the ultimate payment in exchange for the ultimate gift, and it was the poet whose words revealed both the light and the dark layers of the immortal muse. For consumers of Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry the Classical sorceress was not the wicked witch or fairy godmother, or the social victim of the novel; she was beautiful, exotic, mysterious and powerful. She was the scarlet witch, coloured by blood and sexual allure, while she was also the green witch, as bloody-clawed and as innocent of malice as any other creature of nature. For the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters who

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<sup>105</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p. 118, and Swinburne quoted in Wilton and Upstone, *The Age of Burne-Jones, Rossetti and Watts*, p. 44.

<sup>106</sup> Swinburne, “For ‘The Wine of Circe’ By Edward Burne-Jones’ [1869] (l. 5), [http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/for-the-wine-of-circle\[sic\]-by-edward-burne-jones/](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/for-the-wine-of-circle[sic]-by-edward-burne-jones/). Accessed 5/2/12.

conjured this image the Classical sorceress was a hypnotic, justified, amalgam of nature and divinity.

### **Crones and Faeries of the Northern Mists**

From the late eighteenth century onwards another area of mythology was also being explored and recorded by the folklore enthusiasts of Britain and Ireland. It belonged to an ethereal realm which, when invoked by poets from Keats to Yeats, was coloured with a subtler palette of threatening or alluring greys and greens, lit by the glow of moonlight or the precious glint of northern sunlight, and occasionally splashed with shocking crimson. Unlike the gods of Olympus who looked down on mankind from on high, the Celtic immortals (the Old Ones, the Good Folk, the Sidh, the Faery) existed in a parallel place beyond a permeable membrane through which young women, children, poets or musicians might be snatched or enticed away to the Otherworld, while mortal men might take faery brides, or faery changelings be left in the cradles of this world.<sup>107</sup> The attributes of witchery might be applied to god-like women such as Thomas the Rhymer's bewitching Queen of Elphame and the aristocratic women of the Irish Sidhe, as well as to the village wise-woman whose 'faery blood' allowed her to see and communicate with the 'Others': but the 'witch' might equally be a suspected shape-changer, or the crone who healed, sold love spells, or looked with an 'evil' eye upon her neighbour's cattle. As demonstrated in Chapter One, the words 'goddess', 'fairy' or 'witch' are characterised by their interchangeability when applied to the uncanny women of oral tales, fairy stories, scholarly folklore collections, or re-elevated national mythology. Twentieth-century Wiccans accepted an integration of these terms, as did the nineteenth-century poets who found fellowship with the magical female. Conversely, the superstition-ridden moribund agrarian landscape, being eagerly and lovingly preserved and reenergised in the later nineteenth century, and the metaphorical Otherworld lit by the Celtic Twilight or reflected in the myths of alien lands, became a refuge for those who did not fit comfortably into the contemporary world, while the uncanny woman of the

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<sup>107</sup> Diane Purkiss, in *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (London: Penguin 2000), called Yeats' preference for the 'Keatsian spelling 'faery' ... a harbinger of the Romantic fairy', p. 297. One suspects that the use of this spelling by Irish folklorists and by current practitioners of what is called Faery Wicca is intended to give a quasi-historical validity to the Sidh-type immortals and differentiate them from the popular anodyne image of fairies as gauzy diminutive creatures.

Otherworld became a spiritual repository for those who also felt themselves to be 'other'.

Rosamund Marriott Watson was one of these troubled souls. Her successful literary career was blighted by emotionally painful relationships with three men, which resulted in two divorces and consequent separation from three of her four children. Leighton suggests that the poet's first husband George Armytage disapproved of her 'literary and social success', precipitating her flight to the arms of painter Arthur Graham Tomson (in 1886), and her subsequent divorce (in 1887) from Armytage who gained custody of their two daughters.<sup>108</sup> Her poem 'The Ballad of the Bird-Bride' (1889) uses the shape-changer motif, common to the folklore of many societies, to address the sorrow of a free-spirited woman trapped unhappily in marriage. The animal-shape 'other' of her heroine is a grey gull who, like other mythical animal-women, is only truly content in her natural element; so, even as she leaves the air and lands on an ice floe, she 'cried as her heart were broke'.<sup>109</sup> The duality of the bride's nature is displayed by the contented smiles she bestows on her Eskimo husband and the baby at her breast in their 'warm snow house' (l. 21), when contrasted with the wildness of her eyes as shrill winds blow. In similar tales the bride is held captive until she finds the discarded animal skin hidden by her husband. This version has more in common with faery-bride tales where the bride promises to remain with a man until he strikes her, however slight the contact. The Bird-Bride's marriage rests on her husband's vow never to hurt another gull, but in a time of great hunger he kills four of her sisters. The dreadful betrayal is signalled by the image of a red sun hanging on 'the sky's dull breast' above the snow which was suddenly 'wet and red' (ll. 51-52), against the purity of white and grey with which the rest of the poem is coloured. The poet uses the myth to ameliorate her own story, as the Bird-Bride covers her children in her plumage and flies away with them. The children are, she implies, the offspring of a mystical coupling between the bird-woman and the elements, 'Babes of mine, of the wild wind's kin' (l. 66). The husband's role is negated; he is the betrayer, and the pain and loss is his.

There are three children in the poem and the poet had in fact given birth to Graham Tomson's son in 1887, so she was the mother of three (two of whom were

<sup>108</sup> Leighton and Reynolds (eds.), *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 581.

<sup>109</sup> 'Graham R. Tomson' (her pseudonym), 'The Ballad of the Bird-Bride' [1889], in Leighton and Reynold (eds.) *Victorian Women Poets*, l. 13. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

lost to her) two years before it was published. Once again she become pregnant, this time by a young writer named H.B. Marriott Watson, was divorced by her second husband, and lost custody of her third child. The volume entitled *The Bird-Bride* (1889) was published under the pseudonym 'Graham R. Tomson', while, after 1895, she wrote as Rosamund Marriott Watson, adopting the name of her third partner. Like her Bird-Bride she displays a curious dichotomy of self, within which the poet-woman dons the domestic 'skin' provided by her partner, to the extent of writing under a name which places her within the shelter or confinement of his 'element', whilst simultaneously contending with her wild other-nature.

However, the 'otherness' encapsulated by 'the sweet, strange' faery Bird-Bride became the ferocious 'otherness' of a malevolent red-eyed crone in 'The Ballad of the Were-Wolf' (1890). Like the Bird-Bride, the Were-Wolf also hurts her husband by depriving him of his children, but she is a totally destructive force who, it is implied, has devoured both children. Once again this ballad is a variant of the many tales of witches who assume the shape of animals, from hares to wolves, and are discovered when a wound they have received in their animal state is then discovered on the woman. In this version the husband returns to his wife, jubilant that in a life-or-death struggle he has cut the paw from the 'great grey wolf' who has stolen their children, and he vows to 'hae her heart' if they meet again.<sup>110</sup> Intimations of the wife's supernatural powers and savage animal nature emerge immediately as imagery of chill rain and shrill wind outside conflict with the domesticity of the blazing fire watched by the woman as she awaits her husband's home-coming. The Scottish dialect in which the poem is written uses the word 'louping' to describe the flame: the word means leaping, but is uncomfortably redolent of 'lupine' or wolf-like. The juxtaposition of shadowy night, the woman's white face, and the red flame reflected as an animalistic 'red licht' (l. 8) in the eye she turns on her husband, combine to create an atmosphere of extreme Gothic tension. As the triumphant husband throws the severed paw onto his wife's lap it becomes a blood-red hand; she rises before him and slowly and deliberately strips the bandaging cloths, first white, then red, from her arm to reveal the horror of a bloody, handless stump. The white cloth of bereaved motherhood is peeled away to disclose both the cannibal soul and the hidden pain of

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<sup>110</sup> Marriot Watson, 'The Were-Wolf' [1890] in Leighton and Reynolds (eds.), *Victorian Women Poets*, l. 15. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

the infanticide. She is the Gothic Medea, stripped of classical glamour, and literally 'red in tooth and claw'.

In the classical southern tradition the animal-souled femme-fatale was a rare and exotic beast whose victims belonged to the elite class of noble hero, lover or poet, and whose deadly sorcery was softened under the Pre-Raphaelite eye. The northern animal-woman was the product of a tradition wherein any small community might contain those suspected of passing among them unnoticed as hare or cat, or prowling abroad at night in wolf-form, devouring livestock or even humankind. She was a creature of half-worlds and half-light emblematic of a potentially destructive passion which might lurk within any woman. In Marriott Watson's 'The Were-Wolf' this suggestion is accentuated by the use of dialect, which allows the arcane appellation 'gude wife' to be applied to the wife, both establishing her ordinariness and letting the poet indulge in a darkly ironic use of the word 'good'. The cathartic expurgation of guilt provided by this work is coupled with a defiance of social approbation, as the old woman rises to her feet 'but a span' (l. 31) from her husband, her eyes red with anger or hatred, and the livid blood flowing from her arm. The man stands 'cauld as the deid' (l. 38), while in the half-light the wolf-woman's figure draws demonic vitality from the fire's leaping flame. If 'The Bird Bride' might grant the wish of a Victorian woman to retain artistic and sexual freedom *and* her children, and to punish the patriarchy which denied her that dream, 'The Were-Wolf' provided a nightmare vehicle for self-loathing on the part of a woman tormented by the knowledge that her society's bias towards the rights of the husband and father meant that she could not feed her own desires and also keep her children.

The themes of repented marriage and devilish passion were also addressed through witch-imagery, but from the male perspective, by two fringe members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, William Allingham and William Bell Scott. Allingham, the 'Hampstead Irishman' as Rossetti called him, is possibly best known now for his poem 'The Fairies' (1850), which combines the comic with the bizarrely sinister in a style pre-emptive of the early twentieth-century artwork of Arthur Rackham. However, his poem 'The Witch-Bride' (also written in 1850) succinctly relates the chilling tale of the seduction, disillusion, and despair experienced by a man who falls into the clutches of a predatory woman. Their engagement is short: 'A fair witch crept

to a young man's side, / And he kiss'd her and took her for his bride'.<sup>111</sup> Then a 'Shape' enters their bridal room, shedding a light which shows his bride to be something 'more frightful than mouth can say' (l. 6). The bridegroom flees, followed by the Shape over a daylight landscape 'crowned' and 'sainted', beautified and beatified, by sunlight, but the 'foul Witch-Bride' (l. 12) clings 'mocking and thwarting' to his side (l. 11). A rationalist reading of the text might detect the disillusionment of a husband whose perfect bride turned into an adulteress, a financial or emotional vampire, or even a sharp-tongued harridan.

The words 'crept' and 'clung', used respectively at the start and close of this poem, attach a serpentine or even leech-like quality to the witch-bride, reminiscent of Swinburne's definition of Tennyson's Vivien as 'such a sordid creature as plucks men passing by the sleeve', and thereby conflating the images of witch, seductress and harlot.<sup>112</sup> However, Scotsman William Bell Scott's jaunty work 'The Witch's Ballad' (1875) revels in the havoc wrought by four unambiguously promiscuous 'poultry sellers' among the staid citizens of a prosperous market town. The ducks and cockerels they sell will vanish like fairy gold as the sun sets, but Bell Scott wryly implies that the girls whose 'hair with marygolds was bound' also offered more salacious fare (ll. 18-20).<sup>113</sup> Their dancing draws the entire town into a wild frenzy, leaving the population naked, shamed, and furious enough to tear the witches 'limb from dainty limb' (l.62). Only a magic line drawn 'widdershin' with 'bleeding thumb' (ll. 64-65) holds the mob at bay. But the witches carry desirable partners, including the priest, the lawyer and the provost's son, over the rooftops in a whirlwind of sexual excitement. Although the witch-narrator's foolishness in publicly greeting her satanic master results in the loss of his favour and her power, she is defiant, 'I am as proud as he is fierce' (l. 115). A combination of female desires and satanic devices will, she insists, ensure that the witches can hold their men and become ladies of the town. Spoken through the woman's voice this poem presents the witches more credibly as 'perfect imps' than Burne-Jones managed to do with his paintings. It is written with

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<sup>111</sup> William Allingham, 'The Witch Bride' [1850] in Christopher Ricks (ed.) *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ll.1-2. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

<sup>112</sup> Cited in Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 180.

<sup>113</sup> William Bell Scott, 'The Witch's Ballad' in Ricks (ed.) *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*. ll. 1-2. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

an airy humour, which, with its ‘darling imps’ (l. 95) dancing on the chimney tops, floats above serious debate about the dangers of ‘lusty’ (l. 10) female power.

The witches of this ballad are the daughters of those ‘comic grotesques’ whose appearance in art and literature coincided, as Porter notes, with the disappearance of ‘real witches’ from the ‘daily fears of the educated’ during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and their reappearance as femmes fatales and vamps.<sup>114</sup> However, during the nineteenth century the witch also became a protean symbol of fear and hope for women who were both creative and educated, and nowhere is this more evident than in the intriguing half-submerged intimacy of the work of Rosamund Marriott Watson and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge.

Mary Coleridge could have traded upon the name of ‘Coleridge’, to promote or validate her own poetry, but she did not. Whether through diffidence or through fear of comparison with her famous great-great uncle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, most of her poetry remained unpublished until after her death in 1907.<sup>115</sup> She had, she claimed, no fairy godmother, only ‘a fairy great-great uncle’ whose legacy (like many of the fairy god-parent gifts identified earlier in my thesis) seems closer to a curse than a blessing, being ‘perhaps the reason that I am condemned to wander restlessly around the Gates of Fairyland, although I have never yet passed them’.<sup>116</sup> However, Karen Devlin deduces that Coleridge’s exile was often self-imposed, as evidenced perhaps by her use of the alienated witch-figure as a vehicle for poetic flight to the border-lands between Victorian Britain and Fairyland.<sup>117</sup> Gilbert and Gubar argue that ‘The novelist....works in a third person form even when constructing a first person narrative. But the poet, even when writing in the third person, says “I”’.<sup>118</sup> This argument might certainly be applied to both Marriot Watson and to Mary Coleridge. Biographical works on Coleridge focus on two primary areas: her sense of alienation from the male poetic establishment, and what Leighton refers to as the ‘lesbian subtext’ of her poetry.<sup>119</sup> Leighton suggests that works like ‘The Other Side of a Mirror’, ‘A Daydream’, ‘The Witch’, ‘The Witches’ Wood’ and ‘The White

<sup>114</sup> Porter, ‘Culture and the Supernatural’ in Ankarloo and Clark (eds.), *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Vol. 5: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, pp. 246-247.

<sup>115</sup> Mary E. Coleridge, *Poems* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1908).

<sup>116</sup> Mary Elizabeth Coleridge quoted in Karen Devlin ‘An Introduction to the Literary Works of Mary Coleridge’, *The Victorian Web* <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/Coleridge/intro.html>, Accessed 5/2/12.

<sup>117</sup> Devlin, ‘An Introduction to the Literary Works of Mary Coleridge’.

<sup>118</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 548.

<sup>119</sup> Leighton and Reynolds (eds.), *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 612.

Women’, ‘all conjure up an alternative world of women, riddled with risky, secret knowledge, sexual power and hidden, white-hot passion’.<sup>120</sup> However, Coleridge’s wildly diverse witches also allow us to engage with the kaleidoscopic moods of this very private woman, and catch fleeting glimpses of the mind of Anados, the pathless one, as she chose to call herself.<sup>121</sup>

In ‘The Other Side of a Mirror’ the narrator, witch-like, conjures up a vision of a poet’s ‘other self’, lurking beneath the superficial ‘aspects glad and gay’; those faces which please society without disturbing the mirror’s surface tranquillity.<sup>122</sup> In this poem about images both the female mask donned for the benefit of polite society and the fearsome face of uncontrolled ‘bare’ (l. 2) female poetics, could be seen as male constructs. The image conjured by Coleridge is eerily reflective of Sandys’ painting of Medea, with its ‘vision of a woman, wild / With more than womanly despair’ (ll. 5-6), made ‘mad because its hope was gone’ (l. 121). Yet the soundless lips, likened to a hideous wound, bleeding secretly and silently, are those of a repressed poet trapped behind the glass, unable to express her sorrow or her dread (ll. 18-19). The poet-soul is caught in volcanic crystal, whose generation in ‘the leaping fire / Of jealousy and fierce revenge’ (ll. 22-23), is still visible in the ‘lurid’ eyes staring madly from the mirror. Then, in the final stanza, the ‘viewer’ changes her tone. Rather than urging the madwoman in the mirror to shatter her prison she pleads to the ‘Shade of a shadow in the glass’ to ‘set the crystal surface free’ (ll. 25-26). The poet-self manifests herself in witch-form in a ‘distracted hour’, when the woman who wishes to deny her is forced to whisper in awful recognition, ‘I am she’ (ll. 29-30). The poem ricochets erratically between the frenzied frustration of a poet whose words are silenced, and a woman weary of the demands of the muse which she is unable to answer. As she begs the shadow in the crystal to pass she is also asking for the bitter cup of poetry to pass. Virginia Woolf defined the woman identified as a witch or wise-woman as ‘a suppressed poet ... crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to’; but while not every accused witch was a frustrated poet, not every Victorian woman poet ‘dashed her brains out on the moor’, as a broader view of Coleridge’s poetry demonstrates.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> In 1896 Coleridge published a volume of poetry under the pseudonym ‘Anados’, the name of the questing hero of George MacDonald’s adult fairy tale *Phantastes*.

<sup>122</sup> Mary E. Coleridge, ‘The Other Side of a Mirror’ in Leighton and Reynolds (eds.) *Victorian Women Poets*, 1.3. All subsequent examples of Mary Coleridge’s poetry cited in this chapter are taken from *Victorian Women Poets*.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 544.



Initially her poem 'The Witches' Wood' indicates a wearied acceptance of the death of female poetic expression, as it evokes a landscape beyond the mirror, when passion is spent, and even the trees have assumed the 'gray nun's veil' of celibacy and sterility. No birds nest or sing within the haunted 'hollow trunk and bough possessed' (l. 16), while, instead of the living music of green leaves, the dead branches chatter and gossip inanely and incessantly, 'Like men and women that have sinned,/ Whose thousand evil tongues are one' (ll. 7-8). The wood is a mirror of materialistic society, with tree roots 'like the hands of men / Grown hard and brown with clutching gold' (ll. 9-10) and their foliage like the superficial and transient beauty of 'women's tresses when / The hair is withered, thin, and old' (ll. 11-12). The conjunction of these two images portrays men as predators and women as victims. Yet, deep within this wood lies a pool, not dark and sinister, but ghostly white. Its luminosity comes not from the sun, which has fled in fear, but from the reflection of the moon, trapped within its waters. Coleridge once wrote that she had 'not the faintest doubt that the moon was once a woman ... Somebody treated her very badly, depend upon it'.<sup>124</sup> In 'The Witches' Wood', the essence of the woman poet has not 'passed' after all, but lies contained, not dead, beneath another glassy surface, deep within a desiccated society and a barren landscape.

In contrast, the earth is described as 'fruitful' (l. 5) by the first voice in Coleridge's poem 'The Witch', yet the Witch herself wanders a 'great while over the snow' (l. 1), chilled to the core by cutting winds, as though even the weather makes her an outcast. This work is another 'poem as mirror'. It is perceived by many critics as a reflection of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel*: as such it views the long Romantic work through a three-stanza telescopic lens, yet, as with all mirrors, the viewer sees right as left and left as right. So the witch-figure pleads for sanctuary from the cold, while her original in *Christabel* braves the winter chill in a silken robe, bare armed and unshod. The new Geraldine further emphasises her vulnerability by claiming that she is 'a little maiden still' (l. 12) who is neither 'tall nor strong' (l. 2), yet her original is described a number of times as a 'lofty lady'. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his poem in the third person, while Mary uses the 'I' for both female voices in her work. Gilbert and Gubar's argument regarding the poetic 'I' might resonate in the voice of the Witch as the wanderer excluded from literary society, and

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Leighton and Reynolds (eds.), *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 612.

equally in the 'lesbian subtext' of the new *Christabel*'s orgasmic cry, 'She came – she came', followed by the climactic image of the 'quivering flame' (l.17). Although this poem is ambiguous and opaque there is a sense of sorrow at love lost in the image of the flame which, 'Sank and died in the fire' (l.18) never to be lit on her hearth again, while the disgust and self-loathing demonstrated by the heroine of *Christabel* is absent.

These three poems address alienation, sorrow, sacrifice, fear of self and annihilation of self. However, as Leighton notes, Coleridge's speakers 'may grieve for wasted or lost love, but they do not die'.<sup>125</sup> Nor was her poet-self constrained from writing poetry by silvered glass or 'ironed' door. If 'The Witch' is read as a defiant incursion into, and inversion of, 'Christabel', it is possible to see 'Wilderspin', also written in 1897, as an allegorical representation of Mary's attempts to free herself from what Devlin calls 'the historical and literary influences that twist and tangle her in their strands'.<sup>126</sup> The poet of 'Wilderspin' rides over the borders of fairyland and strides into the 'little red house by the river' to break the web spun by the spider-like weaver (l. 1). The river, beginning as a thin brook and growing to a torrent, might offer a metaphor for female creativity, freed by the severing of the 'twisted spell'

(l. 40) woven by patriarchal tradition, but Coleridge's 'little red house', hiding a secret jewel-filled chamber, and throbbing with the relentless beat of the loom, could also be the heart of poetry. However, instead of drinking the cup of cider (the distillation of the fruit of knowledge), taking up the shuttle and assuming the role of Poet, the rider destroys the web, breaking the threads which link the past with the present, and consequently, breaking her/his heart as well. The poem encapsulates the dilemma of the artist overshadowed by ancestral greatness, although Mary was not totally awed by her great-great uncle Samuel, as her inversion of 'Christabel' demonstrates. A mischievous inversion is also detectable in the intensification of the man-witch's diabolic imagery in 'Wilderspin' by the narrator's fervent prayer to 'Mary and the Saints' to deliver his/her soul from hell (ll. 4-5 and 35-36), when one remembers that Samuel Taylor Coleridge signalled the evil witchery of Geraldine by appealing to 'Jesu, Maria' to 'shield [Christabel] well'.<sup>127</sup> Evidently Mary Coleridge was capable of weaving a twisted, and possibly mischievous 'spell'.

<sup>125</sup> Leighton and Reynolds (eds.), *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 612.

<sup>126</sup> Devlin, 'An Introduction to the Literary Works of Mary Coleridge', *The Victorian Web*.

<sup>127</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Christabel' [1797-1801] ll. 54 and 582.

Like her witch-Christabel, Coleridge also eagerly embraced the positive image of the magical female. Her exquisite little poem 'The Lady of Trees' captures a moment in time when the poet sees a joyful circuitry between elements of nature, which are defined by their femaleness and lit by magical silvery moonlight. The moon and the tree are both 'she' and the lake is maternal as mother to the tree. The birch has long been known in tree-lore as the 'Lady of Trees' whose ivory bark glows silver-white at night, while the fragile delicacy of her pendulous branches and fluttering leaves gives her an enchanting elegance. The poem is a study in stillness and movement where the tree is its own mirror-image, caught and held by the power of the moon. The subsequent glamour and sensuality are a direct consequence of the gleeful reciprocity between the lake and the moon; 'Therefore dull leaves glitter', 'Therefore' the 'moony' water embraces the tree trunk (ll. 5-7). In this eroticisation of nature without the need for a masculine element, the tree dies into the water, and is reborn into moonlight in a microcosm of a dream-like nature-worshipping macrocosm where each element, water, moon and birch tree, is a symbol of female magic. Its imagery and message are as relevant to modern paganism as to the deism of the German and English Romantics, and the pantheistic Christianity of Victorian writers such as George MacDonald.

Despite her complaint about being excluded from fairyland by the male literary establishment, Coleridge is as adept as MacDonald's Anodos at crossing the borders of 'Otherworlds', as demonstrated by her poem 'A Day-dream', which explores many of the themes 'flitted around' in 'The Lady of Trees', such as stasis and motion, female power, and the life-affirming quality of a momentary vision when it returns to the 'inward eye'.<sup>128</sup> In a grey urban Victorian Sunday, where the voice of the city is a muffled dirge and smoke clouds vision as if 'the edge of life was gone' (l. 3), the narrator slides into a soporific reverie, envisaging a vibrant, sunlit classical landscape occupied by dead men and living women. Three kings lie, in mummified splendour within their pyramids, while two women sit equally silent and motionless. Yet the women hold ancient universal sound and living elemental stillness within their eyes. Those of the aged sibyl are filled with Time's song, while the maiden's eyes contain tranquillity as deep as the sea. They are not subservient priestesses guarding the tombs of long-dead kings. Women hold an ancient verity, the 'mother of all joys' (l. 40), in

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<sup>128</sup> William Wordsworth, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' [1804] (l. 21) in Abrams (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 187.

this matriarchal world which, implicitly, preceded and supersedes a society where men ruled, died, and were laid in tombs which, like their occupants, hide no mysteries. The transmuted power of unspoken knowledge and healing silence is the 'other side' of a mirror in which a woman poet could see herself as a mad-eyed monster, trapped behind sound-deadening crystal.

If the women of 'A Day-dream' demonstrate the superiority of female spiritual power, the warrior women about whom Coleridge wrote in 'The White Women' are the physical obverse of the trapped, silent women of her more anguished poetry, giving voice to 'the war-cry of the storm' as they fight their enemies (ll. 14-15). Like the occult land of the Day-dream women, the dwelling place of the White Women is one of primordial antiquity where 'In the shade / Primeval of the forest oaks they hide' (ll. 31-32), but they are hidden because they *choose* to be, not because they are buried by society. They are 'lovely' (l. 1) but, as the barbed second line emphasises, they are also deadly, 'Mortal to man'. Their beauty and stature are greater than that of men; while tigers and eagles quail in fear at the sight of them and mortal men die if they look upon them (ll. 34-35). These wild Amazonians might provide a secret fantasy model for a Victorian woman poet, burning with white-hot impotent anger at male-dominated society. The White Women, removed from the norms of that society, also provide a vehicle for an expression of Sapphic fantasy, as 'they never sinned' but unbound their hair, flung away their girdles, and sated their desire (ll. 21-24); consequently, 'maidens to the maidens then were born' (l. 26). In Coleridge's Otherworld men are not simply exiled, as in the Greek myth of the Amazons, but they are not even necessary for procreation. The idea of parthenogenic reproduction, which was played with lightly in 'The Lady of Trees', is now transferred to supernatural women whose daughters are the offspring of 'the maidens and the breeze' (l. 27). Thereby Coleridge, like Marriott Watson, emphasises the relationship between the supernatural women and the elements. Both women, each struggling to free her poet-self from the constraints of Victorian society, created role-models in witch-women who are as one with the elements, particularly the wild, unconstrained, unpredictable symbol of supernatural life-force, the wind. It was a harmonisation of feminised super-nature and Nature herself which also sang through the early poetry of William Butler Yeats.

In 'The Hosting of the Sidhe', included in Yeats' *The Wind Among The Reeds* (1899), the goddess Niamh calls to those who gaze upon her band of wild riders,

'Away, come away:/ Empty your heart of its mortal dream./ The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round' (ll. 4-6). In his notes to this poem Yeats explains that 'the gods of ancient Ireland...the people of the Faery Hills...still ride the country as of old. Sidhe is also Gaelic for wind, and certainly the Sidhe have much to do with the wind'.<sup>129</sup> He wrote two years earlier that the old god's reign 'has never ceased, but only waned in power a little, for the Shee still pass in every wind'.<sup>130</sup> Yeats saw in the re-emergence of the old gods of Ireland, a metaphorical revival of the land. This idea would eventually expand into direct expressions of nationalism in Yeats' work as the new century progressed, but the primary focus of my thesis is the nineteenth century, at the close of which his poetry was glowing with magical light rather than blazing with political fervour.

But Yeats' magic was brewed from a heady concoction of pagan and Christian myth. In 1897 he argued that the simple peasantry of Ireland, rather than the 'blind educated', could comfortably accommodate both Christianity and old paganism in a living spirituality, wherein those who saw 'the red light and white light of God smite themselves into the bread and wine at Mass', also saw 'the exultant hidden multitudes among the winds of May'.<sup>131</sup> Hutton notes that Yeats believed 'folk customs represented surviving portions of an ancient religion, offering an alternative system of spirituality to set beside the Christian'.<sup>132</sup> The sage Dathi in the poem 'The Blessed' (1899) advises the hero Cumhal to 'Praise God and God's Mother' (l. 17) whilst following the 'windy way' (l. 6); a vision of the 'blessed souls' who follow a path undefined by religious dogma is vouchsafed 'like a drifting smoke' (l. 13) to Cumhal, through the eyes of the mystic. In Yeats' eyes the most spiritually perceptive were found among women, mystic poets, and the peasantry whose lives still followed the seasonal cycle. The mystics included William Blake, Yeats himself and his friend and inspiration George Russell (AE), whose 'pleasure' according to Yeats was 'to wander about upon the hills, talking to half-mad and visionary peasants'.<sup>133</sup> Yeats' sister Susan saw those 'visionary peasants' among the Irish servants of their childhood, who 'knew so intimately angels, saints, banshees, and fairies', while servants in the Yeats'

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<sup>129</sup> Yeats, notes to 'The Hosting of the Sidhe', *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 524. All subsequent examples of Yeats' poetry cited in this chapter are taken from the Macmillan collection.

<sup>130</sup> Yeats, quoted in Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p.156. Yeats uses the phonetic version of 'Sidh' in this example.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p. 156.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*.

London home knew only ‘a great deal too much of murders and suicides’.<sup>134</sup> Yeats contended that ‘women come more easily than men to that wisdom which ancient peoples, and all wild peoples even now, think the only wisdom’.<sup>135</sup> This statement carries a Hardy-esque lamentation for a fading rural existence where mankind connected directly with nature and super-nature; it echoes contemporary belief that women are more attuned to spirituality than are men (as addressed in Chapter Four of my thesis); and it differentiates between knowledge and wisdom, concluding (like George MacDonald with his characterisations of Makemnoit and Watho) that wisdom is the superior quality.

The ‘wisdom’ Yeats alluded to recognised magic/divinity in every aspect of life, and manifested itself not only in his poetry and prose but in his exploration of alternative forms of religious expression. At a time when mainstream Protestant Christianity had discarded much of its magic and girded itself in rationality, Yeats and many others followed the multifarious ‘windy way’, exploring exotic belief systems and creating new forms of religion. This area will be addressed in the next chapter of my thesis, but the connection between Yeats and ‘new religions’ is mentioned now because of his influence within the Celtic Revival which played, and still does play, an important part in neo-paganism, including new witchcraft. Yeats appears in this chapter, not because he created a body of literature which alludes directly to hags, sibyls or sirens, but because the misty magical Celtic landscape created by Yeats, Russell and William Sharp (among others), is the spiritual homeland of modern Celtic paganism, providing a crucial plank on the literary bridge between seventeenth-century maleficium and twentieth-century Wicca. Yeats established a standpoint from which those seeking a national or a religious resurrection could look backwards to a romanticised past and forward to a re-fashioned resurrection. He also provided a template for the self-image of the modern witch as one deeply and intuitively connected to nature, with the capacity to generate a link between the human race and the Spirits of Earth, and between mankind and the re-born Old Gods.

He did not, of course, invent the land of Faery or the land of the Sidhe, but learnt his faery lore from detailed study of Irish folk lore collected by enthusiasts like

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<sup>133</sup>W. B. Yeats, ‘A Visionary’ *The Celtic Twilight* [1893] (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1981), p. 40.

<sup>134</sup>Cited in Robert Fitzroy Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life I The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 20.

<sup>135</sup>Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, pp. 132-134. The drawing which fills page 135 of this 1981 edition depicts a woman as ‘holy fool’.

Crofton Croker and Standish O'Grady. The British and Irish may have been tardier than the Germans or French in taking the collection of vanishing folk-lore seriously, but by the late nineteenth century it had once more become a legitimate subject for academic study, and as such was pursued eagerly by John Rhys, David Nutt, Andrew Lang and many others. However, Yeats reclaimed folk-lore and myth from academia, breathed life into it and, to a great degree, lived within its bounds himself.

As noted earlier, interest in and adoption and adaptation of all things Celtic was already fashionable during Sir Walter Scott's lifetime, but it is interesting to find Yeats using the word 'Twilight' to define its fin-de-siècle variant. Twilight is generally thought of as the time between day and night, rather than the period between night and day. In Yeats' work the twilight world may be a place where 'the hapless faun' (Pan?) lies buried 'under the sleeping ground', but it may also be a hopefully crepuscular time when the weary heart may laugh again.<sup>136</sup> An even deeper dichotomy appears in Yeats' treatment of the Faery world. In 'The Stolen Child' (1889) it a refuge from a world 'full of weeping' (l. 12), but it is also a place where the 'solemn-eyed' (l. 43) stolen child will no longer hear the comforting sounds of home; so at its darkest it is a place without sorrow or joy. There is also a suggestion that entry into this world may require a literal escape from life. Folklorist Katherine Briggs points out that in many tales where the worlds of mortal and immortal meet 'fairies, witches and the dead come close together'.<sup>137</sup> The mother in Yeats' 'The Unappeasable Host' (1899) holds her wailing child close, thinking of faery children who need not fear the lottery of post-death reward or punishment, and is tempted to be swept along with the 'unappeasable host' who ride the wind, fearlessly unimpeded by mortal morality. 'The Hosting of the Sidhe' (1899) is even more explicit in its death-imagery: the Host are themselves images of the dying, with their pale cheeks, heaving breasts, gleaming eyes and parted lips. The poem opens with the host riding over the 'grave of Clooth-na-Bare' (l. 2), whom Yeats suggests may be Maeve 'the Mother of the Gods herself', whose beautiful, fearsome, inspirational and destructive nature mirrors the land of Faery, a place of beauty and of death, of dread and desire.<sup>138</sup> Maeve, like La Belle Dame Sans Merci and the Queen of Elphame, keeps the gate

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<sup>136</sup> Yeats, 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd' (ll. 47-48) and 'Into the Twilight' (ll. 1-3), *The Collected Poems*, p. 8 and p. 65.

<sup>137</sup> Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 63.

which separates death and life, but she also becomes the Celtic muse as well as being the immortal muse of the Celtic poet.

A variety of mortal muses are also responsible for the diversity of tone and image in Yeats' 'fitful Danaan rhymes', beginning with the story-telling 'henwives and queer old men' of his childhood.<sup>139</sup> Yeats' tale-telling mortal fairy godmothers include his own mother and Mary Battle, his uncle's housekeeper, who spun him tales of an enchanted, relatively unthreatening world where faery and mortal lived side-by-side. Then his cousin Lucy Middleton, whom Yeats described as 'the only witch in the family', joined him in investigations of 'local fairy lore' and youthful 'psychic experiments'; but throughout his adult life he was, in the words of his biographer Foster, constantly 'idealizing unattainable and uninterested women'.<sup>140</sup> The first of these women, his cousin Laura Armstrong, was described by Foster as 'pretty, impetuous, unstable and already spoken for'.<sup>141</sup> Yeats wrote of her 'wild dash of half insane genius', and continued, 'Laura is to me always a pleasant memory. She woke me from the metallic sleep of science and set me writing my first play. Do not mistake me she is only as a myth and a symbol'; a phrase which (minus the qualifying word 'only') might be applied more appropriately to Yeats' great love, Maud Gonne.<sup>142</sup>

The early plays inspired by the muse Laura invariably include a 'witch' character.<sup>143</sup> When Gonne told him that she favoured the enchantress in *The Island of Statues* (1885), and hated the mild Nachina, she thereby, as Foster notes, 'cast herself precisely as the *fatale*, capricious beauty of whom the poet dreamt'.<sup>144</sup> Yeats labelled the day he first met Gonne, as the point when 'the troubling of my life began'.<sup>145</sup> For Yeats, the striking, strong, single minded, passionate, nationalist personified Queen Maeve. In the role of the martyred Countess Cathleen, the eponymous heroine of Yeats' play (1892) who sold her soul to the devil to save her tenant, she became the human manifestation of the goddess. This image is consolidated in 'Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland' (1904) where the flame of Cathleen's eyes and her inner quiet are stronger than the storm, with a purity which cannot be extinguished by the pool

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<sup>138</sup> Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 81 and footnote to p. 98.

<sup>139</sup> 'To Some I Have Talked with by the Fire' [1893] (l. 1), and Yeats quoted in Kathleen Raine's introduction to *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 17.

<sup>140</sup> R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life I The Apprentice Mage*, p. 125 and p. 34.

<sup>141</sup> Foster, *W.B. Yeats*, p. 34.

<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Foster, *W.B. Yeats*, p. 34.

<sup>143</sup> Including *The Shadowy Waters*, *Mosada*, *The Island of Statues* and *Time and the Witch Vivien*.

<sup>144</sup> Foster, *W.B. Yeats*, p. 34.

<sup>145</sup> Foster, *W.B. Yeats*, p. 87.



overflowing on Clooth-na-Bare, or outshone by a candle before the Holy Rood. But the elusive Gonne might also be found in the 'glimmering girl' (l. 13), bewitching, enticing and ever beyond reach of Aengus, the god of love and poetry, in 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' (1899).

If Gonne, the woman who rejected Yeats' numerous proposals, was the multi-faceted Maiden Goddess of his land and his life, Lady Gregory was the Mother, providing informed knowledge of folklore, encouragement for his work, financial backing for such projects as the Abbey Theatre, and even shelter from life's storms. Yet, despite filling the fairy godmother role in Yeats' adult, public life, Lady Gregory too has connections with the bewitching, unattainable muse: 'The Song of Wandering Aengus', with its delicious vibrant imagery and its evocation of hopeful yearning for the fulfilment of a roused but unsated desire, was composed at Lady Gregory's home at Coole, a place Yeats described to John Masefield as 'the most beautiful place in the world'.<sup>146</sup> However, Foster notes Yeats' confession, in a 'cancelled passage of his memoirs', that the summer he composed 'Wandering Aengus' was the most miserable of his life, when he was 'tortured by sexual desires and disappointed love'.<sup>147</sup>

There is similar ambivalence in Yeats' reference to 'those children of Lilith we call faeries'; while he counters the Judeo/Christian diminution and demonisation of the old pagan deities, he also equates the Sidhe with the proto-type seductive female.<sup>148</sup> The traditional relationship between a poet and his immortal muse is initiated by his seduction and requires the sacrifice of mortal life in exchange for a brief period of genius and fame. For Yeats it seems that ultimate union between the bewitcher and her inspired poet-lover may be postponed indefinitely, even to beyond the grave. This is implied in the ten lines of 'He Hears the Cry of the Sedge' (1899), where, following a Keatsian opening, the wanderer by a 'desolate lake' (l.2) predicts that his beloved will not lie by him in sleep until the end of time. In 'He Thinks of His Past Greatness When a Part of the Constellations of Heaven' (1899) the poet who consumes the food of the otherworld learns much but must postpone love until his mortal life ends. Similarly, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' implies that even the god of poetry must search for many years before achieving eternal union with *his* muse. It seems that for Yeats the pursuit, not the final consummation, is the creative

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<sup>146</sup> Quoted in Foster, *W.B. Yeats*, p. 182.

<sup>147</sup> Foster, *W.B. Yeats*, p. 182.

<sup>148</sup> Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 43.

act. Purkiss muses upon the fact that during the period in which Yeats was ‘endlessly spurned’ by Gonne he wrote a number of poems about mortal men who loved and lost ‘exquisite fairies’: she contends that Yeats eventually concluded that ‘fairies had fair faces but were chillingly malevolent underneath, like lamiae’, and she wonders if he saw Maud as a lamia, and whether ‘Yeats’s folkloric researches [were] skewed by his wish to find in them stories which would let him cope with her constant rejections?’<sup>149</sup>

Such speculation must, as Purkiss acknowledges, remain conjecture, but the fascination for Yeats of dangerously alluring and unattainable powerful females is still evident in ‘Lines Written in Dejection’ (1919), in which the fifty-year-old married poet bemoaned the loss of all the fearfully exciting ‘dark leopards of the moon’, the ‘wild witches, those most noble ladies’ who, with ‘their broom-sticks and their / angry tears’ (ll. 3-6) had disappeared from his life. Using the long-familiar mythical gendering of sun and moon he complains that the ‘heroic mother moon’ has vanished, leaving only the ‘embittered’, ‘timid’ sun (ll. 8-11). This is bleak imagery when compared with ‘Wandering Aengus’ with its promise that the magical girl and her pursuer will eventually walk hand-in-hand, plucking the ‘silver apples of the moon’ and the ‘golden apples of the sun’ (ll. 23-24). However, if Yeats the man lost his witch-women because he was too timid, too foolish, or too wise to grasp them before they moved beyond reach, Yeats the poet used the wand of Amhairghin to play his part in the creation of a new Celtic culture, and, coincidentally in the creation of a new image of the witch.<sup>150</sup> For a twentieth-century witch the positive Genius Loci of Yeats’ Celtic ‘other world’ is a glimmering female spirit who wears apple blossom in her hair, promising the revelation of secret knowledge to those whose sensibilities are attuned to hers. Yeats did speak for the aged and outcast victim in ‘The Ballad of Moll Magee’ (1889); and he compared the condemnatory superstition of the (Protestant) Scots with the sanguine attitude of the Irish towards witches, ‘You have burnt all the witches. In Ireland we have left them alone’.<sup>151</sup> However, even when he wrote of those he called ‘witches’ rather than ‘faeries’ they are sometimes

<sup>149</sup> Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things*, pp. 196-7.

<sup>150</sup> See the creation spell ‘The Song of Amhairghin’ ‘I am a wave of the ocean ... I am a dewdrop in the sun ...’ sung by the the magician/ poet of the Sons of Mil in their mythical invasion of Ireland. Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (Middlesex:Hamlyn, 1970), p. 64.

<sup>151</sup> Yeats, ‘A Remonstrance With Scotsmen For Having Soured The Disposition Of Their Ghosts and Fairies’ *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 125.

indistinguishable from the immortals in their magical aura, their propensity for enchantment, and their occult knowledge:

I know of the leafy paths that the witches take  
 Who come with their crowns of pearl and their spindles  
 of wool,  
 And their secret smile, out of the depths of the lake.<sup>152</sup>

Yeats' personal and literary life is haunted by the image of the witching-woman. Through her various manifestations he sought to restore dignity to a subjugated land and to a people often seen as either villains or clowns by their neighbours, and to find an accommodation between life and death through a new Celtic spirituality.

Yeats was writing when, as the century closed, some sought a new spirituality while others threw themselves over the edge of Aestheticism into Decadence. Marsh finds that the image of femininity in late-nineteenth-and early twentieth-century visual art was characterised by 'Cold, cruel, even sadistic, sorcery'.<sup>153</sup> The artwork of Aubrey Beardsley represents a moment (in Britain) when Decadence removed human frailty from images of the witch-woman and left her simply 'cold and cruel'. There is no suggestion that, as with the Pre-Raphaelite paintings, there might be some mitigating circumstance in the sorceresses' stories. During his short career (he died of consumption at the age of twenty-five) Beardsley was prolific in his production of sensuous, sinuous, often erotic images, usually ink work, black on white. The figures in his illustrations for *The Savoy* magazine, the 1892 edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897) or Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, combine eroticism with a strange inhuman androgyny. Fraser Harrison describes Beardsley's illustrations for *Lysistrata* as unequivocally pornographic.<sup>154</sup> Oscar Wilde's description of Beardsley himself as a 'monstrous orchid' not 'flesh and blood', with 'a face like a silver hatchet adorned by grass green hair' comes to mind when one looks at his creations.<sup>155</sup> The vegetation from which Nimue peers, and in which Merlin is enfolded, in Beardsley's illustration for the *Morte d'Arthur*, is sinister and predatory. The wide frame depicts tree-bark whorls, writhing tendrils, forbidding spear-like growths, faintly flickering candles and token serpent, seeming to hold witch

<sup>152</sup> 'The Withering of the Boughs', ll. 9-11.

<sup>153</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, p. 120.

<sup>154</sup> Fraser Harrison (ed.) *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly: An Anthology: April 1894-1896* (Np: Sedgwick and Jackson, 1974) also notes that Beardsley converted to Catholicism shortly before his death and pleaded unsuccessfully with his publisher to destroy 'all obscene drawings', p. 15.

<sup>155</sup> Wilde, quoted in Harrison, *The Yellow Book: An Anthology*, p. 7.

and sage in a never-ending tale of vanity and betrayal. The picture within this border is startlingly bisected by the jagged blank surface of the rock beneath which the magician's cave-tomb awaits his furtive figure. The rock mirrors the form and angle of Nimue's white cloak, outstretched arm and controlling hand. Similarly in Beardsley's depiction of Morgan le Fay the viewer's eye is drawn not so much to her expressionless face, or even to the exposed breast, but to the dress which divides into multiple, writhing serpentine tails, seeming to lift her off the ground. Although her legs are clearly visible, this is a portrayal of Morgan as the lamia unmasking herself, with a slender dagger in hand, ready to inflict the fatal sting. The illustration of Salome (one of many created by Beardsley) is arguably an even more exquisite piece of composition than that of 'Nimue' and 'Morgan', demonstrating a justification for the continued popularity of Beardsley's work, despite its original controversial reception. It also defines the 'witch' as cold, cruel, sadistic and predatory. Salome, the bewitcher, floats above the water, hair writhing in Medusa-like strands, as she holds the dripping head of John the Baptist and stares directly into his dead eyes. One lily (the death flower) stands triumphantly out of the water, mirroring Salome, while the other droops its dying bud, mirroring the Baptist whose blood falls and snakes around it.

In all three pieces there is no suggestion of subtle enchantment or seduction; no attempt to humanise characters or to introduce a speculative dialogue about the nature of woman as witch in the way that the majority of nineteenth-century poets and painters seem to have done. Everything is literally and metaphorically black and white and two dimensional. Bewitching women as seen through Beardsley's eyes are wicked. Christina Rossetti accused the Pre-Raphaelites of using their sorceresses as mirrors of themselves: perhaps Beardsley, who according to Harrison 'positively revelled' in the notoriety of being dubbed Weirdsley Daubery, Awfully Weirdly, and Daubaway Weirdsley, enjoyed doing the same.<sup>156</sup> Beardsley's witches emerge from the dark extreme of the Art Nouveau spectrum, but they are still 'organic'. They grow from, mirror, and manifest the natural elements which surround them. But unlike the comforting fronds curling from the pens, brushes or chisels of the Arts and Crafts movement, these inky-black witches seem to be engendered by the spores of sinister vegetation or from life-forms lurking beneath unfathomable waters. For those whose signature flower was the green carnation it seems that the bewitching woman was a

hybrid, combining the monotone of black seventeenth-century maleficium with the visual and psychological contortions of late nineteenth-century angst.

Yeats argued that it was ‘by no means strange that the age of “realism” should also be the harvest-time of folk-lore’, coinciding with the period in which ‘our rooms, our short lives, our soon-ended passions and emotions, put us out of conceit with sooty and finite reality’.<sup>157</sup> While some escaped bleak realism through a fin-de-siècle plunge into cynicism or decadence, others sought hope in a re-formed spirituality, where even the uneasy relationship between the Land of the Dead and the Land of the Living had a positive bias when conflated with the face of benign Christianity, or with the new witchcraft of Spiritualism or Theosophy. The poets and artists examined in this chapter looked at fear and desire through the image of the witch, but some also allowed her to cross the boundaries of conventional ideology and morality, enhancing her positive traditional role as emissary between the living and the dead, and repository of occult knowledge.

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<sup>156</sup> Harrison, *The Yellow Book*, p. 11.

<sup>157</sup> Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, p. 155.

## Chapter Four New Witchcraft

In *The Trial of Woman* (1992) Diana Basham notes the regular occurrence of references to nineteenth-century occultism as ‘the new witchcraft’, and she quotes an 1889 dismissal of trance phenomena as ‘only the old witchcraft, restored, renovated, and adapted’.<sup>1</sup> The ‘old witchcraft’ was still practised widely in modified form by herbalists like *Mary Barton’s* Alice, by pedlars who sold love-charms and gypsies who told fortunes, and by those who sought protection or relief from supposed maleficium.. It also persisted amongst the superstitious who, like those represented in Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* and ‘The Withered Arm’, were unconvinced by the official change in the status of witchcraft. Yet, at the same time, manifestations of ‘new witchcraft’ were taking the form of quasi-sciences such as mesmerism, or new religions such as Theosophy, or Spiritualism which conflated quasi-science and religion. Science and technology increasingly allowed mankind to perform feats which hitherto would not have been achievable outside fairy tales, thereby encouraging many to envisage a future where the human mind itself could be the instrument of power. Conversely the loss of religious certainty and the decline of belief in magic had left an emotional void, which was particularly painful for the bereaved. So some seized eagerly upon the possibility of direct communion with the next life and with those they hoped continued to exist there, while others found through exploration of new belief systems a vivified spirituality and a longed-for re-mystification of what had become stale and disenchanting. A nineteenth-century longing for the dissolution of the boundaries between science and magic is illustrated by Basham when she compares nineteenth-century occultism with nineteenth-century technology, noting that for some the planchette could be equated with the telegraph, or the ‘rapping’ out of spirit messages with the ‘tapping of Morse’s code’.<sup>2</sup> Leslie Mitchell demonstrates a specific example in the author and politician Edward Bulwer-Lytton, whom he describes as a ‘hypochondriac’ for whom ‘new treatments were always of interest, particularly if they could be related to what he would call the allied

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, pp. 118 and 111.

sciences of mesmerism, galvanism and clairvoyance'.<sup>3</sup> In 1891 Charles Godfrey Leland (the author of *Aradia: The Gospel of Witches*) even made the hyperbolic claim that 'Darwin, Huxley, Tyndale, Galton, Joule, Lockyer, and Edison' worked with 'theosophists, spiritualists, Folklorists, and many more ... towards a grand solution of the Unknown'.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter explores the Victorian fascination with the occult as reflected in the lives and writing of men and women such as Harriet Martineau, George Du Maurier, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, Benjamin Disraeli, and Bulwer-Lytton. It also examines the ways in which 'new witchcraft' evolved as, like the sorceress in Burne-Jones' painting *The Beguiling of Merlin*, the 'witch' took control of occult power. The passive female tool of the mesmerist/magician was superseded by the 'star medium' described in Alex Owen's fascinating work *The Darkened Room* (1989), and by the spiritualist who regulated rather than simply channelling occult power.<sup>5</sup> Women such as Chandos Leigh Hunt, Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant seized the mantle of healer, feminist activist and priestess which was subsequently assumed by those who chose to call themselves witches in the following century. This final chapter will show that from a heady mixture of quasi-science, magic and religion there emerged a 'new witchcraft' which played a significant evolutionary role in the formation of twentieth-century witch imagery.

### **The Mesmerist's Coven**

Franz Anton Mesmer, the German father of mesmerism, introduced his theory of Animal Magnetism in 1779 as a cure for physical and mental ailments. Porter claims that during a period of European Enlightenment the new esoteric sciences 'needed new magi'.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that the arcane theatricality of such 'magi' compromised the scientific validity of new sciences. After being declared a 'public menace' by the medical faculty of Vienna, Mesmer took a house in Paris to which all 'social orders'

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<sup>3</sup> Leslie Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2003), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Godfrey Leland, *Gypsy Sorcery and Fortune Telling* (London: T. Fisher and Unwin, 1891), p. x.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Porter, in Ankarloo and Clark (eds.) *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe; Vol.5: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, p. 251.

were reputedly drawn as by ‘an unknown power’, until he was again driven out by official concern about the danger his methods posed to vulnerable female patients.<sup>7</sup>

After being discredited in pre-revolutionary France, mesmerism re-emerged in 1830s Britain, promoted by respected medical men such as Charles Dickens’ friend and physician John Elliotson, the Professor of Medicine at University College London. However, the medical journal *The Lancet* attacked the idea of animal magnetism so effectively that Elliotson, despite his reputation as a campaigner against corrupt medical practice, had to resign his university place in 1839. Fred Kaplan, in his book on *Dickens and Mesmerism* (1975) implies that Elliotson’s reputation may have suffered as a result of his association with his patients Elizabeth and Jane O’Keys, whose mesmerisation was used by him at public displays.<sup>8</sup> These young women claimed to be in contact during trance with ‘guides’ who gave them predictive abilities, and subsequently Elizabeth was taken around male hospital wards at night, where she would foretell the death of a patient by shuddering at the sight of him.<sup>9</sup> The various improprieties involved in the introduction of a young girl into a ward full of men, where she then demonstrated witch-like powers as a harbinger of the Angel of Death, can have done little to enhance Elliotson’s standing with conservative medical authorities. On the contrary, it probably linked him with the unsavoury elements of Mesmer’s reputation.

The taint of the ‘magician’ was a difficult one to remove. In 1843, the year in which the now marginalised Elliotson founded a journal, *The Zoist*, to discuss both mesmerism and its allied ‘science’ phrenology, another physician, James Braid, published his work on hypnotism, which he sought to separate from morally suspect ‘animal magnetism’. Despite the emphasis on the relationship between the witch and the devil in medieval and Early Modern witch accusations, Satan’s appearances seem relatively rare in Victorian culture, but the male mesmerist suspected not only of threatening the virtue of his female subjects but also of drawing-out her witch-like abilities, filled that role in life and fiction. Owen quotes from the *Lancet* of 1838 to demonstrate the fear of mesmerism as a danger not just to the vulnerable female, but to Victorian family life

Mesmerism, according to its advocates, acts most intensely on nervous and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 252.

<sup>8</sup> Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 34-5.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism*, pp. 43 and 50.



impressionable females. What father of a family, then, would admit even the shadow of a mesmeriser within his threshold? .... If the volition of an ill-intentioned person be sufficient to prostrate his victim at his feet, should we not shun such pretenders more than lepers...? <sup>10</sup>

The image of the mesmerist as a moral leper, the potential carrier of a psychological infection to which even the most rational woman was rendered particularly susceptible by virtue of her weaker gender, was understood by Harriet Martineau. Despite her ultimate conviction that mesmerism restored her health, the first of her 'Letters on Mesmerism' (published in the *Athenaeum* in 1844) reveals her initial belief that it was 'morally impossible' for her to try a treatment which family, friends and medical practice all thought 'an imposture'.<sup>11</sup> She explained that she had resisted making her cure public until she felt convinced of its validity, not through dread that 'the clergy here wd [sic] burn us for witches'.<sup>12</sup> Her 'Letters on Mesmerism' were the subject of fierce attack by many, including the editor. Her mother and eldest sister had also objected to her experiment with mesmeric treatment, but in her *Autobiography* she suggested mockingly that the objectors were influenced by 'evil spirits', and castigated those whose humanity was paralysed by superstition;

For my part, if any friend of mine had been lying in a suffering and hopeless state for nearly six years, and if she had fancied she might get well by standing on her head ... or reciting charms or bestriding a broomstick, I should have helped her to try .<sup>13</sup>

The 'Letters' also reveal a fascinating contradiction to the image of the masculine mesmeriser prevalent throughout much Victorian journalism and fiction. When Martineau's mesmerist Spencer Hall was taken ill after the first 'séance' her maid, who had observed the process, took on the role of mesmerist and maintained the mobility, appetite and freedom from pain which Hall had achieved for his patient. The maid continued her mesmeric work successfully and apparently with Hall's approval, for some time, and was only replaced because Martineau thought it more seemly for a better-educated person of higher social status to perform the task, not because of the maid's gender.<sup>14</sup> In fact she was replaced by a female mesmerist.

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<sup>10</sup> Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism* (London: Edward Moxon, 1845), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Martineau, *Autobiography* Vol.1, p. 474.

<http://www.webapp1.dlibindiana.edu/wwwp/view?docId=VAB7103> Accessed 26/1/12.

<sup>14</sup> Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism*, p. 9.

The second 'letter' deals with Martineau's observation of the mesmerism of her landlady's daughter. She reports that the girl had suffered from severe headaches and inflamed eyes for six years, but the mesmerism used to alleviate this situation also resulted in changing a simple 'ingenuous' and 'conscientious' girl into a young woman who, when in a trance state, gave lucid opinions on matters beyond her normal sphere of experience, and was capable of diagnosing and recommending treatment for her own and others' ailments. The girl, 'J', also reported (correctly as it later transpired) that her sailor cousin's ship had sunk, but all on board were saved, although one boy, not her cousin, had died in an accident earlier in the voyage. This incident has resonances with the case of the spiritualist medium Helen Duncan, Britain's so-called 'Last Witch' who was tried and imprisoned in 1944 under the 1735 Witchcraft Act when she apparently relayed a message from a drowned seaman before the loss of his vessel had been announced publicly, thereby threatening national security and public morale.<sup>15</sup> 'J' herself made the link between spiritualist mesmerism and witch imagery, telling the mesmerist, from her trance state, of a woman who cured a lame monk only to be repaid by him having her ducked as a witch; Martineau quotes 'J' as telling the mesmerist, 'this is the way they would have treated you; but they know better now'.<sup>16</sup> Martineau provides in the 'Letters' a fascinating microcosm of evolutionary divergence and convergence in nineteenth-century occultism, where the supposedly male-dominated province of mesmeric healing is entered by women, the boundaries of social status are crossed, the transition is made from passive mesmeric subjectivity to active spiritualist mediumship, and 'new witchery' is presented as being enlightened, scientific and beneficial to humankind. This evolutionary trajectory will be followed again shortly in an examination of Owen's research on 'star mediums' and healers, yet in the third and fourth Letters Martineau also acknowledges the charlatan element epitomised by those who take 'money for it' and those who demean mesmerism by 'trying funny experiments, getting fortunes told, or rashly treating disease': these false practitioners include 'women who mean no harm, and base men who do mean harm'.<sup>17</sup> The shadow of the Evil (male) Magician was still evident in Martineau's distinction between female ingenuity and male perfidy.

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<sup>15</sup> Not because she 'pretended to witchcraft'.

<sup>16</sup> Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism*, pp. 33-4.

<sup>17</sup> Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism*, pp. 40 and 49.

Kaplan implies that harmful mesmerism might result from a mesmerist's desire to control other minds, rather than from actual evil intent, when he focuses on Dickens' attempts to cure Madame Augusta de la Rue's facial tic. Kaplan describes a 'relationship of mutual dependency' in which Dickens plays an increasingly domineering, and implicitly harmful, role in the 'management' of this married lady's psychological problems.<sup>18</sup> No suggestion is made of sexual impropriety by Dickens; just an excess of zeal on the part of a man who, at his death, had at least fourteen books on the occult in his library, and was caught up in the general fascination with mesmerism to which he was introduced by Elliotson. It is easy to understand the appeal of healing wizardry to Dickens the showman, who even took the part of Mesmer in Elizabeth Inchbald's play, *Animal Magnetism*, in 1857. Yet, as Kaplan notes, Dickens who was 'born to be an operator rather than a subject' always managed to avoid 'putting himself in the power of an operator's manipulations'.<sup>19</sup> Dickens even wrote of his 'horrible aversion' to one regular female visitor to his home; this 'Ancient Mariner of young women' as he called her, 'holds me with her glittering eye', with a 'basilisk' gaze apparently capable of reaching him through the wall when he tried to escape it.<sup>20</sup> Despite its comedic presentation the dramatisation of these unwelcome visitations exposes Dickens' disinclination to be the bewitched, rather than the bewitcher, but also emphasises the assumed link between mesmerism and witch-or-wizard-craft.

The general assumption made by advocates as well as critics and sceptics was that man would be the bewitcher when mesmerism was the potent spell, with critics and sceptics also assuming immoral motivation on the part of the male mesmerist. Robert Browning's poem 'Mesmerism' (1855) explores the salacious megalomaniac fantasy of a mesmerist. Hours of concentration in the solitary darkness of his room conjure the phantom 'shape' of the woman he desires, clad in night attire with chestnut gold hair plaited; but in order for her 'Passive and yet aware' body to fill the conjured shape he must send 'the power' from his soul to hers; he imagines her drawn to him through the storm; her hair now provocatively unbound like 'the doors of a casket-shrine', with her outstretched arms inviting him to plunder the casket.<sup>21</sup> While

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<sup>18</sup> Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism*, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism*, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Robert Browning, 'Mesmerism' [1855]. Daniel Karlin (ed.), *Robert Browning: Selected Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1989), ll. 34, 59, 111.

he utters a profane prayer for temporary control of her mesmerised soul, and consequently the body which houses it, he acknowledges that, as in some Faustian pact, he must one day pay for his actions.

Five decades later the image of the archetypal diabolical mesmerist was still powerful in fiction, as exemplified by Svengali, the physically and morally unprepossessing anti-hero of George Du Maurier's novel *Trilby* (1894), whose name is still a synonym for the evil genius behind bewitching artistic triumph. Du Maurier's Svengali transforms a tone-deaf artist's model into an internationally renowned diva, who is even sent into a mesmeric trance by looking at a picture of him following his death.<sup>22</sup> The widely held suspicion that mesmerists would entrap female victims by offering to cure ailments is graphically illustrated in the novel as, at an early meeting, Svengali sends Trilby into a trance ostensibly to cure pain in her eyes, then renders her temporarily blind and dumb before drawing out the hidden musical ability through which she becomes a Lorelei whose unearthly singing drives men mad and impels them to shower her with expensive gifts (p. 171). Yet, her singing also has powers to heal the psyche. She is described as both a potentially home-wrecking siren (p. 241) and a Circe (p.262); but she is a Circe who turns beast into man. The paintings of Rossetti or Burne-Jones permeate the text, as the narrator's early description of Trilby as the physical 'type' admired by the Pre-Raphaelites is overlaid by new images of her as an immortal (p. 90). Svengali also becomes 'other' than human when he is described not only as a 'black spider-cat' (p. 73) and a shadow between Trilby and the sun, but as a 'powerful demon' (p. 92) and a 'magician' (p. 294) who both creates and destroys a bewitching instrument which falls silent as he dies.

Mesmerised women through whom the electric force was channelled might be embryonic 'new witches' but, like their medieval grandmothers, they were presented as being in the thrall of a male Mephistopheles throughout the nineteenth century, at least from the perspective of the male novelist. There is a fin-de-siècle two-dimensional quality about Du Maurier's personification of wizardry and witchery, a quality akin to the paintings of Beardsley, and as such his treatment of new witchcraft contrasts as much with the infinitely more subtle treatment of the occult by novelists such as Wilkie Collins as Beardsley's work does with that of the Pre-Raphaelites.

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<sup>22</sup> George Du Maurier, *Trilby* [1894] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 287. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

Collins, who fed the Victorian appetite for sensation with nearly eighty novels, short stories and plays, often with occult overtones, from the 1840s to the 1880s, surely deserves the designation of purveyor of 'typical' Victorian fictionalised 'new magic'. A close friend of Dickens, he too was intrigued by the idea of mesmerism. The difference between the two novelists was that, despite Dickens' mesmeric experiments on friends and family, his reputation for 'mesmerising' audiences at his readings, and his delight in sinister fictional subjects and settings, he does not engage with specific nineteenth-century occult subjects as Collins does. There is a further dichotomy within Collins himself, in that he enthusiastically introduced sinister mesmerising characters into his fiction, yet argued in non-fiction terms for the positive efficacy of mesmerism. Under the heading of 'Magnetic Evenings at Home', Collins wrote six reports of mesmeric demonstrations by a 'Count P' for *The Leader* in 1852.<sup>23</sup> The 'Evenings' took place, mundanely, in Weston-super-Mare, in the presence of Collins' friends, a 'clergyman' and a 'barrister', but exoticism was provided by the magnetising Count and his wife's young French companion, 'Mademoiselle V', the magnetised woman. Collins was seemingly impressed by the clairvoyant abilities which 'V's trance induced in her, although *The Leader's* editor, George Henry Lewes, while convinced of 'the leading facts of mesmerism' found nothing to prove it facilitated clairvoyance.<sup>24</sup> This placed Lewes firmly with those members of the medical establishment who were willing to accept the veracity, and even value of, hypnotism, but disinclined to engage with the possibility that the hypnotist might release within his female subject other abilities which were once the province of the witch. Collins' demonstrates a willingness to merge the boundaries between elements of 'new witchcraft' in his fiction, where he conflates mesmerism, clairvoyance and spiritualism, but he is also careful to use distancing techniques which, as in 'Miss Jeromette and the Clergyman', (1875) leave his readers to answer the question 'Do you believe...?'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> W. Wilkie Collins, 'Magnetic Evenings at Home' *The Leader* January-April 1852 <http://www.deadline.demon.co.uk/wilkie/etext/magnetictext.htm>. Accessed 26/1/12.

<sup>24</sup> G.H. Lewes, 'The Fallacy of Clairvoyance' response to Collins' 'Magnetic Evenings at Home', p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'Miss Jeromette and the Clergyman' *The Haunted Hotel and Other Stories* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p. 222. It is interesting to note that Harriet Martineau turned to mesmerism through fear of falling victim to dependency on the opiates she was taking to control her pain while, despite the early enthusiasm for mesmerism proclaimed in Collins's articles, he relied on opiates to alleviate his pain, using a dangerously high daily intake towards the end of his life.

Collins described Count P as a gentleman of ‘honour and integrity’ who wished only to ‘study a science in which he felt a deep and natural interest’.<sup>26</sup> Conversely his fictional Count Fosco, the villain of *The Woman in White* (1859-60), seems to embody all the sinister elements attached to Anton Mesmer by his critics, without being specifically identified as a mesmerist. Fosco, with his foreign ‘otherness’, his flamboyance, his claims to esoteric medical knowledge, and his unctuously sinister control over women is probably Collins’ most metaphorically ‘mesmeric’ character. Yet, despite a doctor’s dismissal of Fosco’s ‘quack remedies (mesmerism included)’, and the Count’s magnetic personality which both attracts and repels even the redoubtable Marian Halcombe and exerts its influence over virtually every action in the story, whatever mesmeric powers he may possess are only hinted at obliquely.<sup>27</sup> Marian is aware of an ‘irresistible glitter’ in his ‘unfathomable gray eyes’ (p. 221) and the disturbing impression that ‘his mind is prying into mine’ (p. 269). Female vulnerability to Fosco’s mesmeric capabilities is indicated by the condition of Madame Fosco, a once-lively advocate for the Rights of Women who, when married, is silenced into mute submission. Significantly, Madame Fosco is ‘cured’ of her youthful flightiness, and rendered as ‘cold as a statue’ (p. 219), by a man who claims to be able to petrify a body after death ‘so as to preserve it, as hard as marble, to the end of time’ (p.223). He is the dark ‘magician’, emitting a death-force rather than a life-force. Even the animals who ‘seem to love him’ (p. 222) are tamed creatures released from their cages at his whim, while the savage bloodhound slinks from him in fear, and Marian suggests that the ‘reformation’ of Madame Fosco is a dangerous suppression of the lady’s nature, akin to the ‘taming’ of a wild animal (p. 219).

A sulphuric medieval aura surrounds the image of Madame Fosco stoically rolling her husband’s cigarettes and looking ‘proud of being the officiating medium through which her lord and master composed himself with tobacco smoke’ (p. 260). In contrast the one woman who fascinates Fosco is Marian who resists his influence, matches him in terms of intellect and strength of will, and alludes good-humouredly to her less-than seraphic physical appearance and reputation when compared with her half-sister, Laura:

I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody think me crabbed

<sup>26</sup> Collins, ‘Magnetic Evenings’, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* [1859-60] John Sutherland (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 331. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am - (p. 34).

The words 'demon' or 'witch' are left unsaid, but despite the light-heartedness of this statement, Marian displays abilities which could have defined her as an 'old' or 'new' witch, when she sees and communicates with Walter Hartright despite their separation by thousands of miles. However, these instances of 'trance or day-dream' (p. 278) are achieved without the aid of a mesmerist. Clara Burnham, the 'pale', 'delicate' young woman in Collins's early play *The Frozen Deep* (written in collaboration with Dickens in 1856) also falls into clairvoyant trance states with no secondary intervention. Her behaviour is attributed by rational Mrs Crawford to her upbringing in 'a lonely old house in the Highlands of Scotland' where 'ignorant' people filled her head with 'superstitions' concerning 'second sight'; whereas in Mrs Crawford's view trance-inspired clairvoyance is an 'hysterical malady' in 'enlightened times' when, she notes with a 'satirical smile', people 'only believe in dancing tables, and in messages sent from the other world by spirits who can't spell!'.<sup>28</sup> Yet, in this work, as in many others, Collins engages with the possibility of non-corporeal intercourse between individuals or between this world and an 'other', by those whose spiritual purity negates the aid of the mesmerist

In 'Miss Jeromette and the Clergyman' the ghost of a murdered woman appears to the clergyman as an eerie pillar of white mist which gradually takes the form of his beloved Jeromette. Similarly in Collins' short story 'Mrs Zant and the Ghost' (1885) there is direct communion between the living and the dead as a man returns in spirit form to protect his widow from the brother who has murdered him. Watchers see Mrs Zant pale and glassy-eyed, walking as though in a dream, 'void of expression', oblivious to her surroundings, while Mrs Zant experiences the terrifying oblivion of her surroundings, followed by the joyous awareness of her husband's return from the 'unseen world' to hold, kiss and protect her.<sup>29</sup> The late Mr Zant is just such a loving presence as those attending séances might hope to encounter and his widow is the medium who needs no mesmerist's intervention in order to pass through death's veil. Although Collins earned a considerable degree of notoriety for his portrayal of convention-breaking anti-heroines in works such as *No Name* (1862) and

<sup>28</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Frozen Deep and Mr Wray's Cash Box* (Stroud, Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1996), pp. 7-9.

<sup>29</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'Mrs Zant and the Ghost', *The Haunted Hotel and Other Stories*, pp.175, .201, 185.

*Armada* (1866), his fictional ingénues are drawn unconsciously into the unknown place between the living and the dead, and shielded from the taint of charlatanry associated with public mediumship. However, Clara Burnham and Mrs. Zant do display the death-like characteristics demonstrated by public mediums when they enter the borderland between this world and the 'other'. Anne Catherick (*The Woman in White*) also appears to Hartright with her face set in 'deathlike stillness', 'a grave between' them and 'the dead about' them (p. 95). Clara, Laura Fairfax and her uncanny double Anne Catherick, even Mrs. Zant, widowed during her honeymoon, are all 'white women'. Wan and sickly Anne is obsessed with the need to wear white; Clara is 'a young girl, pale and delicate, dressed simply in white' (p. 7); while Mrs Zant, pallid-faced and surrounded by an unearthly mental fog which isolates her within the paranormal world, is metaphorically dressed in bridal white, not widow's weeds. They all exude an angelic, almost child-like innocence, and all are surrounded by an aura of virginal naivety. Unlike the white-women of myth their paleness is a result of their communion with the dead, or a symbol of their qualification to make that communion, not because they represent death itself. When Collins' fictional white women (or their spiritualist-medium counterparts) cross the borders between life and death, they do not barter creative genius in exchange for life, as did La Belle Dame Sans Merci or the Queen of Elphame; they offer renewed hope of eternal existence to the masses rather than the promise of eternal fame to the elite.

Collins's white women are fairy-witches; the opalescent representations of new white magic and the antithesis of dark, medieval witchery. He constructed a direct confrontation between black and white, old and new, witchery in his Gothic novella 'The Haunted Hotel' (1878) where a profusion of sinister witch imagery surrounds the character of the devilish Countess Narvona. Collins returned to the character of the foreign aristocrat, this time a Countess, the murderous activities of whose menacing alchemist brother/lover are exposed by Agnes, a fair English heroine, who unwittingly becomes a communication channel for her murdered ex-fiancé. The doctor whom Narvona consults at the start of the tale is left 'literally spellbound' by the 'startling contrast between the corpse-like pallor of her complexion and the overpowering light and life, the glittering metallic brightness in her large black eyes.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'The Haunted Hotel' in *The Haunted Hotel and Other Stories*, p. 4. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.



She actually practices no witchcraft, black or white, old or new, yet the doctor reverts to medieval irrationality by recoiling from anything she has touched through a fear that she has left ‘an infection of wickedness’ (p. 11) in his house. Equally, Countess Narvona speculates that she is a ‘demon’ and the demure Agnes whose fiancé she has seduced is the ‘avenging angel’ (p. 10) who will be the instrument of her doom. The eventual confession of murder is accredited to ‘magnetic influence’ communicated to Agnes as she ‘lay between the [concealed] remains of the murdered husband’ and ‘the guilty wife suffering the tortures of remorse’ beside her (p. 126). Thus a clear distinction is made between old black witchcraft and new white witchcraft, when evil is overcome by ‘new witchcraft’ channelled unbidden through the accidental medium. The black witch is aware of, or deluded by, her occult nature and impelled by predatory sexuality and avarice, whereas the white witch is ingenuous, virginal, and innocent of cupidity. The latter is an idealised image which foregrounds the child-like nature of each of Collins’ fictional ‘new witches’ who, apart from the pre-pubescent boy-medium used by the Indian priests in *The Moonstone* (1868) and Miss Jeromette’s unworldly clergyman, are all female.

Male mediums, although in the minority, were also extant in Victorian Britain. Yet suggestions were made of an interconnectedness between male mediumship and deviation from accepted masculine norms in the case of Daniel Dunglas Home, probably the most famous male medium of his age, and his fictional counterpart Robert Browning’s ‘Mr Sludge, the “Medium”’ (1864). Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an admirer of Home, referred to the ‘weakness’ of Home’s temperament and ‘something feminine in his disposition’ as ‘flaws’ in his character, while Sludge makes the embittered prediction that public opinion would accept cheating as natural to mediums who are ‘Vain and vindictive, cowards, prone to scratch’, ‘hysterical, hybrid half-and-halves’.<sup>31</sup> Adam Roberts defines ‘Mr Sludge, the “Medium”’ as ‘the most famous attack on mediumship as quackery’, remarkable for the ‘vitriol Browning injects into his portrait of Sludge’.<sup>32</sup> Since its publication this dramatic monologue has been accepted as a barely veiled personal attack on Home. In 1913 the psychical

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<sup>31</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Career of Daniel D. Home’

<http://www.survivalafterdeath.org.uk/articles/doyle/home.htm>. p.8. Accessed 16/4/2009.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Browning, ‘Mr Sludge, “The Medium”’ [1864] in Karlin (ed.) *Robert Browning: Selected Poetry*, ll. 558, l.567. Subsequent line references will be cited in the text.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Roberts, ‘Browning, The Dramatic Monologue and the Resuscitation of the dead’ in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, Pamela Thurschwell (eds.) *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 109.

researcher J. Arthur Hill claimed that Browning admitted to F.W.H. Myers (another researcher) that he had never actually caught Home cheating, despite Sludge's confession, in which Browning has him say, 'I know 'twas wicked of me' (l. 30).<sup>33</sup> Hill contends that Browning 'unfortunately allowed himself to be influenced by his own prejudices rather than by the evidence'.<sup>34</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was more aggressive in his denunciation of Browning's use of a long piece of 'doggerel' to describe 'an exposure which had never taken place'.<sup>35</sup> Yet Browning's ire if directed at fraudulent mediumship in general is understandable, particularly when, in an era of painfully high infant mortality, deception was practiced on parents of dead children, who trusted the medium to set the 'little voice...lisp[ing] once again' (l. 473). Sceptics saw spiritualist mediums as being more monstrously guilty than practitioners of petty 'witchcraft' such as fortune tellers and astrologers when they tricked the credulous out of money and valuables in exchange for spurious connections with the departed.<sup>36</sup> While in 'Mesmerism' Browning implies that the medium is prepared to sell his soul, in 'Mr Sludge' allusions to a more earthly trade permeate the poem as they do in Tennyson's treatment of the witch Vivien. Sludge is a 'kept' creature who angrily protests that any gratitude his patrons expect, would, in reality, be the 'gratitude...of a prostitute' to those who use her (l. 783). He refers to himself as his patron's 'pet' (reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelite view of their bewitching models) or 'boy', the latter phrase in particular having connotations of ownership, of the catamite, and of an abrogation of adult masculinity (ll. 143-155). Owen doubts whether 'persistent rumours' about Home's supposed effeminacy were based on anything more substantial than 'his long hair, sensitive hands, and personal vanity', but while Conan Doyle's disquiet over Home's character 'flaws' reflects a contemporary discomfiture regarding suggestions of homosexuality it also indirectly reinforces the traditional imaging of those who practise witchcraft as female, even when the witchcraft is 'new'.

Yet, while traditional misogyny conflated images of the female witch and the harlot, advocates of spiritualism emphasised the superiority of the 'female' qualities of passivity and empathy in the finest mediums, and Owen notes that a number of

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<sup>33</sup> J. Arthur Hill, *Spiritualism and Psychical Research* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1913), p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Career of Daniel D. Home', p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Hill states that Home 'never accepted fees in money, though no doubt he received valuable presents', p. 19.

spiritualists, male and female, sought to cultivate ‘mind passivity’, which involved ‘undermining the strength of mind (will power) which differentiated the masculine from the feminine psychological profile’.<sup>37</sup> However, Owen’s research also reveals many instances where, during séances, female mediums ‘flagrantly transgressed gender norms’, often adopting a ‘trance persona’, male or female, ‘which was at total odds with the Victorian idea of respectable womanhood’.<sup>38</sup> If some people found the female qualities of male mediums disconcerting and possibly deviant, the female medium who manifested a male spirit seems to have been seen as exciting and attractive to both male and female audience members, possibly because they were aware of the glamorous young woman beneath the spirit-persona. While this is arguably akin to the Victorian enjoyment of male impersonators and principal boys in the theatre, it is also evident that an enchantress who displays manly qualities may arouse a man and inspire a woman, when the mannish hag is likely to repulse both. Owen writes of the male spirits whose masculine characteristics were expressed as ‘the polar opposite of a fictional feminine’ when apparently channelled through the body of Annie Fairlamb.<sup>39</sup> These include ‘Sam’, a hirsute, dark-complexioned man, in the clothes of a labourer, who ‘began to flex his muscles and perform gymnastic movements’, before striking a male sitter a number of violent blows to the face, and ‘George’, who ‘adored women’, touching and kissing female sitters and writing ‘little *billets-doux* to a select few’.<sup>40</sup> Even Fairlamb’s ‘Minnie’, despite her radiant ‘saint-like appearance’ bestowed her ‘thrilling’ kisses on the lips of men.<sup>41</sup> Owen argues that the very vocabulary of trance mediumship, with its surrendering, entering, seizing and possession ‘oozed sexuality’, but she also notes that the sexual gratification implicit in all these manifestations (of all ages and genders) has a dual capability, in that sitters may have been aroused, but mediums also used their ‘powerlessness to achieve and wield power’.<sup>42</sup> When the examples of physical expression are seen in conjunction with communication (even through the planchette or automatic writing) where the ‘spirit’ often resorted to embarrassingly profane, obscene or blasphemous language, it is evident that these practitioners of new witchcraft had the means and opportunity to

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<sup>37</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, pp. 217-18.

<sup>40</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, pp. 216-17 and .220.

<sup>41</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, pp. 220-21.

<sup>42</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, pp. 218 and 233.

cross the boundaries of conventional propriety and thereby to explore territory which was beyond the reach of 'respectable' Victorian women.

If female novelists used the witch as a medium through which they might transgress intellectual boundaries, 'new' witches used their own mediumship to cross not only sexual but social boundaries. New witchcraft bestowed on many of its practitioners the opportunity to achieve a level of status, wealth and celebrity beyond the dreams of the majority of their peers. Owen writes of a 'middle-aged spinster', Georgiana Houghton, living 'a sequestered life with her elderly parents', but whose limited social circle expanded to include the aristocracy through her ability to make 'spirit drawings'.<sup>43</sup> Yet, Owen's 'star mediums', the 'beguiling, youthful creatures' who brought their 'theatrical style' to the stage of British mediumship in the 1870s were, as she demonstrates, bewitchingly different to middle-aged spinsters, 'matronly women' or 'society favourites' like Home.<sup>44</sup> It might be no coincidence that Florence Cook introduced the elegant and youthful spirit 'Katie King', draped classically 'in white, with bare arms and feet', in 1873 when Pre-Raphaelite artists had set the template for the visual image of the occult enchantress.<sup>45</sup> Equally, the psychic capabilities which the 'stars' demonstrated far surpassed the initial 'new magic' of spirit voices, or invisible hands writing messages from the 'beyond', or the levitation of furniture. Consequently star witches who summoned manifest spirits into the séance room often became celebrities in their own right. Florence was just fourteen years old when she began to experience trance-states, and by 1871, aged fifteen, she was holding séances for the Dalton Spiritualists' Association, and materialising spirit faces, and two years later 'Katie King' became 'Florence Cook's passport to success', enabling her to entertain the 'well-to-do and eminent', to stay in their homes, to cruise on a yacht and to holiday in Paris, as well as to earn a living from her mediumship.<sup>46</sup> Owen presents Florence as an exemplar of the lower-class girl who successfully walked the fine line between public and private mediumship, when public mediums charged their audiences while private mediums (like 'Sludge' and Home) enjoyed the largesse of their hosts. Following 'Katie's' first appearance a wealthy spiritualist,

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<sup>43</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 48.

<sup>46</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 49.

Charles Blackburn, paid Florence what he defined as a 'stipend' to enable her to continue with her vocation.<sup>47</sup>

In view of such evidence it is tempting to see the growth of spiritualism, especially the era of 'star spiritualism', as evidence of burgeoning freedom for women, or at least to concur with Basham's assertion that if 'mesmerism had privileged female psychic performance under male control, Spiritualism ... indicated a venture in which male control could be dispensed with'.<sup>48</sup> Owen, however, is more cautious, with her detailed examination of the lives of the fêted pets of the séance circle revealing that their new freedom was, to a degree, simply the freedom offered by a larger cage than that inhabited by their less glamorous sisters. Significantly, Owen writes of the majority of public mediums who had no 'male patron or supporter' as 'small-time' practitioners, many of whom worked steadily, but presumably without the transcendent freedoms experienced by the stellar mediums.<sup>49</sup> In contrast male 'supporters' played a major role in the progress of Florence Cook and Annie Fairchild, as well others who enjoyed their degree of celebrity. Florence had a series of 'minders' who 'guided' her progress before her marriage. Words such as 'proprietary', 'control', and 'manage' permeate Owen's descriptions of these men, overshadowing any positive designations of 'supporters' or 'protectors' with the 'fetch' of the pander or Svengali.

As well as being 'protected' by a man who subsequently married her, Annie Fairchild was funded by the Newcastle Society for the Investigation of Spiritualism. Societies of this type provided another element of physical and financial security for the medium by paying her a retainer in exchange for her performance of an agreed number of séances over a given period. This shielded her from the unsavoury taint of moral corruption associated with those mediums perceived as selling their gift or themselves, but it also imposed another level of control upon the 'freedom' of new witches. The word 'Investigation' in the title of the Newcastle Society indicates a rationale claimed by many of these groups, that they were not just interested in communion with the spirit world, but wished to explore Spiritualism as a new science and test its validity. The Society for Psychical Research formed in 1882 was composed of interested parties spanning the entire spectrum of belief, from Sir Arthur

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<sup>47</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 50.

<sup>48</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 111.

<sup>49</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 61.

Conan Doyle to Frank Podmore, Tennyson and William Gladstone. In explaining his own reasons for joining the S.P.R., J. Arthur Hill exemplified the impartial researcher, who was ‘neither spiritualist nor anti-spiritualist’, but wanted ‘cool, balanced judgement’ and, significantly, wanted ‘no return of witch-manias’.<sup>50</sup> However, the investigative methods employed by many societies, ostensibly motivated by an ‘earnest desire for truth’, seem uncomfortably reminiscent of those favoured by seventeenth-century ‘witch-finders’. The tying-up, strip-searching, even mild electric-shocks inflicted on Victorian mediums are compared by Basham with the treatment suffered by supposed witches during the infamous Trials.<sup>51</sup> Owen describes Florence Cook being stripped and searched then performing the séance dressed only in her underclothes and a cloak, her ‘wrists tied with tape, the knots sealed with wax, and the ends of the tape tied to a chair outside the cabinet’ so that any movement by her would be detected.<sup>52</sup> Another medium was tethered by ‘a threaded needle passed through a pierced hole in her left ear’, while Cook on one occasion became part of an electrical circuit, ensuring that any movement would be recorded on a galvanometer, and Fairlamb was locked in a wire cage and tethered to marble pillars by leather straps.<sup>53</sup> Even the non-stellar mesmerists’ mediums were subjected to unpleasant experimentation. One might wonder why, if Collins believed in the validity of the trance effect on ‘V’, he was not more disturbed by her being subjected (through suggestion) to the horror of strychnine poisoning.<sup>54</sup> The nature of the experiments, and Collins’ detached attitude towards them, contrasts markedly with the experiments and responses reported in Martineau’s ‘Letters’ where ‘J’ was induced to think that a drink of water was ‘sherry’ or ‘porter’, while Martineau objected strongly to the behaviour of a man who ‘wrenched’ J’s arm while she was in a trance state.<sup>55</sup>

However, the significant difference between seventeenth-century witch trials and Victorian mediumship tests is that the latter were an inversion of the former: the ‘new’ witch, particularly the ‘star’, was actually trying to prove that she *was* possessed by the non-corporeal. Nonetheless, Owen cites the writings of a medium who ‘understood how a woman at the end of her strength could recant and admit to a

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<sup>50</sup> Hill, *Spiritualism and Psychical Research*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>51</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 140.

<sup>52</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 68.

<sup>53</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, pp. 68-9.

<sup>54</sup> Collins, ‘Mesmeric Evenings at Home’, p. 5. Collins claimed that ‘V’ looked vibrantly well, not ‘like a martyr’ after five years as the subject of such experiments, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism*, p. 35.

“horrible farce and deception”<sup>56</sup> The use of the word ‘recant’ evokes images of innocent accused women in earlier centuries, broken by torture, confessing to demonic pacts or neighbourhood maleficium in order to end their torment. Whether they ‘confessed’ or not Owen recounts the sad retreat of many ‘star mediums’ into alcoholism, followed by social oblivion and early death. Their testing and demise, while not as barbaric as ducking, pressing, burning or hanging, still carries echoes of the medieval witch-hunt. While ‘star mediums’ made pioneering flights over social and sexual boundaries, they remained essentially contained and restrained by their male ‘protectors’, and by the dominating ‘spirits’ who possessed them, as well as by the societies which maintained them and facilitated and tested their performances, and by a wider society whose normative values placed limits on the distance of their flights.

### **The Healer**

The ‘stars’ glowed magically for a while, became enchantresses viewed with lust and distrust, and finally submitted to victimhood. The healers in contrast challenged the ‘establishment’. Like Davies’ traditional folklore witch who ‘became a template for the generation of new witch figures’, the new-witch healer became a template for many twentieth-century witches who wore the name as a badge of defiance as they sought to heal what they viewed as the ills of society.<sup>57</sup> In her book *The Witch in History* (1996), Purkiss addresses the link made between physical healing and witchcraft as she presents a ‘once upon a time’ tale of the pre-Enlightenment woman defined as a witch because she was ‘a healer and a midwife’, whose ‘medical knowledge’ and ‘spiritual values’ threaten the doctor and the Church respectively, and whose ‘independence and freedom threatened men’.<sup>58</sup> Purkiss dismantles the ‘myths’ surrounding this image and criticises its retelling by academics as well as creative artists. Basham provides the example of two German academics who in 1985 described medieval witches as ‘mid-wives whose own knowledge threatened to create a wasteland as women controlled their own bodies’, while Owen claims that late nineteenth-century spiritualist healers:

maintained the links with an ancient tradition which revered the healing gift

<sup>56</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture*, p. 170.

<sup>58</sup> Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 7.

and sought to unite it with the curative properties of the natural world. Spiritualist healing was essentially a combination of traditional techniques and spirit guidance and women were important in both domains. They had been part of the ‘ancient ways’ which stretched back through ‘wise women’ and ‘white witches’.<sup>59</sup>

Whether such ‘links’ actually exist or not is irrelevant to my thesis, which is concerned with images, but it is evident that for many in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the image of the new white witch is reflected in the person of the healer. If one examines the lives of women like Chandos Leigh Hunt and Georgina Weldon it also becomes evident that such nineteenth century female campaigners for holistic health and female rights played a role in the formation of self-imagery on the part of many twentieth-century witches, even though most will never have heard their names.

Chandos Leigh Hunt inherited a name often associated with the manipulatively ingenuous Harold Skimpole in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*. When Andrew Lang described Daniel Dunglas Home as ‘a Harold Skimpole with the gift of divination’ he reflected the opinion of those who viewed mediums as parasitic charmers whose lives were a continual fabricated performance.<sup>60</sup> The perception of new witchcraft as entertainment is reflected in Owen’s report of the first public ‘mesmeric séance’ of Chandos Leigh Hunt, as seen through the eyes of a clergyman named Davies who admitted, with disarming candour, that if the medium had been as he feared, ‘old’, ‘frumpish’, ‘inclined to run to eighteen stone’, or ‘dropped her h’s’, he would soon have left the stuffy room; but to his delight, ‘She was a tall active young lady was Miss Chandos, and had a mystic crop of long black curls, which waved about like the locks of a sibyl’.<sup>61</sup> In his palpable excitement the Reverend Davies conflates images of classical enchantresses into one beguiling image of the idealised practitioner of new witchcraft. On this occasion ‘Miss Chandos’ emulated the siren as she cast her spell over eager volunteers and compelled them to perform for the audience. However, in a private conversation with the Reverend Davies after the performance she spoke of the healing potential of her gift, and of her feelings that it was ‘slightly sacrilegious’ to use it ‘for playing tricks and gratifying curiosity’; as Owen says, for Chandos the use of stage hypnotism was merely the means to an end.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 100 and Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> Lang cited in Frank Podmore ‘Daniel Dunglas Home’ <http://survivalafterdeath.org.uk/articles/podmore/home.htm>. p.4. Accessed 16/4/2009.

<sup>61</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 124.

<sup>62</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, pp. 125, 126.



In her use of the séance as entertainment, enhanced by her youth and pleasing physical appearance, Chandos had much in common with the ‘star’ mediums. She also apparently shared and succumbed to their predisposition to adolescent illness, as well as their dependence on non-familial male support. The restoration of her health, and the genesis of her interest in healing, was attributed to the influence of dietary reformer Joseph Wallace whose treatment demanded a vegetarian diet, free from ‘fermented products’, including alcohol and bread. She became his patient, then his pupil, and eventually his wife. However, unlike the star mediums who became the tools of their male protectors, Chandos used her male supporters as teachers, not keepers. Owen suggests she probably learned her mesmeric techniques as a private pupil of Dr. Moses Rigg, while Wallace, who ‘usually charged one hundred guineas for individual training’ instructed her in the dietary control of disease.<sup>63</sup> This was not the exchange of ‘favours’ implicit in the star mediums’ relationships, but the self-motivated education of a woman who soon abandoned stage mesmerism and followed her vocational imperative to become a healer. In the late 1870s she made her publishing debut with a work on organic mesmerism, which is permeated with the language of magic and spell-casting, as illustrated by instructions for harnessing and directing of magnetism, ‘Your hands can be filled with it... The hands are the points of Nature’s own Magic Wands ... and each pass will, with practice, assist you in the formulation of your *will*’.<sup>64</sup> This is no longer the female medium as the passive channel through which Mesmer and his fellow wizards direct the magnetic force; it is the woman mesmerist and medium, channelling ‘Nature’s Magic’ with ‘*will*’ and ‘*intention*’.<sup>65</sup>

Owen’s picture of Chandos in 1899 is equally very different to her depiction of the comet-like incendiary careers of her star mediums. Chandos, as Mrs Wallace aged forty-five, is the archetypal earth-mother, and not simply because she has seven children. Owen quotes the Independent Labour Party’s *Annual* of that year in which ‘the picture of a dark haired woman, dressed in a loose-fitting robe and gazing serenely to her left’ accompanies the description of her as one who ‘combines an incisive logic with winsomeness and enthusiasm’.<sup>66</sup> Much had happened in the years

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<sup>63</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 126.

<sup>64</sup> Chandos Leigh Hunt, *A Treatise on all the Known uses of Organic Magnetism* [1876] cited in Owen, p. 128.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

<sup>66</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 137. Italics in the original.

between her first appearance as a stage mesmerist and this expression of admiration for her as one who strove to heal bodies, minds, and society. She had become a passionate opponent, in print and at public meetings, of compulsory vaccination, vivisection and smoking, and an equally passionate advocate for the causes of vegetarianism, temperance, rational dress, fresh air and exercise, as well as the common ownership of land. It is a surprisingly modern agenda, including many elements not only resonating with those who ‘looked to the left’ in late Victorian Britain, but with those who became part of the Green Wiccan movement in the twentieth-century.

The interrelationship between nature and the physical and emotional health of humankind is a staple of all twentieth-century neo-pagan belief systems, but the nineteenth-century healers and practitioners of new magic made the same connections. Chandos Leigh Hunt writes of mesmeric pain-relief in childbirth ‘the *perfectly natural*, and beautiful act of Nature, of giving birth to a child ... painlessly ... in exact accordance with the laws of Healing and Phenomenal-Organic Magnetism’, and she reminds her readers that ‘childbirth is *not* a disease’ or an ‘unfair burthen on Nature’s capabilities’.<sup>67</sup> Removal of the reference to magnetism and of the deifying capital letters would render this statement comfortably compatible with much twenty-first century orthodox medical opinion on child-birth. Yet, it is also evident that pioneering women who qualified as doctors during Victoria’s reign might have been defined as new witches too. Basham claims that Elizabeth Blackwell (the first woman on the British Medical register in 1849) ‘discovered her vocation through the practice of mesmerism’ and ‘became an early and committed advocate of the spiritualist cause’.<sup>68</sup> Likewise Anna Kingsford, who gained her medical degree in 1880 just after Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, was not only a ‘passionate anti-vivisectionist’, but also a ‘spiritualist’, an ‘occultist’ and a ‘theosophist’.<sup>69</sup> In view of the struggle undertaken by these early female medics to overcome misogynistic opposition to their training and qualification, those looking for evidence of male physicians’ witch-hunts against healers need look no further than the nineteenth century for examples of the victim-hood of *new* witches in the medical arena.

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<sup>67</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 130-31.

<sup>68</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 123.

<sup>69</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 67.

Nineteenth-century ‘witch hunts’ were also focused on women who were satisfied to be known as healers rather than doctors. While an overwhelmingly male medical profession was eager to distance itself from the irrational and unquantifiable, others offered cures without the intervention of what was, for many patients as well as healers, a suspect medical ‘priesthood’. Conversely, in the opinion of the majority of male medical practitioners, the possession of a womb placed women firmly within the ‘irrational’ category; thus females were not only considered to be highly vulnerable to predatory mesmerists but they were also totally unsuited to a medical career. Nonetheless, during the second half of the nineteenth century many women earned their living as spiritualist healers. Some even worked in partnership with qualified male doctors, while others claimed to be guided by the spirits of doctors who had transferred their practices to the next life. However, in 1878 the medical establishment succeeded in securing an amendment to the 1858 Medical Act, which ensured that no qualified practitioner could work with spirit mediums, and no unqualified person could be paid for healing services. Chandos Leigh Hunt was threatened with prosecution under this amendment, so gave up healing for three years, married Wallace, and wrote fiction. Others lower down the social scale, and without such alternative options, lost their livelihood. Once again the image of the ‘witch’ driven to the edge re-asserts itself.

But the links between spiritualism, medical science, and misogyny do not end there. As Owen demonstrates, among the most ‘aggressively anti-spiritualist’ physicians there were some who saw spiritualism not simply as quackery but as symptomatic of a ‘pathological condition’, thereby exposing spiritualists to the prospect of a diagnosis of lunacy and possible subsequent confinement in an asylum.<sup>70</sup> For the Victorian medical world lunacy and gynaecology were areas ripe for exploration, and for many physicians these two specialities were not mutually exclusive. Unlike spiritualists who saw women as the perfect healers and nurturers, orthodox medicine began to see those in possession of a uterus as susceptible to physical dangers and to all sorts of ‘manias’. Uteromania, a disease allegedly caused by the ‘wandering uterus’, was cited by Frederic Marvin as the mania which drew sufferers to ‘embrace some strange ultra ism – Mormonism, Mesmerism, Fourierism, Socialism, often Spiritualism’ and led some to believe they had a ‘mission in the

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<sup>70</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 139.

world' to publicly proclaim their beliefs, and even denounce their husbands as 'tyrants bent on their enslavement'.<sup>71</sup> Implicitly a woman with a 'mission', particularly one who held and openly acknowledged unorthodox socio/religious views was, like the witch of old, a threat to the stability of society. But, as with Enlightenment views of old witchcraft, the scientific consensus was that the cause of this irrational and anti-social behaviour was not a diabolic pact but a form of lunacy, possibly with a physical root. Consequently, it was argued that the safest, most rational and humane option for these female 'lunatics' as well as for their families and society in general was, in severe cases, to incarcerate them in one of the many public or private asylums which became a major feature of the Victorian mental health system.

A number of women were in fact committed to asylums not simply because they propounded such dangerous ideas as mesmeric healing, socialism, or unusual religious beliefs. Owen suggests that ulterior reasons for a woman's incarceration could be financial, or because her presence was an inconvenience in some way to those family members who had control over her life. The fate of Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* might thereby be replicated outside fiction. Before the passing of the 1870 Married Woman's Property Act (and its refinement in 1882) a wife had no more status or self-determination than had a child. This was the situation which threatened Georgina Weldon in the 1870s after she and her husband parted following an unsatisfactory, childless, fifteen-year marriage. As well as being a talented amateur singer and musician (her father and husband vetoed a professional career) she had also become deeply involved in a number of causes which might have been classified as strange ultra-isms, including spiritualism, women's suffrage, socialism, and the education of poor children. Her home became an orphanage for about a dozen urchins from the streets of London, who went barefoot indoors, wore comfortable clothing, and whose education included music and recitation which they performed in concerts. She also wore rational dress, flat shoes, and short hair, went to bed early and rose early. This was all rather too eccentric for Mr Weldon, who moved out, granting her a generous allowance of £1000 per annum, which Georgina supplemented with earnings from her music. However, it seems that what Owen calls Georgina's 'genius for publicity' regarding her 'progressive' causes

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<sup>71</sup> Cited in Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 149.

and her spiritualist beliefs proved a growing embarrassment to Mr Weldon and to Georgina's relatives.<sup>72</sup> Weldon asked Forbes Winslow, a doctor well known for his denunciation of spiritualism as a 'religious insanity', to commit her to an asylum.<sup>73</sup> With the aid of a female spiritualist, who claimed to have been alerted by a premonition, Georgina evaded attempts to confine her and subsequently added reform of the lunacy laws to her 'missions'. Numerous legal actions followed as Georgina fought, and eventually conquered, those who had hoped to confine her, but the spectre of a home-wrecking Eve emerged during the process as Winslow suggested that a jury 'ought to consider what idea they would form of their wives if they should fill their houses with children picked up in the street, and drive about with placards advertising "social evenings"'.<sup>74</sup>

Georgina Weldon is not typical of the majority of less vociferous or resilient women who found themselves threatened with a living death in the asylums of nineteenth-century Britain. She *is* typical, as is Chandos Leigh Hunt, of what Owen defines as 'a certain kind of spiritualist: well born and unconventional'.<sup>75</sup> Chandos' status meant that she was not swept aside as many of 'little healers' were under the onslaught of conventional medicine, but she is representative of a 'type' which emerged in the middle class during the next century, enhancing their healing strategies (genuinely effective or not) with a dusting of theatrical 'magic'. Georgina's image is reflected in those twentieth-century women who campaigned for female equality, or against war, or in pursuit of any number of causes where being a thorn in the side of authority was a role eagerly assumed by women defining themselves as witches. Georgina made the same connection as those who followed her, being as Owen notes, 'fond of remarking that had she lived in a different age she would have been burned as a witch'.<sup>76</sup>

## The Priestess

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<sup>72</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 161.

<sup>73</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 156. Owen notes that Forbes Winslow agreed to keep Georgina in one of his asylums for an annual fee which was half of the allowance Weldon paid to her. p. 161.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 165.

<sup>75</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 166.

<sup>76</sup> Cited in Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 166.

The evolutionary progression from ‘new witchcraft’ to ‘New Age witchcraft’ was part of a search for alternative forms of spirituality. Hutton, in *The Triumph of the Moon*, performed an effective exorcism of claims that Wicca is part of a hidden but continuous belief system running from pre-history to the present day; but he presents a shorter continuum by demonstrating that many ideas and images which inform contemporary Wicca and other Pagan beliefs and practices reflect those of eighteenth and nineteenth-century groups and individuals who found new ways to explore the realm of the spirit. The nineteenth century witnessed the expansion or formation of arcane societies such as the Rosicrucians, the Ancient Order of Druids, the Freemasons, the Hermetic Order of Golden Dawn, and the Theosophists. Intertwined with this spiritual and mystical experimentation was a blossoming cultural interest in antiquarianism, as well as in the folklore and mythology of Britain and other lands, plus a renewed fascination with classical myth. While pagan myths were smoothed and polished for the popular market or subjected to anthropological analysis, some poets, artists and mystics looked for occult meaning beyond the cold catalogue or beneath the superficial gloss. The influence of mystics such as Novalis is evident in the texts of writers from George MacDonald to W.B. Yeats who, in common with modern Pagans, evince a desire to unite nature, the human spirit, and the divine. As I have demonstrated earlier, the female spirit of divinity, often overlaid by the image of the witch, played a pivotal role in Victorian re-visioning of myths and fairy tales. The final section of my thesis will focus on women (fictional and real) who played a leading part in the formation of new expressions of spirituality emanating ostensibly from ancient roots but with clear links to the practices of ‘new witchcraft’.

The Rosicrucians, Druids, Freemasons and other organisations which had been formed before the nineteenth century were overwhelmingly fraternal.<sup>77</sup> Only the societies formed during the late nineteenth century, such as the Order of the Golden Dawn, or Yeats’ aborted Celtic Mystical Order, included female celebrants. Coincidentally or not, many of the most significant voices in these later societies were also heard in the so-called ‘Blessington Circle’, the group which met regularly at the Kensington home of the beautiful, notorious, Lady Marguerite Blessington. Gore House was the place where, in Basham’s words, ‘Disraeli and Bulwer [Lytton] “precipitated” their fellows into a heady round of experiments in the occult arts,

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<sup>77</sup> Although this is not now the case.

debating the subject of witchcraft and spirit raising ... practising clairvoyance and crystal gazing'.<sup>78</sup> As befits a woman who presided over such a circle of witchery, Lady Blessington lived at society's edge. She was an Irishwoman, the young mistress of an army officer who then became the wife, and swiftly the wealthy widow, of elderly Lord Blessington, and subsequently enjoyed the life-long companionship of Count Alfred d'Orsay, the estranged husband of Lord Blessington's daughter. Leslie Mitchell, Edward Bulwer Lytton's biographer, describes the Gore House salon as the 'meeting place of ... misfits', where Lady Blessington was a glamorous fairy godmother to the members of what was to polite society a 'tainted, if exciting company'.<sup>79</sup> Enchanting those who formed her circle and encouraging their exploration of the occult and esoteric, she presents a pale image of the 'Occult Woman' whom Basham defines as being 'culturally central ... during the Victorian period'.<sup>80</sup>

These 'occult women' include a succession of self-appointed female prophets who appeared regularly throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Joanna Southcott who claimed to be the Woman Clothed with the Sun, in *Revelations*, (Chapter 12). Basham notes that the 'figure of the prophetess poses a special problem since it offers the startling paradox of God choosing to speak through his own outcast and transgressor'.<sup>81</sup> However, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky took the female occult voice beyond the authority of Christianity when she founded the Theosophical Society in 1875. She brought together all the elements of 'new witchcraft' including mesmerism and spiritualism, and used geographical and temporal spiritual exotica to explore and explain the mystery of existence, as she became the channel which accessed, analysed and disseminated the information vouchsafed to her from the Great Unknown. Her early life is cloaked in glamour, through a narrative which presents her as a Russian aristocrat whose adolescent marriage in 1848 precipitated a swift flight from the nobleman who was more than twenty years her senior. However, by the time she came to public notice, she could in no way be equated with the physically enchanting sirens of Pre-Raphaelite art. W.B. Yeats (a Theosophist himself) likened

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<sup>78</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 33.

<sup>79</sup> Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, p. 94.

<sup>80</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 38.

<sup>81</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 53.

her to ‘an old Irish peasant woman, at once holy, sad and sly’.<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, even when instances of suspected fraud in relation to public displays of her ‘talents’ tainted her with the image of a roguish ‘pretender’ to old witchcraft, enough committed supporters distinguished between Blavatsky’s mischief and the tenets of Theosophy to allow the Society to continue into the present day. Blavatsky either dismissed as malice, or submitted with rueful laughter to her critics’ accusations, but she vehemently defended the veracity of Theosophy:

... why should there be such a *hullabaloo* made over that question? The fact of her [Blavatsky speaking in the third person] being an impostor has never been proved ... whereas it is a certain and undeniable fact that, by whomsoever invented, the philosophy preached by the “Masters” is one of the grandest and most beneficent philosophies once it is understood.<sup>83</sup>

Blavatsky claimed that Theosophy was born of a meeting she had with a mysterious Tibetan whom she encountered while travelling alone in the Himalayas. This chimed with a growing Western fascination regarding Eastern religions and belief systems, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as an interest in Egyptian and Kabalic myth as seen through the eyes of Masons and Rosicrucians. The genesis of Theosophy can be traced through three primary works by Blavatsky: *Isis Unveiled* (1877), *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and *The Key to Theosophy* (1897). The use of the Egyptian mother goddess in the title of the first work signals the use of the ‘Great Mother’ image which permeates Theosophy, Blavatsky also claims a unique affinity between mankind and the moon, which in most myths is depicted as female:

the cold, chaste moon stands in closer relations to Earth than any other sidereal orb. The Sun is the giver of life to the whole planetary system; the Moon is the giver of life to our globe; and the early races understood and knew it, even in their infancy ...<sup>84</sup>

Thereby, Theosophy revisits the paganism of the eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century Romantics and the seekers of the mystery cults, thereby reinforcing the foundations of the ‘special relationship’ between New Age Pagans and the moon. Yet perversely, in *The Key to Theosophy*, Blavatsky distanced Theosophy from both religion and magic. She declared that the system was ‘Divine Knowledge or Science’, not religion, and

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<sup>82</sup> Cited in Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1993) p. 91.

<sup>83</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* [1897] (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), p. 298.

<sup>84</sup> Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* Vol.1.[1888], p. 368 <http://www.theosociety.org/pasedena/sd/sd1-2-09.htm> Accessed 22-2-12.



insisted that Theosophists believe in nothing supernatural, comparing their work with that of Edison, who, had he ‘lived and invented his phonograph two hundred years ago would most probably been burnt along with it, and the whole attributed to the devil’.<sup>85</sup> Again, despite both Blavatsky and Theosophy’s co-founder Colonel Olcott’s initial interest in Spiritualism, by 1897 Blavatsky declared that she did not believe in Spiritualism, that the Spiritualist philosophy was merely a collection of ‘crude theories’, and that Spiritualists demonstrated ‘lack of organisation and blind bigotry’.<sup>86</sup> She claimed that anyone ‘Theosophist or Spiritualist’ who practices any type of ‘Occult science – e.g., Hypnotism, Mesmerism ...producing physical phenomena’ without the ‘*rationale*’ of Theosophy is ‘simply a black magician’, and she even castigates the ‘Law’ for being ‘illogical’ in ceasing to believe in ‘Witchcraft and Sorcery’, which she declared was still extant under the new guise of misused occult sciences.<sup>87</sup> It seems that the more Blavatsky grew to inhabit the role of priestess the less she wished to be associated with old or new images of the witch.

Yet while she evidently viewed both old and new witchcraft with equal disapproval in her role as the Mother of Theosophy it is also fascinating to note that Blavatsky produced a collection of five short stories which Annie Besant claims in the foreword, were ‘thrown off in her lighter moments’ during the final months of her life.<sup>88</sup> The title of *Nightmare Tales* (1892) signals a brew of lurid Gothic fantasy, in which the author wallows in theatrical self-indulgence, while the drawing depicting a woman who makes a psychic connection with a doomed alchemist in ‘A Bewitched Life’ is very like the image that appears in photographs of Blavatsky. This first tale warns of the terrible consequences awaiting those who use occult powers without the counterweight of philosophy, but the next three demonstrate only a positive view of mesmerism or thought transference. ‘The Cave of the Echoes’ tells of a murderer exposed and destroyed by a Hungarian mesmerist, a Siberian Shaman, and the goblin-like infant reincarnate of his victim; ‘The Luminous Shield’ concerns a young English visitor to Constantinople, who finds her lost pet dog with the aid of a mesmerised dervish; while the psychic gifts of a two-hundred-year-old guide save a group of stranded explorers in ‘From the Frozen Lands’. The final story ‘The Ensouled Violin’

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<sup>85</sup> Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, pp. 1 and 290.

<sup>86</sup> Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, pp. 27 and 31.

<sup>87</sup> Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, pp. 27, 25, 294.

<sup>88</sup> See Besant’s foreword to *Helena Petrova Blavatsky: Nightmare Tales* [1892] (Charleston SC: BiblioLife, nd.)

was probably inspired by rumours that the playing of celebrated violinist Niccolò Paganini had a ‘mesmerising’ effect on his audiences due to a pact with the devil and the imprisonment of the souls of his murdered wife and lover within his violin. In Blavatsky’s tale a violinist engages in a musical duel with Paganini, playing on an instrument strung with the intestines of his self-sacrificing music teacher. Having ignored the pleas emanating from the possessed instrument that the strings may be reunited with the corpse, the musician is strangled by the strings while his audience flees in horror. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the piece both artists play is Paganini’s ‘Witches’ Dance’. The unalloyed relish with which Blavatsky relates this tale of vivisection and Faustian damnation is palpable, and suggests that the young Helena who had allegedly held other children ‘spellbound with her weird stories’ was very much alive in Madame Blavatsky as she neared her death.<sup>89</sup>

Edward Bulwer-Lytton was also well known as a writer of weird stories, elements of which, particularly his own favourites *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story* (1862), seem to be reflected in the works of Blavatsky. A less sensationalist version of ‘The Ensouled Violin’ for instance might be detected in the obsessive Italian musician who appears in *Zanoni*, speaking through his violin and treating it as his eldest child. But both Basham and Washington suggest that the link between Bulwer-Lytton and Blavatsky may have been more profoundly significant than coincidence or mild plagiarism. Basham argues that,

Whether she appears as mesmerised somnambule, spiritualist medium, revamped witch or emancipated Theosophist, the ‘New Woman’ of the Victorian period owes much to the curious alliance between literature and occultism which helped to script her existence.<sup>90</sup>

She implies that in Blavatsky’s case this statement might be literally valid, and that Bulwer-Lytton and Benjamin Disraeli, two politicians with literary ambitions and an interest in the occult, may have between them unwittingly provided the template for Theosophy and the script for its founder’s life. Whilst acknowledging Blavatsky’s wide but erratic reading of Asian religious texts, Washington asserts that Bulwer-Lytton was her source for the idea of the Masters, and furthermore that ‘It would not be unjust to say her new religion was virtually manufactured from his pages’.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Basham notes the ‘uncanny resemblance’ between Blavatsky and

<sup>89</sup> Washington, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*, p. 30.

<sup>90</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. x.

<sup>91</sup> Washington, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*, p. 36.

Theodora, the heroine of Disraeli's novel *Lothair*, as well as the equally uncanny way in which 'after the book's publication in 1870, her own life began to follow the narrative script laid down for Theodora'.<sup>92</sup>

The Masters of Theosophy might well have had their nativity in the three mysterious sages who appear in *Zanoni* as the guardians of secret knowledge. The first is a scholar of Rosicrucian texts who, having befriended the narrator in an antiquarian bookshop, bequeaths the coded manuscript of the story to him. Declining to elaborate further on the identity of the 'august fraternity' he retorts 'can you imagine that any members of that sect ... would themselves lift the veil that hides the Isis of their wisdom from the world?'<sup>93</sup> This seems a highly significant phrase in view of the title of Blavatsky's first work on Theosophy, *Isis Unveiled*. Zanoni himself is a god-like being, reputed to be ancient despite his appearance, much travelled and possessed of immense wealth and wisdom, but doomed to mortality by his love for the heroine. Zanoni's brother mage, Mejnour, has in contrast, sequestered himself from life. If these three men represent the Masters then Glyndon is the dilettante who dabbles in the dangerous occult without true commitment and consequently becomes a victim of the dreaded (female) 'Dweller at the Threshold'. Bulwer-Lytton created another example of the Occultist without Theosophy (or at least without Philosophy), in the person of Margrave who finds the elixir of life by nefarious means and is eventually destroyed by beings from another dimension, in *A Strange Story*. In these two novels one *might* find the outline of Madame Blavatsky's 'new religion', with its Eastern Mystics, privileged esoteric Mysteries, and warnings against black Occultism.

The Occult Mother emerged in the persona of the alluring Theodora Campion in Disraeli's *Lothair*. She is the wife of an American Colonel, who holds society spellbound with 'the magic of [her] voice', and the 'supernatural light' of her 'wonderful grey eyes', while the spirit of young Lothair yields to the 'mystical sway' of her influence.<sup>94</sup> She is the mysterious 'Mary-Anne', embodying the Spirit of Revolution as she works secretly for the victory of Garibaldi against the forces of the Papacy; but she is also the founder of a neo-platonic religion. After her valiant death at Metana she is described as a woman who did not bow before altars, who 'believed in her immortality' and 'did not believe in death according to ecclesiastical

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<sup>92</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 211.

<sup>93</sup> The Right Hon. Lord Lytton, *Zanoni* [1842] (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1901), p. 13.

<sup>94</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Lothair* (London: Ballantyne Press, 1870), pp. 218, 134, 194.

interpretation'.<sup>95</sup> Basham reinforces her argument about the mirror images of Blavatsky and Theodora with a reminder that not only did both have careers as musicians and singers, but that Blavatsky also claimed to have fought in the Battle of Metana and to have been injured, or in some versions, killed and reborn there. Basham contends that if the 'Metana episode was a fiction, *Lothair* was the source for it', and she notes that following the publication of *Lothair*, Blavatsky acquired an American Colonel, and invented a new religion in the form of Theosophy.<sup>96</sup> Washington and Basham each make a strong case for the influence of Bulwer-Lytton and Disraeli respectively in the evolution of both a branch of 'new witchcraft' and of its high priestess.

It is also tempting to look for parallels between Lady Blessington and Mrs Poyntz in Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story*, although the latter does not possess the feminine allure of Marguerite Blessington. In fact Lytton emphasises the masculine virtues of the 'Queen of the Hill', who is 'a very powerful creature' with 'handsome hair for a man' and a 'dauntless' masculine face.<sup>97</sup> This gender inversion is reminiscent (albeit less flamboyantly so) of Sir Walter Scott's mannish witch figures, and implies not androgyny but matriarchal power. Her masculine attributes are further emphasised by her designation as 'Mrs. Colonel Poyntz', which has the effect of transferring her husband's title to her in a relationship in which *his* role is described as that of an 'admirable aide-de-camp to the general in command'(p. 32). Nonetheless, Allan Fenwick, the rationalist hero of this work, weaves a magical web through a realist warp as he watches her knitting, 'I by her side, gazing now on herself, now on her work, with a vague idea that the threads in the skein of my own web of love or of life were passing quickly through those noiseless fingers (p. 29). Although Fenwick's refusal to recognise the occult is challenged during the progress of the novel, this brief mental transformation of the colonel's wife into an amalgam of fate-spinner and fairy godmother is soon dispelled when she is revealed to be simply a manipulative woman intent on serving her own interests. The parochial circle over which she presides is one whose Mysteries are purely secular, while her disapproval of clairvoyance and mesmerism is ambiguous, being motivated by her belief that their

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<sup>95</sup> Disraeli, *Lothair*, p. 376.

<sup>96</sup> Basham, p. 212.

<sup>97</sup> Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story* [1862] (Np: Wildside Press, 2008), p. 29. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

use might cause her acolytes to look foolish, rather than firm disbelief in the veracity of these practices (p. 62).

The copious notes which accompany both *Zanoni* and *A Strange Story* indicate an authorial desire to render the supernatural natural; yet the supernatural theatricality of the author who delighted in adding gargoyles and turrets to the gothic splendour of his family home and on occasions named himself ‘Merlin’ or ‘Le Vieux Sorcier’, is evident in the cast of witches, sorcerers, demons and fairy brides which inhabit his pages.<sup>98</sup> Mitchell claims that Bulwer-Lytton was often ‘teased’ about his occult interests, and consequently retreated into defensive denial; if this is so it might explain why he seems to retreat from developing the realist character of Mrs Poyntz into that of an Occult Woman.

One might also ask why Disraeli abandoned the gloriously wicked character Mrs Felix Lorraine after four chapters of his first novel, *Vivian Grey*, which was published anonymously in 1826 when he was twenty-one years old. Its eponymous hero is a politically ambitious feline youth, whose plans to form a new political party are initially thwarted by the manipulative German vamp, Mrs Lorraine. Their mutual amorality causes Vivian to wonder at one point whether this ‘mysterious foreigner’ is ‘a double of myself’.<sup>99</sup> The abrupt opening and closing of a door provokes his speculation as to whether the unseen intruder was ‘Mephistopheles, or Mrs Felix Lorraine; one or the other, or both perhaps’ (p. 54), and he muses on the Faustian nature of their relationship, ‘I once imagined that I was using this woman for my purpose. Is it possible that aught of good can come to one who is forced to make use of such evil instruments as these?’ (p. 112). Their final meeting takes place on a suitably Walpurgian night, where clouds scud in the ‘capricious wind’ like ‘a band of witches too late for their Sabbath meeting, or some other mischief’ (pp. 115-16). This is the setting for Mrs Felix Lorraine’s ‘mad scene’ in which she talks of an ‘unhallowed’ custom of her native land, by which, on ‘particular nights’ with ‘peculiar ceremonies’ fate reveals itself to ‘the solitary votary’; Vivian is, she claims, her idol and her fate, but she fails to appear again in this long novel as either his worshipper or his Nemesis (pp. 117-124). Yet, just as Vivian Grey perceived a dark mirror-image in the predatory sorceress Mrs Felix Lorraine, Disraeli himself never

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<sup>98</sup> Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, pp. 149 and 147.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Vivian Grey* [1853] (London: Peter Davies, 1870), p. 112. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

totally escaped from the doppelganger of unscrupulous Vivian Grey. Thom Braun writes that by 1853, when Disraeli revised the work, *Vivian Grey* was an ‘embarrassment’ to ‘a front-bench politician and an ex-chancellor of the exchequer’.<sup>100</sup> The novel was still popular in 1870 when Disraeli dismissed it as ‘a puerile work’ which ‘has baffled even the efforts of its creator to suppress it.’<sup>101</sup> 1870 also saw the publication of Disraeli’s hugely popular *Lothair*, which relates the tale of a morally upright young man whose life and career are influenced by a Wise Woman; unlike *Vivian Grey* where the main protagonist’s evil mirrors that of a woman who embodies medieval maleficium and worships an example of flawed humanity as a god. Consciously or not, Disraeli created in Mrs Lorraine and Theodora polar opposites of the wicked witch and of the priestess.

Equally, when Bulwer-Lytton engages with the male fantasy (hopeful or fearful) of the witch as the demonic scarlet woman, she is the ‘other’ of the occult mother who knowingly guides those who follow her faithfully to divine truth. In *Zanoni* a seductive ‘enchantress’ tempts the prospective neophyte with a dance likened to that of ‘Maenads and the witches Sabbat’ (p. 270). Subsequently the ‘heavenly gateway’ to supreme knowledge is barred to him by a veiled, reptilian female ‘surpassing in malignity and hatred all her tribe...whose power increases over the spirit precisely in proportion to its fear’ (p. 263). In contrast, Ayesha, who ensures the constant rejuvenation of Margrave in *A Strange Story*, represents the misguided and misguiding occult mother whose magic provides physical renewal while the soul dies. When the forces of darkness surround them and she can no longer preserve his immortality, Margrave vilifies her as a ‘witch’ and bids her ‘Sorceress, avaunt!’ (p. 487), but she stays to cradle him on her lap as he dies, forming the image of a healing pietà with her demonic child.

Mitchell also notes that Bulwer-Lytton’s novels are ‘full of childlike heroines, sometimes of such a rare purity that they have become intermediaries between this world and the spirits’.<sup>102</sup> In common with Wilkie Collins’ child-like vessels of white-witchery, those of Bulwer-Lytton are passive conductors of inter-world communication; Lilian in *A Strange Story* is likened by Margrave to priestesses of the ancient oracles, the pristine beings who unconsciously ‘store the gift of the Pythoness’

<sup>100</sup> Thom Braun, *Disraeli the Novelist* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 28.

<sup>101</sup> Disraeli, preface to *Vivian Grey* (1870).

<sup>102</sup> Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, p. 11.

(p. 129). Her unbidden trance states allow her to travel to ‘beautiful lands far away from the earth’ (p. 47), while her healing presence causes Fenwick to feel that ‘the streets were not ghastly now, and the moon was no longer Hecate...but the sweet, simple Lady of the stars’ (p. 48): a juxtaposition of deities which aligns Lilian’s supernatural powers with the healing imagery of new witchcraft. Yet, Lilian and Collins’ white women are like the magnetist’s passive female mediums who pose no moral, intellectual or political threat to individual men or to patriarchal society in general. Once woman awakes from passivity and becomes what Owen describes as ‘the principle actor, the instigator and director’ of a séance she has begun the process which produces ‘star mediums’, healers and priestesses.<sup>103</sup> She also becomes a potential threat to the status quo. Edward and Rosina Bulwer-Lytton had a volcanic relationship in which Edward, in common with Mr Weldon and other husbands who felt themselves to be hag-ridden, had his wife committed to an asylum, although she proved her sanity and was quickly released. Mitchell argues that Rosina’s anger was provoked by her desire to be her husband’s equal, ‘not only in the affections of their children and in the disposal of family income but also in Rosina’s literary production’.<sup>104</sup> Disraeli described Rosina’s mother, Anna Doyle Wheeler, as ‘not pleasant, something between Jeremy Bentham and Meg Merrilies, very clever, but awfully revolutionary’, thereby not only identifying the possible source of Rosina’s proto-feminism, but illustrating the means by which witch imagery could be used to define the perceived threat posed by defiant intelligent women, even when they made no claims to occultism.<sup>105</sup>

Power in both *Zanoni* and *A Strange Story*, even when transmitted through a passive female medium, is controlled for good or ill by a male. However in his late novel *The Coming Race* (1871), Bulwer-Lytton creates an underground race whose society is fuelled entirely by an electrical fluid called ‘Vril’, which is channelled most effectively by superior females. The narrator likens Vril’s wide-ranging properties to electricity but also to forms of new witchcraft ‘such as magnetism, galvanism etc.’, and he evokes elements of traditional witch imagery around the Amazonian beings who fly (albeit with wings not broomsticks) and direct the channelled Vril through

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<sup>103</sup> Owen, *The Darkened Room*, p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, p. 44.

<sup>105</sup> Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, p. 25.

staffs or ‘wands’.<sup>106</sup> These women known as the ‘Vril ya’ can ‘exercise influence over minds, and bodies’, (p. 21), engage in thought transference and heal and preserve life; but they far exceed the ambitions of the ‘star mediums’ in their ability to destroy a single being, an army or a city ‘like the flash of lightening’ (p. 25). Unlike their Victorian sisters they openly choose and court their future mates although, significantly, power diminishes when ‘she suspends [her wings] with her own willing hand’ over the nuptial couch (p. 78). Despite this final concession to patrimony the narrator notes that ‘all that our female philosophers above ground contend for as to rights of women is conceded as a matter of course in this happy commonwealth’ (pp. 109-10). Yet he undermines the utopian quality of a world which, though free of disease, poverty, war, ‘the adulterer, the profligate, the harlot’ (p. 109), is also devoid of literature, courage and invention. This female-dominated commonwealth is a sterile place of ruthless rationalism, where female Sages assume calmly that they will eventually exterminate all lesser races, including the human race. Thereby, a utopia is rendered dystopian by the ultra-rationalism of its gynocracy. The physical perfection and glistening wings of its powerful females should align them with the angels, but Bulwer-Lytton’s otherworld of liberated women occupies the traditional subterranean abode of demons and threatens not only to undermine but also to destroy mankind. The narrator’s reaction to his first sight of the fliers projects a prophetic warning which resonates throughout the novel, ‘I felt the terror and the wild excitement which, in Gothic ages, a traveller might have persuaded himself that he witnessed a *sabbat* of fiends and witches’ (p. 15).

Perhaps that sentence echoes the emotions felt by men who, like Bulwer-Lytton’s narrator, believed ‘the two most disturbing and potential influences on upper-ground society’ were ‘Womankind and Philosophy. I mean, the Rights of Women’ (p. 109); particularly when they were faced with the prospect of a ‘coming race’ of pioneering ‘new women’, many of whom were associated with ‘new witchcraft’. The shadow of old witchcraft added a further ‘disturbing’ quality to the image of new-witch-women when, as with Anna Doyle Wheeler, it was used to darken their character or when, like Anna Kingsford, they cloaked themselves in that shadow. Kingsford, an advocate for the rights of women and animals, a spiritualist, and a guide to new spirituality, exalted in the death of a vivisectionist with the words ‘

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<sup>106</sup> E.G.E. Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*, [1871] (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing 1995), pp. 20 and 53. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.



yesterday, November 11, at eleven at night, I knew that my will had smitten another vivisector! ... I *have* succeeded the demonstration of the power is complete.<sup>107</sup> It is a statement worthy of the satanic villainess of a sensation novel, rather than one of the first English women to qualify (in 1880) as a doctor. Kingston's glee and her recourse to the imagery of malediction might be excused to some extent by the fact that her medical training in France had exposed her to the horrors of live animal dissection. Many (including George MacDonald) were opposed to vivisection, but not all used the language of medieval diabolism to condemn it, and fewer still suggested, like the witches of old and their 'victims', that will power could kill. Kingsford symbolises women whom some denounced as practitioners of dark witchcraft under a new label, and others saw as embodiments of revolutionary new magic which encompassed mediumship, healing, and new spirituality. However, as demonstrated in Blavatsky's damnation of Spirituality and Kingsford's reaction to vivisection, the language and imagery of dark witchcraft also sprang readily to the tongues and minds of those who distanced themselves from it. Washington refers to a confrontation between Blavatsky and Kingsford in 1884 when, having become Theosophists in 1874, Kingsford and her collaborator Edward Maitland challenged Blavatsky's bias towards eastern occultism: it not only illustrates the early Theosophists' taste for the dramatic and the near deification of the 'occult woman', but also demonstrates the ease with which traditional witch-imagery was invoked by adherents of the new religion;

Sweeping into a meeting, where some of her more theatrical members sank to their knees before her, [Blavatsky] attempted to subdue Maitland and Kingsford by staring them down, but they were not to be cowed, and accused her of trying to put a spell on them.<sup>108</sup>

While Kingsford and Maitland founded the Hermetic Society (in 1884) in order to explore western occult traditions, and thereby laid the foundations for the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Annie Besant, another multi-faceted 'new woman' with an interest in both science and the occult and a determination to achieve social reform, became Blavatsky's chosen successor.<sup>109</sup> Before her marriage Kingsford had negotiated the terms of that marriage, including the right to determine her religious beliefs. Her Anglican cleric husband apparently raised no objection to her conversion to Catholicism and her subsequent involvement with the esoteric, her medical studies,

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<sup>107</sup> Cited in Basham, *The Trial of Women*, p. 72

<sup>108</sup> Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*, p. 76.

<sup>109</sup> Besant had a degree in science.

or her close but platonic relationship with Maitland. In contrast, Besant was turned out of the family home by her clergyman husband when her growing religious doubts left her unable to take communion. She lost custody of her son at that point and then of her daughter following her conviction for ‘obscene libel’ when she and a fellow atheist and reformer published a book advocating birth control. Basham likens Besant’s demonization as an unfit mother to a ‘version of the witch hunts’.<sup>110</sup> Besant’s fight for women’s rights intensified; and her promulgation of atheism continued until she met Blavatsky in 1887 and fell under her spell, experiencing, as she confessed a ‘well-nigh uncontrollable desire to bend down and kiss [Blavatsky], under the compulsion of that yearning voice, those compelling eyes...’.<sup>111</sup>

It is arguable that Besant and Kingsford (rather than Blavatsky) with their amalgam of healing, spirituality, defiance of victimhood and battles for social improvement were, along with Chandos Leigh Hunt and Georgina Weldon, archetypal evolutionary precursors of New Age witches who claim to channel connections with the occult in order to heal bodies, psyches, society and the planet. Yet, all the examples of occult womanhood (fictional or real) examined in this chapter demonstrate some, if not all, of the traits of New Age witch imagery. From the passive mesmeric tools whose trance states were preceded by communal hymn singing, to Florence Cook whose patron paid her a sum he deemed equal to a curate’s stipend, to Chandos Leigh Hunt who found something ‘sacrilegious’ in the frivolous use of her powers, to Blavatsky with her declamation of ‘revealed’ truths and kneeling followers, and Kingsford who published her mystic inspiration under the title *Clothed in the Sun*, they all establish a connection between ‘new witchcraft’ and religion. Blavatsky, as the ‘Mother of Theosophy’, Kingsford, the ‘Mother of Vegetarianism’, and Besant, described as the ‘avatar of the Indian mother goddess’ for her efforts towards reform of the Indian Empire, consciously or not, also reinforced the image of a nurturing female aspect to divinity.<sup>112</sup> However, like the witch-fairy-godmother of neo-fairy tale, they demonstrate an awareness of, and often a willingness to use, the dark witch shadow that accompanied them on their campaigns, thereby pre-empting those women who, in the following century, chose to adopt the name ‘witch’.

<sup>110</sup> Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 100.

<sup>111</sup> Cited in Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, p. 198.

<sup>112</sup> Washington, in *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*, relates that the contemporary press bestowed this description on Besant, p. 106.

## Conclusion

This thesis has shown that the witch was indeed alive and well in the abundance of metaphorical images emanating from the bubbling cauldron of nineteenth-century culture. Indeed, the diversity of witch imagery increased and evolved during the period, broadening the limited iconography of malevolent witchery or powerless victimhood bequeathed by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century imaginations. I have also demonstrated the connection between the diversity of nineteenth-century imagery and the mixture of anxiety and intellectual autonomy generated by social evolution, which resulted in the need for an externalised agent through which to express disquiet, and the freedom of the individual to determine the form and nature of that agent. Witches were nominated by writers and artists to view nineteenth-century society from 'the edge', and from there to speak the unspeakable, being presented in numerous forms as the wicked hag or the innocent or deluded victim; equally they might appear as wise women, fairy godmothers, sirens, were-wolves, or in any one of many incarnations where they are implicitly or directly defined as 'witches'.

Images of the witch explored in each of the four areas of my thesis demonstrate an uneven progression from negative to positive imagery. Realist fiction saw the witch through Enlightened eyes, presenting her primarily as a metaphor for victimhood. Through poetry and painting she evolved into an icon of 'otherness' for those whose art (in any form) or whose own nature caused them to feel marginalised from society; her creators also (re)established links with mythic imagery, thereby bequeathing to New Age witchcraft a spiritual link to timeless alternative wisdom and a glamorous substitute for the image of the gibbering crone. However, the greatest transition from negative to positive imagery occurred in fairy tales and 'new witchcraft'. Through neo-fairytales the witch acquired the combined characteristics of the wise-woman and the sorceress as she became the powerful fairy godmother, and ensured that twentieth-century fantasy could accommodate many variants of the good, the bad, the ugly and even the comic witch. Practitioners of 'new witchcraft' became healers, defiant advocates for social reform, and spiritual leaders, thereby reversing the descent from priestess to witch postulated by Dasent, and foreshadowing twentieth-century neo-paganism which presented an amalgam of priestess and witch as a positive image. The interlinking of images of the witch and perceptions of nature emerges as a fascinating aspect of the growing positivity of both, as the Grimms' forest with its fearsome wolf-witch is superseded by MacDonald's wild woodland where a loving green witch helps children find the Golden Key

to life; or the howls of Scott's bloody-clawed Green Women are muffled by Hardy's paeans for the earth goddesses of Wessex. This is part of a process identified by Hutton as 'the exaltation of the natural and irrational' feminine qualities once 'feared or disparaged'; and is echoed in Rae Beth's 'Resolution of a Witch' (1990) which begins 'May I be as the one who weaves the cloth / in a forest, deep hidden'.<sup>1</sup>

Beth's twentieth-century words also carry connotations of Swinburne's reference to the combination of literal and metaphorical light and dark in Pre-Raphaelite imaging of the witch figure; a contrast between the positive and negative which is evident in virtually every example of witchery included in my thesis. The fairy godmother who says that some regard her as a witch, or Kingsley's physically divided symbols of love and punishment, or the mirror other of the Poor Clare, or of Mary Coleridge's poet, or even of the artist's and poet's muse who elevates the value of his talents by her potential to demand the ultimate price for them, all demonstrate that the dark image provided a necessary negative to the positive. Consequently my initial hypothesis that nineteenth-century witch imagery would demonstrate a positive realignment of perceptions of the witch was only vindicated up to a point, but that partial failure validated the fairy-tale convention of curses which are blessings in disguise. I discovered a continued use of negative witch imagery (however subtle) to shadow the positive throughout the nineteenth-century; an ambiguity which invested the fairy godmother with enhanced power or re-empowered the victim of the witch-hunt, by allusions to the negative capabilities of her malignant shadow. This ambiguity enabled the metaphorical nineteenth-century witch to speak for a much wider spectrum of the marginalised than had those actually perceived as witches by the credulous or pitied as victims of delusion by disillusioned philosophy. Victorian writers and artists who used the image of the witch as a scrying device through which to examine society and its individual entities understood the value of her darkness which, like the night sky behind the illuminated room, or the dark-silvering behind the mirror, or the drop of ink in the bowl, enhanced the reflective capacity as well as the power of her mediumship. Perhaps it performs the same function for the woman who now aligns herself with the victimised, defies convention, or symbolises her alternative spirituality, by her use of the darkly-resonant word 'witch' ; otherwise, to paraphrase and invert Maggie Tulliver's query, 'what good would [the name 'witch'] do her then?'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, p.33 and Beth, *Hedge Witch*, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 13.

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