Bedlam and Broomsticks:

Representations of the Witch in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Writing

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by

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Abstract

This thesis is about representations of witches in texts by women writers, and how they develop over time. It begins with texts produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, when witchcraft was re-defined as hysteria, to the present, demonstrating the continuing and shifting significance of the witch in women's writing. Women writers of every era and political stance, in texts of almost every genre, replicate, revise and repeat images of the witch, suggesting a unique bond between the two. The issues that witches interpellate and this thesis interrogate - maternity, marriage, lesbianism, matriarchy and madness - belong primarily to female experience, as does the threat of sexual subversion implicit in the witch's crimes and the punishments imposed on her historically.

This thesis begins by investigating witches as marginal figures in the texts of Mary Coleridge, Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Gaskell, produced at a time when women were similarly subjugated. The witch's connection to political emancipation forms the basis of discussion of interwar writing; Margaret Murray, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sylvia Townsend Warner focus on the witch as socially and sexually deviant. This is continued in my analysis of Dorothy B. Hughes, Enid Blyton and Sylvia Plath, all of whom appropriate motifs of witch-trials and associated violence against women. Second wave feminism sought to overturn such images, but they remain central, however, in the work of poets such as Plath, Olga Broumas and Anne Sexton, and popular novelists such as Marion Zimmer Bradley, who re-figure fairy-tale witches to form part of a feminist dialectic. My final chapter discusses popular cultural images of the witch; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* limit the multiplicitious potential of the witch to conventional stereotypes of femininity. However, when women write the witch, something subversive always leaks out. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels and the character of Professor Umbridge initiate a grotesque fantasy that, whilst only utopian, provides radical potential for female rebellion and release.

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Those whom the powers wish to destroy, they first make mad

- Euripides

Introduction

In the Beginning, there was Magic: Women, Witches and Female Writers

Macbeth: How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags?

What is't you do?

Witches: A deed without a name.

- William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*[1]

Things would have been a lot better for everyone if Macbeth hadn't

listened to those witches.

- Leslie Ellen Jones, *From Witch to Wicca*[2]

What is a Witch?

The answer seems self-evident. Everyone knows that witches wear pointed hats, black

dresses and cloaks; they fly around on broomsticks; their favourite snack is a nice

juicy baby; they are purveyors of potions, curses and general malevolence: the

archetypal fairy tale villains. Above all, they practise magic. A more expansive answer

would include the witches of folklore, in addition to those of fairy tales. These are

women - very rarely men - who live on the margins of society and who are responsible

for the failure of crops, the milklessness of cows and the impotence of men: the fairy

tale witch minus the costume. There are also the accused witches, who may or may

not have had any knowledge of magic or witchcraft, but who were hauled before

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[1] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (London: Arden, 1998), IV. I. 63 - 65

[2] Leslie Ellen Jones, *From Witch to Wicca* (New York: Cold Spring, 2004), p. 15

various civil and ecclesiastical courts in previous centuries. They were tortured until they confessed to outrageous acts of depravity, and then burned at the stake, hanged or stoned to death. Already, representing the witch becomes problematic: are they the violators or the violated? The monsters or the victims?

The notion of the victimised witch is balanced by another representation: that of the nubile, beautiful and lascivious witch, whose charms are purely physical. These are the witches fantasised by the witch hunters, who conceived their own attraction to the 'witch' as necessarily coming from the outside - the result of a spell intended to incite sexual evil. It is this representation of the witch that is endorsed by critics who see the witch hunts solely in the context of cultural and institutional misogyny, and the Freudian projection of frightening sexual urges. She is either the alluring, seductive witch who uses her beauty as a trap for the unwary man and then keeps him through magic, or the repulsive, aged witch who uses magic to obtain sex that no man who was not bewitched would ever offer her. Sex is always the witch's focus, but in relation to the texts studied in this thesis, it is also the key to her liberation. References to her sexuality further notions of witchcraft as a pre-Christian religion, a pagan fertility cult practised in secret for millennia. In this sense, the persecution of witches can be seen not just as the consequence of social and cultural misogyny, but also as a crusade against a religion opposed to Christianity. Witches were tried as heretics, rather than magicians.

So representations of the witch are, historically, complex and multiple, even before literary texts complicate them further. When I began this thesis, I had specific ideas about the literary witches I would discover in texts authored by women; early research

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suggested a clear shift from the construction of the witch as an embodiment of social

and sexual subversion in the second half of the nineteenth century, to the

marginalisation of the witch as a comic or unreal figure, with little resonance or

relevance for female writers, for whom emancipation, literary visibility and social

equality were the rule, rather than the exception. I believed that the significance of the

witch for the women who wrote about her, and for the society that read about her,

would run counter to and in contrast with the gains of the first-wave, second-wave and

post-feminism.

But halfway through this study, a story appeared in every British newspaper (and some

American ones), which disrupted my previous thinking. It demanded consideration

because it was located without exception - in tabloids, broadsheets, left wing and right

wing publications - on the front page. *The Independent*'s headline was 'Witchcraft and

Nail Clippings: The Weird World of Cherie Blair?'; *The Daily Star* claimed 'Blair

Witch Project is so Scary'; echoing the titles of the *Harry* Potter novels, *The Sun*

described, 'Cherie Blair and the Chamber of Lawyers'; *The Daily Express* emphasised

the crux of the issue: 'Witch Cherie Casts Spell on Blair'.[3] Each article focused on

rumours that Cherie Blair, the wife of British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, sent their

toenails and hair clippings to a New Age Guru for guidance during important events,

such as the decision to send British troops to war in Iraq. Central to each article is

Cherie Blair's control of her husband - the patriarch of British society - and the

consequential labelling of her as a witch. Dominik Diamond expressed it:

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[3] Edward James, 'Witchcraft and Nail Clippings: The Weird World of Cherie Blair?' *The Independent*,
p. 1; Dominik Diamond, 'Blair Witch Project is so Scary' *The Daily Star*, p. 1; Jane Marshall, 'Cherie
Blair and the Chamber of Lawyers', *The Sun*, p.1; Daniel Sandler, 'Witch Cherie Casts Spell on Blair',
The Daily Express, p. 1. All October 12th, 2005.

> Now there's nothing wrong with being fascinated by white witches ...
>
> But if Cherie is coming home at night telling Tony to reform the NHS
>
> because of something she divined while splatting owl entrails against a
>
> crooked tree then we're in trouble.[4]

The claims levelled against Mrs Blair included that she casts a circle, a deeply symbolic act in magic, to create a sacred space for herself; that she submitted to Wiccan sexual techniques in order to become pregnant with her son, Leo; that she was washed by a female guru who regularly took 'power-naps' in the Blairs' bed. Such practices apparently indicated that she was able to wield enormous influence over her husband, and, therefore, over government, thereby feeding her own political ambition.

Articles obsessed with political and celebrity scandal, particularly when they concern powerful women, are neither new nor surprising. But what was significant for me was the way in which all of the articles, regardless of political bias, replicated exactly the misogynist language and ideologies that had been levelled against witches and women for centuries. The very attitudes that I had believed to be irrelevant, if not wholly extinct, were the focus of every national newspaper. Their references to the potential of the witch's sexuality to disorder society, to a female authority that challenges Christianity, to sexual deviance and lesbianism, seem to make the prejudices of the nineteenth century current. The witch still signifies some sort of threat from the outside, a challenge to the dominant discourses and authorities of society. The subversion that I had found in the earlier texts studied in this thesis, but which had seemed either less significant or wholly absent later on, continues, as do the anxieties

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[4] Diamond, 'Blair Witch Project is So Scary'

implicit in the condescension of 'splatting owl entrails against a crooked tree.' Indeed, the male writer's insinuation that female minds are unable to resolve important decisions is one that was often levelled against the suffragettes, nearly a century before, to justify imprisoning female hysterics, deviants and witches in the nineteenth century. I will argue throughout that witches always resist this imprisonment and categorisation. Despite the attempts of patriarchy to control witches and women – whether by silencing, incarceration, raping, stoning or burning on pyres – witches written by women always initiate some sort of subversion. And it is this threat to the regulated, male-ordered world that caused the Cherie Blair story to occupy so much space on the front pages of newspapers, not just in Britain, but across the world.

Literary Representations

This thesis is about representations of witches in texts by women writers, and how they develop over time. It begins with texts produced in the second half of the nineteenth century, when witchcraft began to be re-defined as hysteria, informing modern understandings and representations of witches. The chapters move forward through the twentieth century to the present, demonstrating the continuing and shifting significance of the witch in women's writing. Although, in some cases, I refer to male writers' constructions of the witch, for example, P. B. Shelley's 'The Witch of Atlas', Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, in order to establish a cultural norm, it is the witches appropriated by women writers that interest me. This is because the frequency with which women writers of every era and political stance replicate, revise and repeat images of the witch suggests, in texts of almost every genre, a unique bond between the witch and the woman writer, which seems to exclude male experience. Indeed, the issues that witches interpellate – maternity,

marriage, lesbianism, matriarchy and madness - belong primarily to female experience, as does the threat of sexual subversion implicit in the witch's crimes and the punishments imposed on her historically. A legacy of injustice and violation seems to be inherent in a matriarchal authority that witches conjure and women writers access. Yet it is the male texts on the subject - those mentioned above, and of course, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the Grimms' *Fairy Tales* - that have come to define the witch for wider society and to attract critical attention thus far. Furthermore, as Anne Barstow elucidates, the study of witchcraft and witchcraft persecution is part of the study of women's history, especially the history of social and sexual violence against women;[5] literary witches continue to inform and re-write that history.

Representations of the witch and her craft extend over several centuries, becoming inflected with historical and cultural meanings from which it is now impossible to separate them. In the twenty-first century, witchcraft sits uneasily on the boundary between magic and religion; to practitioners, it is, without question, a religion, entirely separate from Christianity, yet no more or less magical than the rites of Catholic Mass, and no less nurturing of the human spirit. To others, witch is a label for a person who worships Satan, sacrifices babies and is an active force of evil - a definition entirely derived from and complicit with Christian teachings. Neither archaeologists nor theologians can be sure where magic or religion began, but both were firmly in existence by the time that humans invented writing, because magic pervades early

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[5] Anne Barstow, *Witch Craze* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 13

narrative writing.[6] The idea that witchcraft, as a female religion, pre-dates and undermines male religion and writing is one that many of the women writers who feature in this study rely upon to challenge conventional literary forms.

Shamanism is probably the earliest surviving form of witchcraft; anthropologists have come to apply the word 'shaman' to those who enter into a trance and send their souls to an Otherworld to interact with spirits and deities. Their other chief function is to heal the sick, who are conceived as ailing because they are missing all or part of their souls, lost or held captive in the Otherworld. There has always been a suspicion in European minds that the role of Shaman is simply the tribal way of dealing with people whom Western civilisation would call schizophrenic, or possibly epileptic, or even homosexual; in some cultures, particularly Native American, male shamans dress or act as women, including taking husbands. This definition of the witch or shaman as mad and/or sexually deviant becomes even more significant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when a drive towards psychology and explanation saw witches not as magicians, but as mentally ill. As will be discussed later, the madness label is not always limiting; in the hands of female writers, madness provides a means of escape from the dominant forces of society that seek to enclose women within the domestic sphere.

The relationship between shamanism and witchcraft is more complex, however. 'Shamans' have traditionally been located in Asia and the Americas, and witches in

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[6] Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Melueth Eliade, *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996)

Europe and Africa. Shamanism is a society's religion, whereas witchcraft has, since the medieval period, been conceived as existing alongside or in opposition to the dominant religion. Witches, in pre-modern texts and cultures, are evil and the enemies of humans, believed to threaten all aspects of fertility: they cause hail which destroys crops; they cause disease; they make men impotent; they steal animals' milk so that they cannot feed their young; they threaten babies and children in every imaginable way. In contrast, Eliade notes that '[Shamans] are pre-eminently the antidemonic champions; they combat not only demons and disease, but also 'black' magicians'.[7] In general, it can be said that shamanism - or male magic - defends life, health, fertility and the world of 'light' against death, disease, sterility, disasters and the world of 'darkness' - female magic.[8] Carlo Ginzburg's *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath* (1991) outlines many of the analogies between witches in Europe and shamans in the Americas, also noting the different moral and cultural weight given to shamanic rather than witch activities.[9]

Negative representations of the witch predate the witch hunts and trials of the early modern period by a long way; many of the stereotypes that persist today exist also in the classical era. For instance, classical witches are invariably female. Males who practise magic may be charlatans, 'con men', or possibly even genuine holy men, but they are depicted as rational and deliberate, normal, if antisocial, humans. Witches are irrational, uncontrollable, connected to a force of nature that is outside of society and

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[7] Eliade, *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, p. 112
[8] Ibid p. 113
[9] Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches Sabbath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 71

which threatens it.[10] Medea is one of the first classical witches, and over the centuries, representations of her have become ever darker and more threatening. Medea spent many years fleeing from one kingdom to another around the Mediterranean, in each place gradually winning over a ruler until her penchant for murder forced her to move on – often in a dragon-drawn chariot. Yet despite her antisocial tendencies, she became an immortal in the Elysian fields and reigned as Achilles' wife. Many scholars have suggested that Medea herself was a goddess who was debased into a witch in the transition from myth to legend. Whether goddess, priestess, or witch, however, she is always presented as a dangerous alien, seductive, powerful and unpredictable, untrustworthy and at the mercy of her passions. Jason and the Argonauts are more than happy to take advantage of her aid – and she saves their lives on several occasions - yet ultimately, she is always Other, and always dispensable. In classical myth, witches such as Medea, Erichtho and Pamphile use their magic for sexual gratification, to overthrow the gods, or make the gods bend to their will. Most importantly, while male magicians were petty criminals, a blight on society, female witches threatened to destroy social order and to return the cosmos to primal chaos.[11] The same impulses and fears inspired by classical witches are hinted at (although perhaps less forcibly) by twenty-first century journalists in their condemnation of Cherie Blair.

Literary witches are also predominantly derived from their classical sisters. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has come to represent canonical literature's view of the witch. The meanings imbued in his writing have been felt far beyond the boundaries of

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[10] Eliade, *Encyclopaedia*, p. 109
[11] Ibid

English Literature, and his revision of topics, from British history to tragedy, have

formed Western cultural norms: Richard III was an evil hunchback, Romeo and Juliet

are the archetypes of romantic love, and, as the epigraph above indicates, things would

'have been a lot better for everyone if Macbeth hadn't listened to those witches'.[12]

Shakespeare's depiction of the supernatural, and of magic and its practitioners, draws

on all levels of contemporary belief. There are ugly old witches, beautiful fairy queens

and kings, ceremonial magicians who renounce their magic in order to claim their

political status, wizardly warriors, changelings, spells and chants from books and oral

traditions.[13] Good magic is practised by attractive people; bad magic by ugly ones.

Male magic derives from books; female magic from demons. This dichotomy between

male ceremonial magic and female practical magic became increasingly important in

the subsequent centuries, when, under the influence of the Enlightenment and the

Industrial Revolution, the first acquired prestige and the second came to be regarded

either as quaint but ultimately harmless folklore, or, more often, as symptomatic of a

dangerously overactive female imagination.

The presence of the witch as a topic of academic study remains relatively new in

comparison with her presence in literary texts, yet up until now, it has largely been

social historians, rather than literary critics, who have concerned themselves with her.

Accusations of, and trials for, witchcraft have permitted the exploration and

discussion of a host of contingent issues such as family, community, elite and popular

divisions, gender relations, textual studies, confessional and political debate, and

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[12] Jones, *From Witch to Wicca*, p. 15
[13] Kier Elam, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp 22- 26 and Maud Ellman, *Shakespeare's Women* (London: Blackwell, 1996), p. 105

changing concepts of demonology and iconography. Historians such as Diane Purkiss, Judith Plaskow, Bengt Ungalow and Garthine Walker have made significant contributions to the field of study, because their work not only recognises the vast numbers of women murdered across continents and centuries, but also acknowledges the problematic and challenging position of the witch, even today. Since the 1970s, feminists have reclaimed the witch as their own, using her legacy to highlight historical injustices against women and also to defy expectations of conventional femininity by providing a more radical alternative. The writings of Catherine Clément, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin have often provided a theoretical complement to the literary works discussed in this thesis, but literary witches themselves provide a unique perspective on the versions of feminism discussed by writers from different periods. Often, women writers go beyond historical representations, interpreting and refiguring witch trials and paganism for their own ends; writers such as Dickinson, Gaskell, Hughes and Plath all engage with witch trials and contemporary theories of femininity, but their work is equally informed by fairy tales, myths and fantasies that seem to stand in opposition to the dominant voices of society.

Running in parallel with the apparently objective academic study of witchcraft was the development, throughout the twentieth century, of witchcraft as a recognised religion: Wicca. Wicca is considered to be a Neopagan religious movement, found most commonly in English-speaking cultures. It was first publicised in 1954 by a British civil servant named Gerald Gardner, after the British Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1951. He claimed that the religion, of which he was an initiate, was a modern survival of an old witch cult, which had existed in secret for hundreds of years, originating in

the pre-Christian Paganism of Europe. Wicca is thus sometimes referred to as the Old Religion. The veracity of Gardner's claims cannot be independently proven, and it is thought that Wiccan theology began to be compiled no earlier than the 1920s.

Wiccans worship a Goddess; they observe the festivals of the eight Sabbats of the year and the full-moon Esbats; and they have a code of ethics that most live by. Wicca is thus generally considered to be a specific form of witchcraft, with particular ritual forms, involving the casting of spells, herbalism, divination and other forms of magic. Wiccan ethics require that magical activities are limited to good purposes only. According to Gerald Gardner, the religion derives from a secret but widespread witch-cult of early modern Europe, which incorporated all of the key religious beliefs and ideals and the distinctive ritual structures found in modern Wicca. While this historical interpretation is now much criticised, it makes it difficult to say conclusively whether Wicca is a religious form of witchcraft or a religion incorporating witchcraft.

Women Writing Witches

The project, then. In charting the literary journey of the witch from the second half of the nineteenth century into the new millennium, I have considered female writers as diverse as Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Coleridge, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Murray, Edna St Vincent Millay, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Enid Blyton, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Olga Broumas, Marion Zimmer Bradley and J. K. Rowling. Current criticism focuses almost solely on literary representations of witches by men: William Shakespeare, Reginald Scot and Arthur Miller. My selection of women writers is deliberately varied, but all are connected by their appropriation of the witch, whether

present in literal or metaphorical manifestations. And the justifications for each are as varied as the texts themselves. Some writers demand consideration precisely because they have been almost entirely excluded from literary criticism; Dorothy Hughes and Mary Coleridge are virtually unknown; Elizabeth Gaskell is one of the most prominent British Victorian women writers, yet her one text on witchcraft has also been excluded; Margaret Murray has similarly been banished. Other writers, particularly Blyton and Rowling, become significant because they are so widely known, and, at the time of writing, are the most published British writers of all time. It is impossible to underestimate the effect that their witches have on public consciousness.

Sexton, Plath and Broumas represent a diverse set of feminist poets of the 1960s and 1970s, and through their representations of the witch, present particularly radical ideologies of female sexuality and feminism. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* exemplify American television's current obsession with the supernatural. Analysis could equally have included series such as *Charmed, The X-Files,* films such as *Bewitched* and even the *Buffy* spin-off, *Angel,* but in *Buffy* and *Sabrina,* the dominance of the protagonists as witches permits a fuller interrogation of the post-feminist contradictions and complexities implicit in late twentieth and early twenty-first century representations of the witch.

As the historical representations of the witch discussed above have revealed, the witch is always figured as 'Other'. She is female when the cultural norm is male; pagan when it is Christian; foreign when it is homogenous; lesbian when it is heterosexual; magic when it is science and explanation. All of the female writers considered in this

study appropriate this subversion of societal mores in their representations of the witch. Their texts are chosen from a deliberately wide range of sources, which are never normally considered in unison in literary study, but in which strong threads of continuity can be found. Conventional categories of genre, form, nation, high and popular culture offer no barriers to my reading of witches in the work of women writers. No previous criticism has set up such a radical premise, but it is one that extends far beyond the limits of this thesis, applying equally to the representations of witches in the work of other women writers; Jane Barlow's *A Witch's Will* (1837), Margaret Walker's *Molly Means* (1945), Joyce Carol Oates' *Do With Me What You Will* (1976), Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1988), Margaret Atwood's *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) and Margaret Drabble's *The Witch of Exmoor* (1995), in addition to the more well-known witchcraft present in Angela Carter, Emily Brontë and Christina Rossetti, all complicate the inherent relationship between witchcraft, women and writing.

At the heart of this triangular relationship is what Shakespeare acknowledges in the epigraph to this introduction: witchcraft as 'a deed without a name', as unrepresentable and incommunicable. The witch seems to operate beyond the borders of language and signification, in the realm of the unknown and in a world that is exclusively feminine. It is perhaps appropriate, then, that my own reading of literary witches works beyond conventional, patriarchal categories. Whereas critics such as Marina Warner, Marilyn Farwell and Maria Tatar have limited themselves by genre, for example, in focusing on fairy tales, on children's literature or on lesbian poetry, I find links and parallels in the presentation of witches in poetry, novels, novellas and popular cultural and academic texts; children's literature, fantasy and romance novels

are equally as significant in constructing witches as radical feminist poetry and Victorian novels; novels spawned by films and television series, secondary texts and fan fiction subvert with as much force as the linguistic revolution of Emily Dickinson, and shared legacies of witch trials and female subjugation lead to transatlantic cultural interchange. Similarly, evolving cultural discourses surrounding female sexuality, marriage, maternity, religion and female liberation inform and complicate the work of all of these women. Representations of the witch are always multiple and conflicted, both within the text itself and in relations to the dominant, contemporary ideologies of its production. Literary criticism that is exclusive, rather than inclusive, surely misses this point. Erecting barriers around nation, genre and popular culture can only reinforce the patriarchal structures that the witch's presence undermines, instating artificial separations. Indeed, by considering both canonical and neglected writers in unison, I hope to offer a new perspective not just on readings of the witch's cultural history, but also on the study of women's literature as a whole, by re-inscribing little-known texts and authors.

One of the most significant of these barriers in much social history and literary criticism is the American/ British divide. Although Diane Purkiss and David Thurlow find the two nations to be divided by their history of witchcraft (a heritage discussed earlier in relation to shamanism), I discover that while women writers from both countries draw on different historical resources - Salem Witch Trials and European Witch Hunts - there are more lines of continuity than difference. Elizabeth Gaskell exemplifies this dual position; locating her witchcraft in the United States serves to both exoticise it and to distance its dangers from British society, but Lois the Witch is actually born in England, connecting the two countries as persecutors of women.

Witchcraft creates a community of women and writers that transcends location, promoting a female sisterhood as vigorously in Dickinson as in Coleridge, and as defiantly in Blyton as in Plath.

Fittingly, then, the most straightforward purpose of the present study is to draw attention to fascinating and significant female writers who have been previously excluded from literary history, to interrogate their relationships with each other, with their particular societies and with feminism as a whole, and to engage in detail with their writing. Beyond this, the thesis will address a number of central questions, all with specific reference to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Firstly, to what extent does the witch alter or decline in significance for women writers as the period of study progresses, and to what extent does she become a locus for feminist subversion of the forces of patriarchy? Is the witch an acknowledged part of Christian belief, part of a framework of God, Jesus and the Devil? Does she exist for Christianity or does she form part of a (fantasy) rejection of it? Similarly, how do ideologies of gender, sexuality and race inform representations? How do conventional ideas of the witch inflect women's writing? And how does this qualify the relationship between witchcraft and the women writer?

Structure of Thesis

This study takes as its point of departure the moment when society goes beyond definitions of witchcraft as female magic or even as folklore, explaining away the power of the witch. During the second half of the nineteenth century, over one hundred and fifty years after the last Witch Trial in Europe, the efforts of scientists,

psychologists, politicians and theologians combined to prove that the witch did not exist. Rather, the signs and symptoms of both her and her victims could be confidently diagnosed as hysteria. The relegation of once-potent magic to the 'silliness' of a weak and excitable female mind is limiting; whereas the witch was once able to threaten society from within, the characterisation of her as a figment or fantasy locks her firmly behind the bars of the mental asylum. In her ground-breaking study of hysteria, *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter argues that such incarceration was, in the 1850s and beyond, typical 'treatment' for women who 'challenged the status quo...[who] threatened social stability.'[14] But literary representations of the witch persisted. Feminist critics have discussed in great detail the oppression of women in nineteenth-century society; similarly literary representations often find the witch imprisoned, oppressed and silenced. But the word 'witch', in the period of study, does not just signify 'evil' women; she evokes both the plight of Everywoman and the rejection of that plight. It is the premise of this thesis that when women write the witch, something more subversive always leaks out.

Chapter One begins at the moment in 1850 when psychology redefined witchcraft as hysteria, legitimising the practice of locking witches and other deviant women behind the bars of the mental asylums from which this thesis takes its title. Yet ideologies of witchcraft seem to persist in popular consciousness, long after scientific rhetoric explains them away. The less conspicuous works of Victorian social novelist Elizabeth Gaskell (1810 - 1865), American poet Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886) and British novelist and essayist Mary Coleridge (1861 - 1907) merit especial

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[14] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (New York: Virago, 1987), p. 204

consideration. Coleridge and Gaskell, in particular, contribute more significantly to the debate than, for example, Christina Rossetti, because they are always, elsewhere, referred to in terms of their social conservatism. What I have discovered challenges this directly. All three women writers always employ representations of the witch to subvert and to challenge, and their witches defy simplistic categorisations and conclusions.

Mary Coleridge's 'The Witch' (1897) highlights the relationship between the marginal status of the witch and her challenge to the dominant social order; the consequences of this challenge are revealed in the writing of Gaskell and Dickinson, but also, to varying extents, in all of the writers considered in this thesis. Similarly, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Lois the Witch* (1859) may be viewed as one of the most significant 'witchcraft' texts precisely because of its marginal status. Although Gaskell is one of the most widely studied British novelists of the nineteenth century, her novella about the Salem witch trials is almost always excluded from literary criticism and from many bibliographies of her work. This omission must be significant: the only one of her major texts to be so excluded from such analysis, it is also her only text with a witch as a protagonist. Gaskell's location of witchcraft at a safe distance, in America, also introduces ideologies of race, colony, religion and slavery to the debate, in addition to complicating already fraught concepts of gender and sexuality. As a poet, Emily Dickinson has widely been associated with disruption of form and linguistic subversion, but the presence of the witch in Poem 593 (1887) ('I think I was Enchanted') intensifies the sense of revolution implicit in her work. Her re-writing of hysteria and the witchcraft it implies as 'divine insanity', to be willingly embraced by all women, is particularly radical in light of contemporary medical debate. Indeed, the

symbolic bond developed between women writers and witches in Dickinson's writing offers up a destruction of the most fundamental of Christian - and therefore patriarchal - authorities.

This 'absolute' subversion that Dickinson initiates becomes less certain as the decades progress into centuries, but literary representations of witches ensure that it persists. The addition of female political emancipation to cultural debate forms the basis of discussion in Chapter Two. As I have already argued, the witch's liminal, subversive status depends almost entirely on her location outside of society; the achievement of the vote served to bring women 'in' from the margins, initiating a division in the identities of women and witches that increases throughout the period of study. The witch, however, cannot access political and social visibility. Although it is at this time that Wicca develops as the official 'religion' of pagan witchcraft, witches themselves remain excluded from social acceptability. The women writers who represent witches during the first thirty years of the twentieth century occupy a new location, using the witch to embody this division between social acceptance and cultural abhorrence. Their appropriation of the witch marks their writing as subversive, suggesting that women as writers necessarily incorporate both her witchcraft and its rebellious power.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that all of the women writers considered in Chapter Two are forced to occupy the marginal status of the witch; indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it seems that images of witches persist only in the work of marginal female writers. Linguist and Egyptologist Margaret Murray's (1863 - 1963) categorisation of witchcraft as a subversive fertility cult for medieval serfs was denigrated by academics as 'vapid balderdash', but her books were devoured by a

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titillated population;[15] American poet, Edna St Vincent Millay (1892 - 1950) was the

darling of popular society, but her poetry was widely dismissed by the literary

establishment as the work of a mere 'woman as poet', while British Modernist writer,

Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893 - 1978) is always rendered as the poor relation of

Virginia Woolf.[16] And yet their feminist subversion is often more radical than their

more celebrated counterparts, and, once again, it is their appropriation of the witch

that is responsible. Virginia Woolf's best-known non-fiction works, *A Room of One's*

Own (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), examine the difficulties women writers and

intellectuals faced in an era when men held disproportionate legal and economic

power, but the lesbian subtexts that witches portend in the works of Millay and

Warner extend this examination to offer up an overt challenge to dominant hegemony.

Female same-sex desire was rarely presented in the mainstream or feminist press as a

conceivable *alternative* to heterosexuality, nor is it ever referred to without

circumspection or the taint of pathology. Both Murray and Millay use the motif of the

witch to code the female sexual deviance that many considered to be the consequence

of feminism and political emancipation. The lesbian subtext of the witchcraft

described in Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1927) undermines, then, the foundations of

patriarchy as shockingly as Woolf's linguistic subversion in *A Room of One's Own*,

precisely because it excludes the need for and dependence on masculinity. At the same

time, it is worth bearing in mind that Lolly's sexual and social subversion can only

exist at a distance from London, in the fictional 'Great Mop'. Like the crones and hags

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[15] C. L. Ewan, cited in Daniel Epstein, *What Lips my Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), p. 90
[16] John Crowe Ransome, cited in Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry* (New York: Pandora, 1987), p. 34

who lurk in the woods and towers of fairy tales, this rebellion is located away from the patriarchal society whose existence it threatens. Sexual subversion is somewhat muted by this location, but it remains powerful, nevertheless.

The insurrectionary presence of the witch initiates perhaps one of the most unlikely but also most pertinent literary comparisons in Chapter Three: the literary witchcraft of Enid Blyton and Sylvia Plath. Feminist reappraisals of the European and American witch hunts of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries have concluded that women labelled 'witches' became the targets of the inquisitors and demonologists because they were both outside of and threatening to patriarchal control, particularly in respect of the exclusively male domains of medicine and the Church. The injustices perpetrated against women during the witch trials have been returned to again and again by feminist theorists, historians and female writers; the representation of the persecuted witch becomes significant because it combines both aspects of her legacy: a violated body and a potential insurrection associated with crimes against patriarchy. The female writers considered in this chapter, American pulp fiction and mystery writer, Dorothy B. Hughes (1904 - 1993), best-selling British children's author, Enid Blyton (1897 - 1968), and iconic American poet, Sylvia Plath (1932 - 1963), are perhaps unusual and incongruous in terms of the writing of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, in so far as they choose to concentrate on the fantastical figure of the witch. By drawing on the destruction of the female body and the imagery of witch burning, both Plath and Hughes recognise historical injustices against women and the annihilation of the female self, symbolised in Plath's 'Witch Burning' (1959) by the ambivalent

'lost…lost.'[17] Whilst previous representations of the witch seemed to acknowledge an inherent power, recognising crimes against the woman and the witch seems to render both impotent, as helpless victims in need of rescue.

It perhaps surprising, then, that the writer who offers the most striking image of feminist subversion in the texts considered in this chapter is Enid Blyton, who has been widely denigrated because of the retrogressive, sexist and racist politics offered in her texts for children. As one of the most widely-read children's writers of all time, the effect of her work upon national consciousness should not be underestimated. Her representation of Witch Snippit, in *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (1937), offers a fragmentary female body that is able to evade patriarchal expectation, objectification and submission. It is worth pointing out, however, that the fantasy elements of the text can never be overlooked; the consequence is that the text offers only a fleeting, utopian glimpse of subversion.

The movement towards Second Wave Feminism in the Sixties and Seventies can be characterised by a widespread attempt to overturn the ideological and cultural, rather than political and legal, structures that enforced female submission. Fairy tales, with their emphasis on marriage, domesticity and the objective of 'happily ever after' were primary targets of feminists' attention. Feminist appropriations and revisions of the tales were common in women's poetry; the works of American feminist poets, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton (1928 - 1974) and Olga Broumas (1949-), considered in detail in Chapter Four, are typical of their age in terms of their appropriation of the witch as a

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[17] Sylvia Plath, 'Witch Burning', *The Complete Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Virago, 1997), p. 34

feminist icon, but also present the most shocking examples of her subversion.[18]

Central to each revision, however, is not the heroine of the tale; rather it is the Wicked

Queen, the Bad Fairy and the Witch in the Wood who dominate, accessing a

revolutionary and pagan past that challenges prevailing ideologies and authorities.

These images are particularly relevant to the study of witchcraft and feminism,

because, due to films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Walt Disney's *Snow White*

and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), these are the images that have come to represent the

witch for a wider society. Sexton's and Broumas's re-writing of *Rapunzel* and *Hansel*

and Gretel challenge many social taboos by breaking them through speech:

lesbianism, cannibalism, incest, paedophilia, infanticide and matricide are all made

explicit. The figure of the witch in their writing is always shocking, somewhat

appallingly so. Every system and sign of patriarchy is acknowledged and castrated by

the 'magic' of the witch, leaving a chaos of non-signification that disorients and

undermines. The images of female repression that many critics say dominate fairy

tales are, in any case, re-written entirely.

The works of American fantasy writer Marion Zimmer Bradley (1930 - 1999) demand

extensive consideration in this thesis because they embody within themselves the

contradictions and complexities inherent in twentieth-century representations of the

witch. Chapter Five considers multiple and conflicting conceptions of the witch,

which draw equally on the legacy of violation associated with the witch trials, the

revolution of a pagan matriarchy and the sexual liberation of the late 1970s and 1980s.

The feminism that emerged in an era of increased political visibility for women

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[18] My analysis of Sylvia Plath is divided between two chapters; Chapter Three deals with aspects of her poetry that invoke the witch trial legacies, while Chapter Four focuses on fairy tale witches.

expounded insurrectionary witches. And perhaps more than in any other era, the witch

invades every arena of writing by women; Angela Carter, Patricia Beer, Fay Weldon,

Margaret Atwood and Ursula Le Guin all produced feminist representations of her.

But Bradley's representations are particularly ambivalent. In her renowned feminist

Arthurian text, *The Mists of Avalon* (1979), and in the lesser known *Witch Hill* (1988),

Marion Zimmer Bradley draws not on the historical discriminations of the witch trial

era, but instead on a pagan pre-history that places a Great Priestess at the centre of a

matriarchal society. In *The Mists of Avalon*, Bradley evokes the power of the pagan

goddess at the heart of contemporaneous feminist theoretical texts, perpetuating a

notion of female authority and autonomy that would, in coming decades permeate and

revolutionise all aspects of women's lives. Yet, surprisingly, by the time of *Witch Hill*,

the witch's power is muted and once more, she has to die. Mary Daly attributes the

power of the witch to the definition of her as *eccentric*, on the margins of a society

that she never fully inhabits.[19] Bringing the female self inside the social circle and

giving her equal political and legal rights dilutes the power of the witch as female

other. Although the feminist utopian subversion of the World Mother is hinted at here,

it seems that it can never again be fully realised.

Cultural images of the witch and women become even more relevant in the latter part

of the twentieth century, as film, television and other media gain greater significance

in constructing roles and identities. Cultural texts such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

(1997 - 2003) and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996 - 2003) re-affirm the dominant

images of witchcraft presented by the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* and Walt Disney's

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[19] Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Meta-Ethics of Radical Feminism* (London: Women's Press, 1979), p.46

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937). Chapter Six considers the series of female-authored juvenile and science fiction novels spawned by both television series.

Although *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* borrows both from the Eastern European Vampire tradition and Western conceptions of the witch, it is important that Buffy, the protagonist, is never referred to as a witch. Similarly, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*'s version of witchcraft and magic is limited to the resolution of teenage dramas and wardrobe crises. Although, in a few cases, witchcraft does offer subtle subversive potential (by providing, in the case of *Buffy*, a sense of female sexual equality), that potential is again limited by secondary texts - newspaper and magazine articles, interviews with the television stars and so on - that reproduce ideas of the witch as conventionally beautiful and conforming to socially acceptable roles. Furthermore, the *Buffy* texts, in particular, also produce worrying ideologies about the witch as 'Other'. The only self-declared witch, the character of Willow, is also the texts' only representative of Judaism and lesbianism, and possesses little power or narrative significance. It seems that at this point, at the dawn of a new millennium, the former ideological power of the witch as sexual, racial and religious 'Other' turns on itself, serving only to silence, rather than subvert, to limit, rather than liberate.

However, once more, such analysis of the witch would be insufficient. The post-script to this thesis considers the global phenomenon of witchcraft and wizardry that is the *Harry Potter* franchise. Like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, the *Harry Potter* novels have been accompanied by numerous secondary texts and many critics have recognised similarly regressive gender politics and submissive versions of witchcraft within the Hogwarts series of novels. Writer Joanne Rowling (1965 -) was even encouraged by publishers to hide the gender of her first name and to

publish as 'J.K.'. But this thesis concludes, perhaps surprisingly, even to me, where it

began, with an image of radical feminist subversion located in the body of the witch.

Professor Umbridge, the sadistic witch/bitch of *Harry Potter and the Order of the*

Phoenix (2002), resurrects a matriarchal authority that once more challenges systems

of patriarchy and its dependent, signification. The witch's body refutes categorisation

and objectification, unleashing a dramatic and horrific attack which interpellates a

grotesque feminist utopia. That utopia might be fantastical, but its subversive potential

is nevertheless hinted at for an entirely new - because largely youthful - readership.

Although it is impossible to guess at the enduring legacy of the *Harry Potter* texts, the

massive number of books sold world-wide must stand as a testament to the way in

which Rowling's representation of the witch redefines and re-locates the witch and her

craft in a post-feminist era.

Chapter 1:

Writing the Language of Subversion: Witches from the Margins

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told

(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)

That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,

And her enchanted hair was the first gold.

And still she sits, young while the earth is old,

And, subtly of herself contemplative,

Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,

Till heart and body and life are in its hold.[1]

<div style="text-align: right">- Christina Rossetti, Sonnet LXXVIII</div>

With the help of the ineffable Name, which she pronounced, Lilith flew away from Adam and vanished in the air ... And God and Adam were expectant and afraid of the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden.[2]

<div style="text-align: right">- Judith Plaskow, The Coming of Lilith</div>

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[1] Christina Rossetti, Sonnet LXXVIII, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 2001), p.161
[2] Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism and Sexual Ethics 1973 - 2003* (New York: Beacon Press, 2005), p.10

Notable enough, too, here as elsewhere, wilt thou find the potency of

Names ... Witchcraft, and all manner of Specterwork, and Demonology, we

have now renamed Madness and Diseases of the Nerves. Seldom reflecting

that still the question comes upon us: What is Madness, What are Nerves?[3]

- Carlyle

This chapter begins at the moment when the witch loses her power. From the 1850s

onwards, scientists, psychologists, sexologists and anthropologists turned their

attention to proving that witches did not exist, redefining both the witch and her

victims as hysterics, and locking both behind the bars of the mental asylum. But such

a lack of social visibility did not deter writers. Literary representations of the witch

persisted, particularly in fantasy fiction and children's literature, and perhaps most

significantly, in the texts of late nineteenth-century women writers, who seem to

recognise the parallel between the subjugation of the witch and the suppression of the

woman at the hands of Victorian patriarchs. This chapter will consider such

representations of the witch in detail; writers such as Mary Coleridge, Elizabeth

Gaskell and Emily Dickinson employ representations of the witch, unknown and

unknowable, to challenge the patriarchal foundations and heritage of their texts, just

as the witch's omnipresence in the text and in society undermines misogynist histories

and hierarchies.

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[3] Carlyle, cited in Ronald Hutton, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (London: Athlone, 1999), p. 72

Witchcraft and Hysteria

The renaming of witchcraft as hysteria began, however, not in the laboratories and institutions of psychologists, psychiatrists and sexologists, but in the wider society of the Western world. The scientific advances of the Enlightenment, had, by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, begun slowly to filter through into public consciousness, initiating the gradual demise of a pre-scientific theory of existence, if only, to begin with, among the elite and intellectual classes. The rhetoric absorbed by those classes associated the divine and sacrosanct with the primitive impulses of the uneducated, un-enlightened savage; belief in religion was beginning to wane. Ready to take its place was what David Newsome describes as 'obsessive classification', a fanatical desire to name, to know, to own and explain the world;[4] this was characterised in part by a widespread attempt to replace the polemic and condemnation of an earlier, supposedly less sophisticated, age with grand panoramas of social and cultural change. An age of revolution looked not to God or to Satan for the meanings of things, but to the great theories of man.

Theses such as Darwin's *The Origin of Species* initiated a narrative of progressive civilisation, from the old Biblical eschatology of the Four Kingdoms to rationality and evolutionary theory, which became more widely accepted by the general population in the next century. Owen Chadwick reflects on this secularisation:

> Sometimes it meant a freeing of the sciences, of learning, of the arts, from
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> their theological origins or theological bias. Sometimes it meant the declining

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[4] David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture* (London: Fontana, 1998), p. 39

influence of the churches, or of religion, in modern society... [It] therefore made the world unemotional; a word used to describe a process, whatever a process was, in the changing relationship between religion and modern society, a process arising in part out of the industrial revolution and the new conditions of urban and mechanical life, in part out of the vast growth in new knowledge of various kinds. [5]

Rather than placing faith and hope for the future in a supposedly greater, unknowable, invisible being, nineteenth-century culture began to prioritise the 'certainties' of the rise of reason and the anthropology of the ascent of man through progressive stages of mental development, whilst still acknowledging the place of religion as a means of enforcing social authority. 'The truth is,' commented Thomas Carlyle, 'men have lost their belief in the Invisible and believe and hope and work only in the Visible.'[6] Belonging firmly to the realm of the 'Invisible', the witch could be decoded equally as representing a more primitive stage of thinking. Despite the fear that her presence had once inspired, it became increasingly difficult to accept that she could occupy the central, malevolent role ascribed to her, when God and Satan had been so obviously downgraded. It is perhaps unsurprising that literary representations of the witch moved her from the dominator of action and narrative in Shelley's 'The Witch of Atlas' to the comic horror of the Grimms' fairy tales; as social commentator Mrs Trimmer described her, a piece of 'perfectly useless trumpery ... fit only for the heads of children.'[7]

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[5] Owen Chadwyck, 'The Religion of Samuel Johnson', *Yale University Library Gazette*, 60 (1986), 119-36

[6] Carlyle, cited in Hutton, *Witchcraft in Europe*, p. 19

[7] Mrs Trimmer, referred to in Lance Salway, *A Peculiar Gift* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 88

Paralleling the dilution of the witchcraft myth was the Victorian desire to name, know

and explain an even greater primitive problem: the 'mystery of all mysteries ...

women.'[8] In an era that organised gender roles in separate spheres, men were believed

to be controlled, ordered and sophisticated, whereas women harked back to the world

of the irrational and savage that scientific advance had attempted to eradicate. British

psychologist Havelock Ellis's project was simple: in *Pscyhopathia Sexualis* (1887), he

claimed to uncover the hidden truths and recesses of female sexuality and expose

them to public view, thus rendering the 'dark drains' of womanhood knowable and

bringing female bodies under male control. The male/ female dichotomy formed the

crux of his argument; in particular, what was male about men and female about

women. Havelock Ellis recognised the sexual drive to be 'the mighty impulse', since

humans must copulate or die out.[9]

Yet in women, Ellis explained, that 'impulse' must be curbed, creating the ideal of

womanhood as guardian of morality, free of sexual desire, and therefore opposed in

every respect to savagery . The desire that guarantees the survival of both sexes

paradoxically threatens its existence; the 'natural psychology of love' is based upon

'natural' characteristics of the sexes. Male desire is active, female desire is passive;

men want sex, women want love; sexual desire is strong in males, it is absent in

females; males are aggressive, females are modest. Such assumptions about female

sexuality were not new. What is significant, however, is how *Pscyhopathia Sexualis*

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[8] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 235
[9] Havelock Ellis, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1949), p. 5

clearly presents a 'natural' female body and constructs female sexuality as passive and

clean. This distinction, which emerges tentatively into society with Ellis's publication,

stands in contrast to much contemporary medical rhetoric that labelled women's

bodies as 'corrupt and corrupting,' with the potential to wreak havoc and spread

disease in an ordered society.[10] Naming women in such confident terms seems to

return them to the male authority of both Ellis and the 'new', confident science he

comes to represent.

Snow White, from the Grimms' *Little Snow White* effectively summarised

contemporary concepts of 'natural' female sexuality: pure as her namesake, 'Snow',

and lying docile on a bed ready to be 'taken' and owned by the hero. This patriarchal

representation of acceptable femininity sets the witch in direct contrast to Snow White

and her 'natural' female body; this opposition is most overtly demonstrated in the

Grimms' presentation of the Wicked Queen. The threatening excess of the witch, as a

demonic temptress, sets her apart from conventional womanhood; this is made evident

when the Wicked Queen devours what she believes to be the blood-soaked liver and

lungs of her step-daughter. Eating meat was linked contemporaneously to

lasciviousness, which is again stressed by the witch's desire to be 'the fairest of them

all' in order to attract men and fulfil what are supposedly 'unnatural' sexual

cravings.[11] The association of witches, food and sex is equally present in the Grimms'

Hansel and Gretel. Unfeminine desires are suggested by the Wicked Stepmother, who

encourages the children's father to abandon them, so that there will be enough food

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[10] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds), *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), pp 27-8
[11] Joan Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: A Social and Cultural History of Anorexia Nervosa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.41

for the adults - an inversion of the traditional female role of caring for the family before herself.[12] The threatening excesses of the deviant female body must be curbed; in the majority of tales that emerge during this period, the witch must die. So whilst the movement toward secularisation reduces the powerful legacy of the witch as conjurer, she comes instead to represent all that is opposed to conventional, respectable and knowable femininity, the unrepresentable lurking potentially within all women.

Despite the advances and explanations of science and secularisation, the spectre of witchcraft still persisted. The linkage of witchcraft to savagery did nothing to limit its popularity among those whom society's restrictions had failed to contain. Routine clinical experience revealed to doctors, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, no shortage of patients who still believed that they were in the clutches of diabolical powers, or experiencing angelic revelations. Patients, almost exclusively female, would shriek, be struck down, or speak in tongues; would suffer seizures, fall into stupors, or become paralysed or anaesthetized - all like former demoniacs.[13] Especially under the controlled stimulus of hypnosis, first revealed by Franz Anton Mesmer and refined by later clinicians, notably Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière, Paris's huge women's madhouse, patients would disassociate, presenting themselves in dissonant personalities and guises, precisely like those in earlier centuries who had been thought to be ventriloquised by demons.[14] The apparent persistence of witchcraft despite decades of explanation and progress seemed to suggest that the attempts of

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[12] Jacob and Wilhlem Grimm, 'Hansel and Gretel', *Grimms' Fairy Tales* (London: Ernest Nister, 1986), p. 109
[13] F.C. Skey, *Hysteria* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867), p.46
[14] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 98

science to suppress belief in the witch and to re-order society had failed.

The key to patriarchy's containment of witches and dangerous women came finally with the hysteria diagnosis. Physicians in the second half of the nineteenth century used hysteria - largely, if not exclusively, a female malady - as a convenient answer to bizarre, unexplainable episodes of witchcraft and phenomena of the past. It became the subject of scores of medical texts, and made the names of Charcot, Josef Breuer, Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud and other towering medical figures, as hysteria became the key to the impenetrable enigmas of mind and body interaction - religious rapture, sexual deviation, suicidal despair, and above all, witchcraft.[15] Wier, in particular, was praised for striving to:

> demonstrate that the crimes the witches were accused of were fictitious; that those women were not criminals, but patients suffering from mental illness; that they should not be sentenced by priests, monks nor judges; that they consequently should not be put in prison, tortured and burned but that they should be entrusted to the care of physicians.[16]

Such progressive schema implied that mental sickness had previously been misattributed to Otherworldly agencies such as witches, spirits and necromancy. Wayward women, wandering wombs and witches could finally be seized by the state and restrained within mental asylums until they could be 'cured' of the moral perversion that caused them to feign such 'illnesses'.

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[15] Ibid, p. 130
[16] Alan Bourneville, [1885] cited in Gijswijt- Hofstra, Levack and Porter (eds), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Athlone, 1999), p. 321

Henry Maudsley argued in *The Pathology of Mind*, that women were susceptible to

the 'pretence' of witchcraft. He summed up the symptoms of a weak female mind:

> More and more of her energy and self-control, becoming capriciously fanciful
>
> of her health, imagining or feigning strange diseases, and keeping up the
>
> delusion or the imposture with pertinacity that might seem incredible, getting
>
> more and more impatient of the advice of others, and indifferent to the
>
> interests and duties of her position.[17]

Such symptoms perfectly accounted for and explained away a long line of female

visionaries, witches and deviants. At last, inexplicable physical symptomatologies and

the weird flights of fantasy of witches and their victims, or of those displaying

convulsions or the dancing mania, could finally be revealed as the products of

individual or mass psychopathology.[18] Battering the witch and the woman into the

submission of the mental asylum, the medicalising or psychologising drive of the

second half of the nineteenth century believed that it had confined the witch and her

craze safely to the uncivilised past. However, what seems significant is not just the

redefinition of witchcraft as hysteria, but also the new definition of who constituted a

witch. The hysteric (or new witch) is defined, like the Wicked Queen, by her rejection

of conventionally acceptable female behaviour. 'Feigning ... disease', 'indifference to

the ... duties of her position' and a loss of 'self-control' are stunning rejections of

societal mores. So there is a strong sense in which the witch is still inextricably linked

to female power, authority and subversion. What is different now is that her

subversion does not come from within society, but seems controlled by the bars of the

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[17] Henry Maudsley, *The Pathology of Mind: A Study of its Distempers, Deformities and Disorders* (London: Macmillan, 1873), p.12

[18] Gijswijt- Hofstra, Levack and Porter (eds), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, p. 450

mental asylum.

Indeed, this subversion is most overtly demonstrated in the persistence of faith in the witch. At the dawn of the twentieth century, villagers in remote rural Essex still believed in magic; the witch could still bring on illness and even paralysis, and visited victims with plagues of lice.[19] 'There lingers', wrote leading folklorist Edwin Hartland, 'a number of traditions ... distinct from and only partially sanctioned by religion, the literature, the sciences and arts, which together sum up what we understand by civilisation.'[20] Amongst those disenfranchised by conventional society, among women, and those for whom psychology held no resonance or who had no knowledge of it, the witch endured, not merely to make sense of existence, but to challenge, subvert and liberate.

The suggestion that witches formed part of a popular, underground existence came from within society itself. Romantic historian Jules Michelet argued in *La Sorcière*, first published in 1862, that witchcraft had developed as a protest movement among medieval serfs.[21] The notion of the sabbat derived from a clandestine nocturnal conclave, where villagers convened to feast, enacting pagan rites and folk dramas that parodied authority as represented by the lord and the priest. The whole concept is centered around the witch, who figured as a priestess presiding over an ancient fertility cult, the people's champion against the feudal tyrant. She copulated with a fertility figure, equipped with giant phallus, at the sabbat's culmination. Levack and

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[19] Leslie Ellen Jones, *From Witch to Wicca* (New York: Cold Spring, 2004), p. 77
[20] E.S. Hartland, *Folklore* [1904] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), p. 9
[21] Jules Michelet, *La Sorciere*, [1862] (Paris: Garnier - Flammarion, 1966), p. 104

Porter argue that many of Michelet's theories are the product of an overactive, mythopoeic imagination, 'ever feverish where women were involved.'[22] Yet the fantasy of witchcraft as a subversive movement seems to have resonance in the rebellion of women and witches as hysteria patients, and more significantly to this study, in the work of women writers, who return to the witch again and again, in order to challenge, rebel and liberate. The 'imaginary' voices of witches might signify a coded rebellion, but it is one that speaks for all women, on the margins of society and of the text.

Banished from Fairy Land: Mary Coleridge

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge is an author who writes from those margins. She appears, Karen Devlin argues, to fit the archetype of the Victorian spinster 'who wrote minor poetry to purge herself of her frustrations and unexpressed desires'. Unsurprisingly, the ambiguities and tensions within her texts are rarely commented upon.[23] The Coleridge name and its imposing literary reputation, 'was something of a cursed chalice for the shy, diffident Mary'.[24] 'I have no fairy godmother', she wrote to a friend, 'but lay claim to a fairy great-great uncle, which is perhaps the reason that I am condemned to wander restlessly around the Gates of Fairyland, although I have never yet passed them.'[25] The motif of the wanderer, the stranger or the outsider, is recurrent in her writing; she refers to herself as 'Anodos', which translates as 'upon no road'. The notion of the female writer locked out of Fairyland by a male literary heritage

[22] Gijswijt- Hofstra, Levack and Porter (eds) *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, p. 391
[23] Karen Devlin, 'An Introduction to Mary Coleridge', http://victorianweb.org/coleridge/devlin, accessed 25th June, 2005
[24] Ibid
[25] Mary Coleridge, *Gathered Leaves from the Prose of Mary E. Coleridge* (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1911), p. 32

which refuses to include her has particular resonance in terms of her writing of the witch. Overtly, at least, she seems to conform to societal expectations by continuing the witch's confinement and marginalisation in her writing. But, as I shall argue in relation to all of the women writers discussed in this chapter, this apparent conformation becomes problematic and confused.

Coleridge's second novel, *The King with Two Faces*, published in 1897 as the hysteria diagnosis began to insinuate itself into the minds of the population, conceals any sense of confusion or uncertainty about witches. It was an immediate success upon publication, earning her nine hundred pounds in royalties, which was exceptional for a female writer of the period. The text focussed upon the life and death of the controversial King Gustav of Sweden, who reigned between 1792 and 1809. Despite the fact that the tale can be characterised as progressive in terms of its homoerotic subtext, its presentation of the witch is far more conservative. As the hero of the tale, whose perspective dominates, expresses it, 'All fair ladies are witches, sire.'[26] Contemporary medical and social rhetoric emphasised the connection between hysteria and the comparative weakness of the female mind; similarly, it had established the former as the 'enlightened' explanation of witchcraft. Coleridge makes the connection more explicit, suggesting the potential witchcraft within all women. Indeed, the fact that these words are spoken by the hero of the tale adds authority and credence, making them more believable for a wider audience. The woman, the witch and the hysteric, locked in hospitals and asylums, require the control of husbands and doctors; literary witches are equally marginalised.

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[26] Ibid p. 95

However, Coleridge's poetry is more ambiguous in its presentation of the witch. Its

publication would not have occurred if a friend had not plotted to find a wider

readership for it. Her poems were shown, in secret, to the poet Robert Bridges, who

insisted upon meeting Coleridge to give her advice prior to publishing the small

collection. She eventually agreed to publication on the condition of using a

pseudonym, and rejected all Bridges's advice. *Fancy's Following* was finally

published privately in 1896. The circumstances around the emergence of her poems,

as Leighton argues, 'reek of intrigue and mystery.'[27] Indeed the sense of the

clandestine and covert surrounding her writing almost in itself hints at witchcraft;

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the female 'freak', monster or witch:

> has been a powerfully coercive and monitory image for women secretly
>
> desiring to attempt the pen ... If becoming an *author* meant mistaking one's
>
> 'sex and way', if it meant becoming an 'unsexed' or perversely sexed female,
>
> then it meant becoming a monster or freak, a vile Errour, a grotesque Lady
>
> Macbeth, a disgusting goddess of Dullness.[28]

Certainly the story of Lillith, referred to in the epigraph - according to Hebrew

mythology, both the first woman and the first evil woman - specifically connects

poetic presumption with madness, freakishness and witchcraft.

Coleridge's 'The Witch' (1897) interrogates witchcraft more fully than her other

works, debating contemporary ideologies about the malevolent witch who assumes the

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[27] Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing against the Heart* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 102

[28] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 56

mantle of the weak, weary traveller requiring Christian succour. Poems such as 'Wilderspin', 'Master and Guest' and 'Unwelcome' all articulate the desire of the exile to be allowed to enter, to cross the threshold. But in 'The Witch', a witch is allowed to cross over, disrupting and irrevocably transforming her new surroundings. The final stanza overtly reveals societal expectations about the conflation of femininity and witchcraft:

> Her voice was the voice that women have,
>
> Who plead for their heart's desire.
>
> She came - she came - and the quivering flame
>
> Sank and died in the fire.
>
> It never was lit again on my hearth
>
> Since I hurried across the floor,
>
> To lift her over the threshold and let her in at the door.[29]

A variation on this final line is repeated at the end of each stanza, drawing attention to the significance of the 'threshold' as a literal and metaphorical social barrier. On the internal side of the threshold are the light and warmth associated with the nuclear family, and suggest the authority of the patriarch within the domestic sphere; the light refers directly to Christianity. The allusion to 'my hearth' suggests that the speaker of the poem is representative of that authority, ownership and safety, expressing prevailing attitudes towards wayward women. The voice is controlled and ordered.

Juxtaposed with this is the external, working beyond societal limits, symbolising a world of darkness and the unknown, of 'cutting wind' and 'the worst of death', where

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[29] Coleridge, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 80

the witch is always located.[30] Her evil is unspoken and unnameable, denoted only by

the enigmatic 'She came - she came -', which seems to exceed social respectability.

Coleridge's witch epitomises the stereotype. Marxist critics have argued that the social

function of the witch, the hag or the crone is group control; witchcraft is a stabilizing

safety valve that preserves social norms: 'fear of the evil eye enforces social

conformity in a community where the values of individualism and competition are

firmly anchored.'[31] Fittingly, the 'witch at the door' is contained by her eviction from

the home. But despite her containment, she refuses to go away. The 'never lit again ...

hearth' testifies to her enduring legacy; the 'Christ light' 'quiver[s]' until it is

extinguished irrevocably. And the echo - 'her voice was the voice that women have' -

once more emphasises the link between witches and women, not just as victims of

masculine oppression, but also in defiance of it.

The female voice, already placed in opposition to conventional male speech and

language, seizes control of the narrative in the second stanza; a lack of quotation

marks to denote the witch's speech merges the two voices. The ABABBCC seven line

stanza, used elsewhere in the poem, is altered unrecognisably as a result of the witch's

curse:

> I have walked a great while over these now,
>
> And I am not tall nor strong.
>
> My clothes are wet, and my teeth are set,
>
> And the way was hard and long.

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[30] Ibid, lines 1-6
[31] W. Appel, 'The Myth of the *Jettatura*', cited in C. Maloney, *The Evil Eye* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1976), p. 433

I have wandered over the fruitful earth,

But I never came here before.

Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door![32]

The irregular rhyme scheme (ABCBDEE) and the movement away from alternating

four and three stress lines create a chaos of the original form once the voice of the

dominant speaker becomes the 'I' of the witch. She disrupts the expectation of the

rhyme and stress pattern, so that the final 'let me in at the door!' is extended far

beyond the natural boundaries of the stanza, and, because it is the last line of the

poem, the natural boundaries of the text, too.

But the literary consequences of this disruption go further. Devlin has already

identified the relationship between Coleridge and her great-great uncle.[33] The folk

motif in 'The Witch', of lifting a female over a blessed threshold, recalls Samuel

Taylor Coleridge's 'Christabel' (1816), whilst the flame on the hearth echoes 'Frost at

Midnight'.[34] Jean Halladay agrees that Mary Coleridge has 'little compunction in

invading the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and effecting radical alterations upon

it in order to make it hers.'[35] 'The Witch' is a poem within a poem, breaking through

the narrative frame of the original work, in order to construct the later poem,

destroying a dominant literary discourse in favour of a more subversive impulse. Her

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[32] 'The Witch', lines 14 - 21
[33] Devlin, 'Introduction to Mary Coleridge'
[34] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Christabel' [1797], *The Complete Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Wordsworth, 1998), p. 195
   The lady sank, belike through pain,
   And Christabel with might and main
   Lifted her up, a weary weight,
   Over the threshold of the gate :
   Then the lady rose again,
   And moved, as she were not in pain.
[35] Jean R. Halladay, *Eight Late Victorian Poets Shaping the Artistic Sensibility of an Age* (New York: Mellen, 1993), p. 217

choice of the ballad is therefore significant in so far as it is traditionally associated with populist, oral poems that belonged to the peasantry. And it is there that the witch persists.

While the enlightened, learned voices of middle- and upper-class men posited the witch as a figment of a weak and susceptible female imagination, belief in her continued, in the late nineteenth century, among the lower classes. Though supposed prophets of progress proclaimed that archaic beliefs were withering away, ancient ways and wisdom remained resilient. 'An old woman bitterly complained to me', the Cornish Quaker Barclay Fox remarked:

> that she had been bewitched by another old woman, Philly Hicks, whom she
>
> attacked yesterday for the innocent purpose of drawing blood which it seems
>
> would break the spell. She says ever since she set her eye on her she has felt a
>
> strange crawling all over her body.[36]

Levack and Porter find this spontaneous journal entry to be 'trustworthy'.[37] Indeed, it is impossible to escape the sense that there is something among the marginalised communities, the peripheral villages and ostracised old crones which suggests more than the persistence of the 'old ways' that they describe. This real and deep-seated belief in the actuality and power of the witch conveys a definite challenge to authority.

The *Shrewsbury Chronicle* reported a 'singular case of superstition' in September 1884, over a decade after doctors 'proved' that witches did not exist:

> A child's mother said she had kept her little girl at home because she had 'a

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[36] Referred to in Robert Thurlston, *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose* (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), p. 14
[37] Levack and Porter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, p. 394

dread' upon her in consequence of having three nights in succession dreamed

of baking bread. She had lost other children, and on each occasion, had similar

dreams before the child died. Owing to her dream she had kept the girl away

from school, and had refused to allow her to leave the house.[38]

'Singular' and 'Superstition' establish the judgemental framework; belief in the witch

is always pushed to the margins and isolated. But women, whether Philly Hicks, the

frightened mother or Mary Coleridge, seek to recreate her. The dual voice within

Coleridge's poem seems to replicate the difficulty in representing the witch: on one

hand, she is necessarily disenfranchised, subjugated and humiliated; on the other, her

legacy and the voice of the Everywoman she embodies is potentially rebellious.

Representations of the witch become, even within one text, multiple and complex, but

they are always subversive.

Acolyte of Magic: Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson's association with witchcraft is perhaps more widely accepted than

the clandestine sorcery of Mary Coleridge's poetry, although she too published few

poems in her lifetime. Indeed, she wrote in secret, and ordered her sister to burn her

poems on her deathbed. Her own 'weak female mind' has been widely commented

upon, and critics such as Chinn and Nell-Smith have spent as much time analysing her

work in light of her agoraphobia and hysteria as they have deconstructing her

unconventional writing.[39] The significance of Dickinson's hysteria links to the

witchcraft redefinition; Sandra Gilbert suggests that 'she transformed herself into a

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[38] Ibid
[39] Martha Nell-Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Re-reading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 109

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myth and into an acolyte of a kind of female magic'.[40] Women writers and witches

become inextricably linked during the late nineteenth century by this sense of secret,

of magic, and either compulsory or voluntary marginalisation.

As a Massachusetts poet residing in Amhurst, only a few miles from the gallows of

Salem, Dickinson would have been acutely aware of the Witch Trial history and the

lives of women who suffered at the hands of the patriarchs whom she rejects so

confidently in her writing. Poem '1583' invokes the dualism implicit in all women

writing witches: a legacy of violation and injustice fused with a potential for

exclusively female power and rebellion:

> Witchcraft was hung, in History,
>
> But History and I
>
> Find all the Witchcraft that we need
>
> Around us, every Day -[41]

Dickinson's choice of 'hung', rather than 'hanged', expresses more than the act of

death, suggesting that the murdered women were displayed like art before the baiting

crowd, manipulated as images or representations of absolute evil for the patriarchy

that their existence endangered.

But there is more. More prominent than female subjugation is a sense of female

challenge, a recurring resurrection of the spectre of the witch that is 'Around us, every

Day -'. Diane Purkiss recognises this rebirth as crucial to the witch's power

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[40] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p.80
[41] Emily Dickinson, '1583', *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Bay Back, 1976), p. 115

throughout the ages: 'a supposed evil that may return at any point to menace civilisation.'[42] In Dickinson's writing, the consequences of her return are felt most obviously in her disruption of syntax and punctuation, which Ellman sees as the 'tools, bars and whips of male-ordered language.'[43] The enjambement, hyphens and haphazard capitalisation create a sense of chaos, and deconstruct poetic tropes. 'History' and the patriarchy it represents are trapped in pairs of commas, replicating visually and metaphorically the hanged witches. The lack of conclusion to the poem, 'every Day -' is equally representative of this; the hyphen seems to stretch out onto the unknown of the page, requiring another clause to complete it in the conventional way.

Jerome McGann argues for the significance of Dickinson's punctuation:

> It does no good to argue, as some might, that these odd lineations are unintentional. ... Her manuscripts show that she could preserve the integrity of the metrical unit if she wanted. Besides, certain textual moments reveal such a dramatic use of page space as to put the question of intentionality beyond consideration.[44]

Indeed, the witch is, as for Gaskell, Coleridge and other women writers, something that 'we need' and someone important; this is reflected in the prominence of the witch and the effects of her chaos that are highlighted in Dickinson's text. As a subjugated, violated and yet magically powerful figure, the witch symbolises the resistance of every woman, but also the power of the female writer. Poetry in the hands of women becomes a medium of revolution. More widely recognised radical feminist poets such

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[42] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.291
[43] Maud Ellman, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (London: Longman, 2000), p. 4
[44] Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 28

as Adrienne Rich, as well as theorists such as Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, have

established a rationale for women's poetry as the privileged language of resistance.

The Lacanian argument that language is essential to the human subject's submission

to a binary system of sexual difference allowed feminists to define poetic language as

a vehicle of disruption. Poetry, because of its concern with the materiality of language

over its semantic function and sound over meaning, privileges elements of a pre-

symbolic relationship to language. The association of the symbolic with the paternal,

and the pre-symbolic or imaginary with the maternal has feminist resonance, but that

resonance is most normally recognised in the literature of second-wave feminism. The

fusion of the witch and the woman writer allows Emily Dickinson to access that

liberation nearly a century earlier.

Yet the liberation Emily Dickinson's poetry reveals is not always recognised.

Montefiore argues against the subversion present in Dickinson's writing, suggesting

that her poems are 'remarkably difficult to assimilate into a theory of female identity

articulating itself through the writing of an Imaginary relationship between and 'I' and

'thou', which could constitute a textual space for a specifically female meaning.'[45]

Furthermore, she even indicates that Dickinson is able to 'transcend' gender politics.

But such a reading seems simplistic. Nancy Chinn has highlighted feminist meanings,

and the link between the Imaginary and the feminist or even maternal as the

instruments of potential 'witchcraft' is one to which, I believe, Dickinson returns.[46]

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[45] Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience and Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 2004), p. 185
[46] Nancy Chinn, ' "I am my own riddle"- A.S. Byatt's Christabel LaMotte: Emily Dickinson and Melusina' *Papers on Language and Literature* (37, 2) (2001) 179

Poem 593 ('I think I was Enchanted), written in 1863, prior to the celebration of

witchcraft discussed above, has been almost universally identified by critics as a

literary presentation of St Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. But this

conclusion would seem incongruous with the sentiments towards Christianity

explored in '1545':

> The Bible is a an antique Volume -
>
> Written by faded Men[47]

By drawing attention to the authors of the Bible, Dickinson stresses equally its

existence as a piece of literature, that is 'written' and constructed by patriarchs. But

the fact that their writing is 'antique' and 'faded' suggests the inadequacy of old male

ways to convey religious experience. The association of writing, Christianity and male

authority recalls by its contrast the converse association of female writing, witchcraft

and subversion. In this light, Dickinson's revision of the Damascus parable becomes

multiplicitious; the witchcraft of female writing reveals itself. Ellen Moers's *Literary*

Women recognises how issues of female authorship obsessed Dickinson, indicating

that she was comparatively poorly read in the male American literary tradition:

'Instead she read and re-read every Anglo-American woman writer of her time.'[48]

The woman writer, in her allegiance to the witch, invokes a potential female

subversion, which not only undermines the authority of the male literary canon, but

also moves towards a valorisation of witchcraft and madness as providing the basis for

female literary expression and feminist utopian experience. Reading the 'magic' or

'witchcraft' of another female writer, such as Barrett Browning or the Brontës

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[47] Dickinson, '1545', *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 20
[48] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 29

transforms Dickinson's poetry and experience into subliminality, so that the

Imaginary, or the sounds of a natural, pre-Symbolic realm, form what she describes in

the poem as a 'Titanic Opera':

> I think I was enchanted
>
> When first a sombre Girl -
>
> I read that Foreign Lady -
>
> The Dark - felt beautiful...
>
>
> ...'Twas a Divine Insanity -
>
> The Danger to be Sane
>
> Should I again experience -
>
> 'Tis Antidote to turn -
>
>
> To Tomes of solid Witchcraft
>
> Magicians be asleep
>
> But Magic - hath an Element
>
> Like Deity - to keep.[49]

The combination of 'enchant' with 'magic' and 'Dark' creates an illicit force, and the

fact that it is inspired by one female writer reading another suggests a supernatural

sisterhood. Although the 'Foreign Lady' refers to the British writer, Elizabeth Barrett

Browning, the word 'Foreign' suggests otherness and the marginal, and this, coupled

with the reference to the figure's specific gender, hints at a witchery that is later

explicitly highlighted.

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[49] Emily Dickinson, '593' *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p.176

These external forces and 'Magic' work beyond conventional systems of

understanding, late Victorian doctrines of acceptable female behaviour and the

redefinitions of medical progress:

> I could not have defined the change -
>
> Conversion of the Mind
>
> Like Sanctifying in the Soul -
>
> Is witnessed - not explained -[50]

What becomes obvious is the speaker's prioritising of a sensual, rather than an

intellectual, reasoning, of a 'Conversion' that is spiritual and cannot be 'explained' in

contemporary discourse. This serves to undermine societal desires to name and own,

and also the research of experts, who, as we have seen, applied logic, reason and

clinical research to rationalise a secularised, scientific 'meaning' of things. The re-

labelling of female madness as a 'Divine Insanity' disrupts further. It can be seen as an

overt feminist rebellion in the face of the hysteria definition, in so far as it accents the

desire for, necessity for and persistence of witchcraft, as an aversion to 'The Danger to

be Sane'. Also implicit in the 'Divine' is spirituality, but it seems unlikely that 'Deity'

or 'Sanctifying' refer in any way to Christian teachings. The alternative system of

belief that the witch/woman writer interpellates is one to which 'Magicians', the only

male characters present, are 'asleep'; it invokes 'Nature ... herself', a 'Foreign Lady'

and a 'Conversion of the Mind'. Female liberation becomes cloaked in a female

language of madness and witchcraft. The 'Lunacy of Light' refigures the Christian

image of Christ's light into a female alternative of 'lunacy', suggesting both

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[50] Ibid

moonlight (a symbol of femininity, rather than patriarchy) and female madness

(indicative of the witch). Emily Dickinson creates an 'enchant[ing]' alternative to the

mental asylum, turning the progressive definition of the witch as hysteric on its head.

By drawing on the witch trial and psychological legacies of violation and submission,

and by demonstrating the persistence of the witch in the face of such adversity,

Dickinson subverts contemporary ideologies. Indeed, she conflates the witch and the

woman writer to articulate that subversion. Liberation, rather than incarceration,

results for women who read, write or incorporate the witch.

'Obedience and Self- Sacrifice': Elizabeth Gaskell

The volume of literary criticism concerning the works of Elizabeth Gaskell is

surprisingly limited in comparison with the plethora of titles associated with her

contemporaries, George Eliot and the Brontës. Initially, this would seem to suggest

that her writing is limited to domestic fictions or, as Eliot described them, 'simple

stories for silly women', that neither interrogate the status quo in the manner of Eliot,

nor explore the 'pride, passion and hell-fire' recognised to be at the heart of the

Haworth novels.[51] At the time of her death in 1865, however, *The Athenaeum*

described Gaskell as 'if not the most popular, with small question, the most powerful

and finished female novelist of an epoch singularly rich in female novelists.'[52] Her

popularity and stature at the time of her writing can be explained, at least in part, by

her social acceptability. Married at twenty-two, and later the devoted mother of four

daughters, Gaskell located herself safely within what was considered to be a woman's

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[51] George Eliot, cited in Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepflmacher (eds), *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.12
[52] Extract reprinted on *The Victorian Web* Ed. Robert Schwarb, May 2003, http://victorianweb.org

'proper' sphere. The correct function of the female writer was not, according to her, the witchcraft of Emily Dickinson, but instead, as Hilary Schor argues:

> a social power based on women's special female qualities rather than on general human rights. For women who previously held no particular avenue of power of their own ... this represented an advance.[53]

Despite the confines of that sphere, Gaskell did exercise some sort of social influence - along with her husband, she helped to educate the working classes of Manchester and she wrote a series of 'problem' novels, such as *North and South* and *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* in 1848, in which she pricked the conscience of industrial England through her depiction and analysis of the working-class. She gave the profits of her literary success to her husband. '*Women* must give up an artist's life, if home duties are to be paramount,' she writes in 1850. 'If the self be the end of exertions, those exertions are unholy... I am sometimes coward enough to wish we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women.'[54] There is little in the 'obedience' and self-sacrifice to suggest the subversion of Dickinson or Coleridge, and furthermore, her sense of the 'holy' and 'duty' conform to patriarchal expectations.

Hidden from the popular domain, however, is Gaskell's short novel *Lois the Witch*, first published in Dickens's journal *All the Year Round* in 1859. Not only is the text widely omitted from critical study, it is infrequently acknowledged in bibliographies or biographies of her work. This neglect perhaps suggests the incongruence of the text

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[53] Hilary M. Schor, *Scherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.70
[54] Elizabeth Gaskell, in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* ed. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 33

with the remainder of Gaskell's work, and also, once more, something secretive. *Lois the Witch* tells how, in 1692, the town of Salem, Massachusetts, was overwhelmed and torn apart by 'involuntary terrors' and the suggestion of witchcraft. Whilst much of the background, plot and original testimony is borrowed from Charles Upham's *Lectures on Witchcraft, Comprising a History of the Delusions in Salem,* Gaskell's version conveys more than delusion and mass hysteria.[55] The retelling of the witch trials, which Arthur Miller returned to in *The Crucible* a century later, is, as we have seen in the poetry of Dickinson, particularly emotive. The trials comprised, across the Western world, the greatest atrocity ever committed against women.[56] During the witch trials, countless women - and some men - in every continent of the world, across several centuries, were stoned, tortured, burned and drowned.

Gaskell does acknowledge this injustice in *Lois the Witch*, but she does so with the hindsight and safety of the hysteria definition, acknowledging the impossibility of the recurrence of such crimes within progressive Victorian schema, and asserting ideas about acceptable femininity. In *Hints on Etiquette* (1843), Charles William Day states that:

> A true lady is ... sweet and delicate and refined ... her sphere is to cheer,
> to refine, to beautify, to bless. The opportunities and influence she may
> acquire (by behaving thus), she may turn to the noblest and holiest
> purposes. ... A true lady certainly does not ... give free rein to her

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[55] Jenny Packlow (ed.), 'Introduction', Elizabeth Gaskell, *Lois the Witch* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. ix
[56] Historians remain divided about the final number of witches that were executed; Ronald Hutton suggests 40,000; Brian Levack indicates that 60,000 deaths occurred. Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the British Isles; Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 59; Brian Levack, *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 17

feelings ... Though her heart may bound with happiness, she must no more

show it than she can show the antipathies and disgusts excited by others.[57]

At first sight, *Lois the Witch* apparently reproduces, rather than challenges,

contemporary attitudes towards women and witches, restoring the dichotomy

between the pure and fallen woman. Gaskell defines the witch in entirely

patriarchal terms, by merging biblical rhetoric and the confident narrative of

superior, learned society in the voice of her narrator:

> 'The sin of witchcraft' - we read about it, we look on it from outside, but
>
> we can hardly realise the terror it induced. Every impulse or unaccustomed
>
> action, every little nervous affection, every ache or pain was noticed, not
>
> merely by the sufferer, but by the person himself, whoever he might be,
>
> that was acting, or being acted upon, in any but the most simple and
>
> ordinary manner. He or she (for it was most frequently a woman or girl
>
> that was the supposed subject) felt a desire for some unusual kind of food -
>
> some unusual motion or rest - her hand twitched, her foot was asleep, or
>
> her leg had the cramp; and the dreadful question immediately suggested
>
> itself, 'Is anyone possessing an evil power over me, by the help of Satan?'
>
> and perhaps they went on to think, 'It is bad enough to feel that my body
>
> can be made to suffer through the power of some unknown evil-wisher to
>
> me, but what if Satan gives them still further power, and they can touch my
>
> soul and inspire me with loathful thoughts, leading me on to crimes which
>
> at present I abhor?' and so on, till the very dread of what might happen,
>
> and the constant dwelling of the thoughts, even with horror, upon certain

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[57] Charles William Day, *Hints on Etiquette* (London: C.W. Day Press, 1843), p. 12

possibility, or what were esteemed such, really brought about the corruption of the imagination at last, which at first they had shuddered at ...[58]

Gaskell at once sets the 'witch' against contemporary female conformity, asserting Day's definition of acceptable femininity by emphasising the conventional, male-ordered boundaries of her writing. Female evil is located firmly outside of those boundaries. The fact that she chooses to delineate pagan witchcraft as a 'sin' suggests the desire to define the witch in strongly Christian, and therefore, patriarchal, terms. This is furthered by describing her as 'poor, forsaken', indicating a weakness within herself that needs to be corrected by male tuition.[59] Shared allusions and references, such as the 'we' and 'you must remember' and 'our age', unite reader and narrator by strengthening their collective enlightened superiority.

But the dual time frame of the Victorian narrator commenting on pre-Enlightenment events also serves to distance the reader from the actual events of the tale, and, importantly, to render a society that believes in witchcraft unknowable and savage. As Lenard has observed in relation to her more widely read works, *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters*, Gaskell's narratives enforce all that is 'reasoned and controlled, comforting and morally responsible.'[60] Similarly, in *Lois the Witch*, the reader becomes so far removed from the mass hysteria of the witch trial, there is never any danger, no threat of 'the help of

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[58] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Lois the Witch*, p. 39
[59] Ibid
[60] Mary Lenard, *Preaching Pity: Dickens, Gaskell, and Sentimentalism in Victorian Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p.157

Satan', no-one 'possessing an evil power over [anyone].' The stability and certainty of late Victorian society is always reinforced. The necessity for Satan's aid denotes absolute female helplessness, while Gaskell's description of witchcraft as a 'little nervous affliction' and 'the corruption of the imagination' signifies the ideological power of psychological theory. Gaskell's writing seems highly conservative, functioning only to limit the multiplicitious potential of the witch, suggesting once more that both the witch and her victim are 'sufferer[s]' of a disease from which male medicine and Victorian society offered a cure.

But at the same time, the legacy of witchcraft does seem to undermine Gaskell's social confidence: 'Such a taint did witchcraft bring upon a whole family that the generations of blameless life were not at that day deemed sufficient to wash it out.'[61] The historical consequences of the name of the 'witch', which obsess later cultures, hint that there is perhaps a justification for such un-enlightened fears; the advent of science cannot 'wash ... out' her potential chaos. On one hand, Gaskell may be referring explicitly to her contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had said of his ancestor, John Hawthorne, a notorious witch trial judge, that he 'made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him.'[62] On the other, she seems to be indicating something which operates outside of Victorian definitions and boundaries. This dualism between conservatism and subversion is subtly drawn throughout.

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[61] Gaskell, *Lois the Witch*, p. 42
[62] Packlow, 'Introduction', p. ix

While Lois the Witch remains alone, she has the disruptive power of the typical

asylum patient. Gaskell constructs Lois, when she arrives in Boston alone,

'steadying herself on the stable land' (p.6), as disenfranchised and marginal; there

are repeated references to the world around her as lonely and alien. Although, after

weeks at sea, land in America should feel secure, it is, in fact, more destabilising.

Even the forests that encircle the settlement are a different shade of green from

those in England. Lois is always a foreigner, a stranger, ill at ease, an unknowable

Other who remains at odds with Bostonian society. It is largely her location as

Other that results in her being labelled a witch. But Lois is not the only foreigner

within the text. The family's Native American slave, Nattee, is equally

marginalised by her colour, dialect and belief in Caribbean Voodoo; she too is,

eventually, hanged as a witch. In representing the bond between these two women

or witches, in what Kranidis has called 'a sacred sisterhood between women',

Gaskell is able to move beyond the safe, conventional narrative attributed to her.[63]

The witch permits a language of subversion which endangers both the stability of

the text and the society it represents.

Lois's response to being locked in a cell with other witches seems typically

conservative and patriarchal, yet something controversial still underpins Gaskell's

certainty:

> Lois knew that she was no witch herself, but not the less did she believe
>
> that the crime was abroad, and largely shared by evil minded persons who
>
> had chosen to give up their souls to Satan, and she shuddered with terror at

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[63] Rita S. Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse: The Cultural Production of Late Victorian Feminist Novels* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 70

what the gaoler said, and would have asked him to spare her this companionship, if it were possible. But, somehow, her senses were leaving her and she could not remember the right words in which to form her request, until he had left the place ...

... But God did comfort her, and strengthen her too. Late on that Wednesday afternoon they thrust another 'witch' into her cell, bidding the two, with opprobrious words, keep company together. The new-comer fell prostrate with the push given her from without; and Lois, not recognising anything but an old ragged woman, lying helpless on her face on the ground, lifted her up; and lo! it was Nattee - dirty, filthy indeed, mud-pelted, stone-bruised, beaten and all astray in her wits with the treatment she had received from the mob outside. Lois held her in her arms, and softly wiped the old brown wrinkled face with her apron, crying over it, as she had hardly yet cried over her own sorrows. For hours, she tended the old Indian woman, tended her bodily woes; and as the poor scattered senses of the savage creature came slowly back, Lois gathered her infinite dread of the morrow, when she, too, as well as Lois, was to be led out to die, in face of all that infuriated crowd. Lois sought her own mind for some source of comfort for the old woman, who shook like one in the shaking palsy at the dread of death - and such a death! ... And in comforting her, Lois was comforted; in strengthening her, Lois was strengthened ...

... The morning came, and the summons to come forth and die came. They who entered the cell found Lois asleep, her face resting on the slumbering

old woman, whose head she still held in her lap. She did not seem clearly

to recognise where she was when she awakened; the 'silly' look had

returned to her wan face; all she appeared to know was that, somehow

or another, through some peril or another, she had to protect the poor

Indian woman.[64]

Gaskell's more celebrated novels, *North and South*, *Wives and Daughters* and

Mary Barton all contain strong female relationships and an understanding of

Kranidis's 'sisterhood'; Moi argues that it is this sort of exclusion of the male that

patriarchy finds most threatening.[65] But the sisterhood established in the above

extracts is far more radical, not just linking together two women as supposed

criminals awaiting death, but also finding threads of continuity between a white,

educated, Christian Englishwoman and a Native American, illiterate slave.

Culture, class and creed separate them, but they are unified as oppressed women

and, significantly, as witches.

Yet this unification is highly problematic. Bringing together two supposed witches

and creating a sisterhood beyond boundaries of acceptability creates, once more,

chaos within the text. Lois feels: 'her senses were leaving her, and she could not

remember the right words in which to form her request.' The old ways of

explaining things, of ordering language, self and society are useless, and a sense of

'madness' seizes control of Lois, who, up to this point, had been wrongly accused

and imprisoned, and who embodied contemporary notions of acceptable

femininity. This insanity, echoing the rhetoric of medical texts, and borrowing

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[64] Gaskell, *Lois the Witch*, pp. 90 -95
[65] Toril Moi, *Sexual/ Textual Politics* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2000), p.14

heavily from frantic ideologies of female sexuality, is more overt in Gaskell's

presentation of Nattee. As a 'savage', from the mystical 'dense forests' of an

American past, Nattee embodies a colonial injustice that seems to parallel the

victimisation she suffers as an alleged witch. Packlow argues:

> if there is an ancestral curse, surely it's one that afflicts all the colonists,
>
> persuading themselves they are fulfilling the will of God whilst they have
>
> brought the original inhabitants such as Nattee into a state little differing
>
> from slavery, and reduced her people to outcasts on the hunting grounds
>
> which had belonged to her fathers.[66]

The bond between Nattee and Lois is difficult, then, to reconcile within the text;

there is an inherent division between the action of the text and the narrative that

describes it. On one hand, Gaskell presents Nattee, her culture and her witchcraft

in entirely conventional terms. The narrator's voice is full of patronising

compassion for the 'poor savage' with the 'old brown wrinkled face', who, 'dirty,

filthy', needs to be cleansed, bathed and cared for by the white woman, as if she

were a child requiring the care of the parent. This only replicates the standard

justification for imperial expansion; such excessive sympathy is completely

condescending. Loomba believes this to be typical of colonial texts, which,

'although less overtly aggressive, still feel the need to justify their own cultural

superiority.'[67] Nattee's 'dread of death' suggests the fate of those without

Christian faith, whilst Gaskell's phrase, 'the poor scattered sense of the savage

creature', encodes simultaneously ideologies of gender, imperialism, sexuality and

insanity.

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[66] Packlow, 'Introduction'

[67] Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/ Post-Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 39

But the seemingly endless allusions to 'the poor Indian Woman' obscure the main action. The actual care that Lois provides is not just the superior care of a stronger, Christian and English mind. When the women awake on the morning of their execution, they are actually sleeping together, bodies entwined, with faces in each other's laps. When being led to the gallows, their arms 'tighten around their bodies'. The language of 'tending bodily woes' is surprisingly erotic, and does more than suggest the deviant sexuality implicit in descriptions of hysterics and witches. Lesbian overtones themselves exclude men, but the implication of the text goes further. Like Emily Dickinson's linguistic subversion, the uniting of two witches and women prioritises once more sound and rhythm over conventional meaning: 'And in comforting her, Lois was comforted; in strengthening her, Lois was strengthened.' In addition to echoing the bible, there is a balance between the clauses that suggests the equality of the women in their relationship. The 'savage' offers as much comfort as the enlightened; witchcraft overturns racial, imperial, class and gender boundaries.

As textual analysis of Mary Coleridge, Emily Dickinson and *Lois the Witch* has revealed, the patriarchal foundations of psychology and, significantly, Victorian Christianity, are at the heart of late nineteenth-century representations of the witch. Despite the fact that scientific advance, and in particular the work of Charles Darwin, had promoted secularisation in popular culture, Patricia Beer has noted the centrality of God and Divine law in the writing of prominent women such as Gaskell, Brontë and Eliot: 'All three were sincerely religious and presented their heroines as believers who conducted themselves according to Christian

principles.'[68] In *Mary Barton*, in particular, Gaskell's eponymous heroine

interprets everything in terms of her religion, and feels and acts voluntarily in

terms of her relationship with God. Although Lois the Witch's final hours and

eventual hanging are loaded with Christian imagery and symbolism, her position

as a God-fearing Christian is confounded by the possibility that she has been

found guilty of witchcraft. Despite Gaskell's implication of her innocence, for the

crowd, the judge and the priest (and therefore, presumably for God), Lois is a

witch.

There seems to be a desperate desire to enforce religious doctrines, with repeated

references during Lois's death scene to 'saving', 'souls', the 'eternal comfort' of a

'Heavenly Friend' and the 'One who died for us'. Yet Packlow indicates that

'[Gaskell's] Salem story also echoed a Unitarian determination to demystify

religion, debunking the miracles and 'priest craft' which exploited the credulity of

ordinary people.'[69] And the addition of witchcraft seems to extend the challenge

beyond the penetrative gaze of psychologists. In the moment of her death, Lois the

witch interpellates the witch to re-write the text and history:

> She smiled faintly, when she saw the bright light of the April day, and put
>
> her arm round Nattee, and tried to keep the Indian quiet with hushing,
>
> soothing words of broken meaning, and holy fragments of the Psalms
>
> ... But when they took Nattee from her arms and led her out to suffer first,
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> Lois seemed all at once to recover her sense of present terror. She gazed
>
> wildly around, stretched out her arms as if to some person in the distance,

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[68] Patricia Beer, *Reader, I Married Him* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.192
[69] Packlow, 'Introduction', p.x

who was yet visible to her, and cried out once, with a voice that thrilled

through all who heard it, 'Mother!' Directly afterwards, the body of Lois

the Witch swung in the air, and everyone stood with hushed breath,

with sudden wonder, like a fear of a deadly crime fallen upon them.[70]

The presence of the witch breaks down religious structures and doctrines:

'hushing, soothing words of broken meaning, and holy fragments of the Psalms.'

Christian verse is a useful crutch, but only in so far as its value is sonic; the gentle

sounds of the words, which 'soothe' in a maternal sense, dominate over Christian

meaning. The psalms are meaningless fragments and the significance of melody is

equally stressed by Gaskell's own onomatopoeic rhythms and repetitions. Some

sense of alternative emerges. In *Reader I Married Him*, Beer argues for the

importance of religion: 'Although Elizabeth Gaskell would never have stooped to

the popular creed of her day that religion was good for women as it reconciled

them to their domesticity, she did seem to feel there was a special affinity between

women and religion.'[71] But the dramatic declaration of a capitalised 'Mother!'

indicates more overtly a female faith. Upon her death, Lois sees a female 'person

in the distance', a powerful, all-seeing female [m]Other that refutes Christian

expectation. Indeed, after her evocative declaration of matriarchy, Gaskell refers to

Lois for the first and only time in the body of the novel as the eponymous 'Lois

the Witch'. An all-powerful pagan priestess somehow declares herself present and

dominant.

In Gaskell's descriptions of Lois's and Nattee's hanging and bodily violation, of

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[70] Gaskell, *Lois the Witch*, p. 105
[71] Beer, *Reader I Married Him*, p. 302

sacrifice and of 'One who died on the cross for us and for our sakes', there is a direct parallel between Christ and the witch. Re-writing the witch (or the hysteric) as Christ is thoroughly subversive. Hill Rigney argues that in the works of contemporary women writers, the figure of Christ becomes not only feminine, but appropriated as a symbol of the female political and social condition.[72] That Christ was persecuted and suffered as a martyr, that he performed the social function of scapegoat and bled for the salvation of humanity, are qualities which lend themselves as literary symbols for the personal and political suffering of women. Simone de Beauvoir memorably expressed women's perceptions of the blood-tie with Christ:

> As women bleed each month and in childbirth, so Christ bled on the cross; as women perceive themselves as sacrificial victims of men, impaled in the sexual act, so Christ was pierced by the spear. She it is who is hanging on the Tree, promised the splendour of the Resurrection. It is she: she proves it; her forehead bleeds under the crown of thorns. [73]

The recognition of the witch as a Christ figure, echoing Emily Dickinson's ground-breaking linguistic subversion, has, thus far, only been recognised in the work of second-wave feminists. Furthermore, neither Rigney, Rich nor De Beauvoir has extended this subversion to merge Christ with a witch, a symbol of pagan power, of 'evil minded persons who had chosen to give up their souls to Satan'.[74]

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[72] Barbara Hill Rigney, *Lilith's Daughters: Women and Religion in Contemporary Fiction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 66

[73] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* trans. Harry M. Evans (London and Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 117

[74] Gaskell, *Lois the Witch*, p. 60

Lois the Witch becomes, despite its conservative narrative, a radical revision of a system of signification based on the *Nom-du-Père*, but it is the witch who permits this, whilst the dominant narrative voice echoes social mores. Phyllis Chesler states in *Women and Madness* that late nineteenth-century physicians recognised a common manifestation of female insanity to be an identification with Christ, which has been argued by later feminists to be 'concretely rooted in female biology.'[75] According to Chesler, it is through the blood sacrifice of childbearing that women assume their role as martyr: 'Unlike men, they are categorically denied the experience of cultural supremacy, humanity and renewal based on sexual identity - and on the blood sacrifice, in some way, a member of the opposite sex.'[76] In different ways, some women are driven mad by this fact. It is their apparent madness or, its predecessor, witchcraft, that allows them to refigure the scapegoat syndrome into one of liberation.

In 1895, in the Irish village of Ballyradlea, near Clonmel, the twenty-six year old housewife, Bridget Cleary, was beaten and burned to death, in the presence of family and friends, for apparently being a witch.[77] They assumed the real Bridget had been abducted by fairies and replaced with a changeling, an evil spirit that needed to be extinguished. One hundred and fifty years after the end of witch burning in Europe, and despite twenty years of experimentation and 'proof' of the contrary from scientists, theologians, academics and politicians, fear of the witch

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[75] Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 41
[76] Ibid p.43
[77] Edward Johnson, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (Penguin: London, 2000), p. 67

was still so strong that a family needed to murder its mother. Analysis of

Coleridge, Dickinson and Gaskell has proved the potency of that fear. Whilst

Coleridge and Gaskell can be seen to articulate highly conservative sentiments of

social respect and Christian submission, the centrality of witchcraft to their texts

defies such simplistic conclusions. Although it is perhaps a fleeting or covert

revision, Gaskell's witchcraft reverses Christian teachings to work in the name of

the Mother, rather than the Father. She extends the challenge of matriarchy that is

initiated in Mary Coleridge's writing, that wreaks linguistic havoc in Emily

Dickinson's poetry, to break down the most fundamental of patriarchal authorities,

and replace it with a primordial, pagan, female alternative. Representations of the

witch remain caught between female violation linked to the injustices of the witch

trials, and the potential of that female alternative. Whilst conservative structures of

narrative, form and society control images of witchcraft, each of the women

considered in this chapter come to incorporate the witchcraft that she writes.

Although women and witches are, in the decades discussed in this and subsequent

chapters, forced into the margins, it is from those margins that both can exact a

timely revenge upon the patriarchal systems that have attempted to incarcerate

them, either in asylums or in prose.

Chapter 2:

'Uterine Deviants': Witches and 'Odd' Women

As a mystic, as witch, as conjurer, and as artist it is time [woman] unfurled her

own flag and hoisted her own colours.[1]

- Edith Lee Ellis, *Rise Up, Women!*

When is a witch not a witch? ... When the witch is a lesbian.[2]

- Leslie Ellen Jones, *From Witch to Wicca*

Precisely because it is motivated by a yearning for that which is, in a cultural

sense, implausible - the subversion of male homicidal desire - lesbian fiction

characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades as 'realistic' in surface

detail, a strongly fantastical, allegorical or utopian tendency.[3]

- Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*

And the effects of the witch's revenge can be felt most strongly in the disruptions of

the early twentieth century. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the

greatest political, social and economic upheaval of the modern age; the two World

Wars, the Great Depression and the beginnings of decolonisation proved common

themes for male writers such as Lawrence, Eliot and Yeats. But many female writers

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[1] Edith Lee Ellis, cited in Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903 -1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 1974), p. 40

[2] Leslie Ellen Jones, *From Witch to Wicca* (New York: Cold Spring, 2004), p. 201

[3] Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 17

of the first quarter of the new century concerned themselves with women's own particular crusade. The suffrage movement dominated women's involvement in the public sphere up until the Enfranchisement Acts of 1918 and 1928 in the United Kingdom, and the introduction of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919 in the United States. The obvious consequence of emancipation was increased political visibility for women of all classes, a 'bringing in' to the public sphere from which they had previously been excluded, providing a direct challenge to the forces of patriarchy, which, in the latter stages of the previous century, had labelled female minds 'too weak' to make important political decisions. The consequences of such a radical departure were far-reaching, with evidence of feminist triumph found in both the high and popular cultural texts of the time. In both the United Kingdom and the United States, women became interested in smoking, drinking, going without corsets, bobbing their hair, reading daring literature, dancing the Charleston and enjoying new economic, political and sexual freedoms. Yet the sense of liberation was not universal. Victorian ideals of femininity still occupied public consciousness, at least among members of the middle and upper classes, and in America, the 'Cult of True Womanhood' preached cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submission and domesticity for young women, despite a political backdrop of revolution.

Whilst women slowly gained social and political territory in the 1920s and 1930s, the witch gained legitimate status too. Wicca, the neo-pagan religious movement and modern survivor of the medieval witch cult, first emerged in the 1920s, giving visibility and significance to the witch whom the advances of the previous century had attempted to destroy. *Wicca* is derived from the Old English 'witcha', meaning male

wizard or witch; *wicce* was a female witch and *wiccecræft* was witchcraft. Its earliest known use is in the circa 890 *Laws of Ælfred*. Earlier origins of the word are uncertain, however, and are much disputed. Gerald Gardner, who published the first texts on Wicca, as discussed in Chapter Three, proposes a relationship with the Old English words *wita*, meaning 'wise man' and 'witan', meaning 'to know', asserting that witches had once been regarded as the 'wise' people; Wicca is often called the 'Craft of the Wise' in allusion to this derivation. The consequence of this labelling seemed to acknowledge the existence of witchcraft as a spiritual movement in its own right, which served to bring the witch, for the first time, into the dominant discourses of society. It is worth noting, however, that this 'bringing in' of witches into society, like the progress of suffrage, is not as liberating as it would first appear. The focus on male knowledge, superiority and right to interpret what was, almost exclusively, female magic, allowed little potential for rebellion. The female witch herself remains always on the margins.

Women writers of the period occupy a somewhat fraught position, then, caught between the new feminism initiated by suffrage and the conservatism that still dominated many facets of society. By appropriating a male literary heritage and claiming it, for the first time, as their own, the writers discussed within this chapter are representative of early twentieth-century women's literature, in so far as they attempt to negotiate a new discursive space for feminism following on from the progresses of enfranchisement. But Margaret Murray, Edna St Vincent Millay and Sylvia Townsend Warner can be distinguished from more widely known writers such as Virginia Woolf by their adoption of the witch, who complicates feminist readings further. Margaret Murray is the only female writer who contributed to the definition

and advent of Wicca - although it is worth noting that her research on the topic of witchcraft has been universally rubbished, once more locating her witches on the margins. Millay and Warner draw out the sexual deviance of the witch suggested by Murray more fully and to greater subversive effect. But rather than debating their current advance, the witch allows women writers to go further, allowing challenges taboos greater than suffrage. The witch is not, as male figures have decreed, socialised; she returns to hint at a more reckless and subversive legacy than critics have ever acknowledged.

From Myth to Religion

From the earliest times, it was believed that witches were apt to worship certain goddesses, Hecate chief among them, who provided them with their knowledge and power. However, the idea that every worshipper of a particular deity was a witch did not arise until that deity was named as Satan; the concept of an organised religion devoted to evil words and Devil worship was a fantasy of Christians rather than an authentic folk practice. Throughout the nineteenth century, the practice of ritual magic took on many of the trappings of religion, but it was not until the twentieth century that witchcraft, or as it came to call itself, Wicca, could be said to have become a religion that practised magic, rather than a magic with religious aspirations.

In the late antique and early medieval periods, the primary religious dichotomy in Europe was between paganism and Christianity. In the High Middle Ages, it was between Christianity and Islam in the arena of the Crusades, and between orthodox Christianity and assorted heresies closer to home. The early modern period was divided between Catholicism and Protestantism. By the Industrial era, however, as

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divided between Catholicism and Protestantism. By the Industrial era, however, as

discussed in Chapter One, the philosophical tension between science and religion took

centre stage. Science provided practical answers to questions that religion had

addressed in metaphorical terms, and promised to answer questions that religion

wouldn't touch. It began to seem that the strength of religion lay in its ability to create

and support community rather than its ability to provide answers to metaphysical

questions. Mainstream religion was increasingly associated, at the beginning of the

twentieth century, with the provision of a moral code and a set of proscriptions upon

behaviour; Diane Purkiss argues that spiritual sustenance was more and more often

sought in the exotic, 'whether that was Catholicism for a Methodist, Buddhism for a

Catholic, or theosophy for a Jew'.[4]

Just as science had driven a wedge between theology and the physical world, the

spiritualist movement had lessened religion's dominion over the afterlife.

Spiritualism, like belief in witchcraft, was in decline at the end of the nineteenth

century, but the carnage of World War I breathed life back into the movement. It

offered the possibility of making contact with loved ones lost on the battlefield in

uncertain circumstances - many of the major battles were, as Jeremy Black suggests,

so bloody and lasted so long that it was impossible to recover bodies and ship them

home for burial.[5] The influenza epidemic that swept through the world in 1918

brought another tidal wave of unexpected death. Between the war and the flu, the first

quarter of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented number of deaths that left

survivors without closure. Séances, witchcraft, or Wicca, perhaps offered that closure.

[4] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.260
[5] Jeremy Black, *The World in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 2002), p. 13

In addition to challenging religious certainties, science also served to provide new

insight into the past. Digging up the physical remains of the past had been a hobby of

gentlemen and grave-robbers for quite some time, but Leslie Ellen Jones argues that:

> It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the scientific discipline of
>
> archaeology began to coalesce, with the aim of understanding how people of
>
> the past had lived, rather than merely accumulating pretty treasures. Since
>
> ancient civilisations usually put a large portion of their time, energy and
>
> resources into religious sites - temples, sanctuaries, statues of gods, ritual
>
> accoutrements - early twentieth century archaeology was revealing the flip side
>
> of religions demonised by Christianity, whether the paganisms of the Middle
>
> East from the Old Testament or those of ancient Europe denounced by early
>
> Church Fathers.[6]

Running parallel to the increased popularity of folklore studies was the rise of

historical linguistics. People were now interested in and capable of reading what texts

remained of these pre-Christian and pre-Jewish peoples. Even when the texts had only

been written under Christian supervision, as in Ireland, the radical difference between

the native traditions they captured and the mental world preserved in Greek and Latin

provided yet another vantage point from which to understand spirituality. For those

who retained their commitment to mainstream Christianity and Judaism, archaeology

uncovered evidence of the actual existence of people, places and events mentioned in

the Bible, offering the promise of proving that the 'myths' of Christianity were, in

fact, true. More importantly to this study, as witches are specifically referred to in the

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[6] Leslie Ellen Jones, *From Witch to Wicca*, p. 151

recognition led to renewed interest in pagan religion and witchcraft, culminating in, as Ronald Hutton indicates, the establishment of Wicca as a mainstream spiritualist movement.[7]

The inclusion of the witch in dominant cultural discourses of the first quarter of the twentieth century paralleled a movement toward female emancipation and autonomy that Gaston Rageot hailed as 'the dawn of a new civilisation' and Leon Abensour as 'the advent of women in the life of a nation'.[8] The idea that the Great War had done more to redefine relations between the sexes and permit political emancipation than years, or even centuries, of previous struggle had accomplished was widespread during and immediately after the conflict. The 'bringing in' of women into the dominant discourses of society, culminating with equal franchisement in 1928, was fully acknowledged in the literature and political speeches of the time, whether hailed or reviled, strictly scrutinized or magnified out of all proportion to reality.

Showing war had not been an exclusively male activity meant identifying women who had filled new roles and positions of authority. Their contribution to the war effort earned official recognition by the Women's War Work subcommittee of the Imperial War Museum; the phrase 'out of the cage' was often applied to such women.[9] While feminist writings of the period did emphasise the desire to serve, to prove one's mettle and to hasten emancipation, an important side-effect of the women's war effort was,

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[7] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.80
[8] Cited in Black, *The World in the Twentieth Century*, p. 76
[9] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Vol 1: The War of the Words* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 32

as many British and American women writers noticed, the first literary explorations of the pleasure of being with other women. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* expressed it:

> 'Chloe liked Olivia ...' Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy
>
> of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do
>
> like women.
>
> 'Chloe liked Olivia,' I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was
>
> there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. Cleopatra did
>
> not like Octavia. And how completely *Antony and Cleopatra* would
>
> have been altered had she done so [10]

Harriet Stanton Blath described England in as late as 1921 as still being 'a world of women.'[11] Many, from war time poets, to later novelists, essayists and biographers, from English propagandist Jessie Pope to the American novelist Willa Cather, noted the destruction of traditional gender roles: as Cather expressed it, 'All the world is topsy-turvy.'[12] Women began slowly to express desire more openly, if still within codified terms. Lesbian writers like Amy Lowell and Gertrude Stein produced increasingly erotic work, and in 1915, Charlotte Perkins Gilman published *Herland*, an utopian novel about women without men.

However, this new confidence created anxiety as well as celebration. As the war moved away from the centre of public consciousness, and as husbands returned to their homes and work, the 'women's age' lost its focus. In order to restore damaged

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[10] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 89

[11] Referred to Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 41

[12] Willa Cather, *Obscure Destinies* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), p.10

their homes and work, the 'women's age' lost its focus. In order to restore damaged egos and compromised authority, patriarchy sought to counter images of female capability and independence by suggesting that such autonomy made them less 'feminine'. Emancipated women were re-branded as 'uterine deviants' and later, especially when borrowing from the earlier writings of Krafft-Effing, 'virile lesbians', dangerous, shameless, 'wo – men'.[13] Mary Scharlieb summarised the effect of the 'confusion' of the sexes in 1929:

> Among the drawbacks in the lot of the unmarried woman must be reckoned the injuries to character and failures of development which may be caused by unfulfilled desires ... This, of course, would account for dryness, hardness, want of sympathy, and also for the loss of feminine grace ... incompleteness ... an incessant aching longing for the fulfilment of that primary feminine instinct ... children.[14]

Isabel Hutton, writing in 1923, adds:

> The marriage may be said to be consummated when the male organ passes through the hymen and enters the vagina of the woman ... if the usual and natural position is used the male organ enters in the correct anatomical position ... the woman to be lying on her back ... If after a year or so the woman does not begin to take part with her husband in [sexual] unions, then she probably is an abnormal person and it would have been better for her to remain a spinster.[15]

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[13] Mary Scharlieb, *The Bachelor Woman and Her Problems* [1929], cited in Greta Jones, 'Women and Eugenics in Britain: The Case of Mary Scharlieb, Elizabeth Slone Chesser and Stella Browne' *Annals of Science* 51 (1995) 481-502

[14] Ibid, p. 489

[15] Isabel Emslie Hutton, *The Hygiene of Marriage* [1923] cited in Jones, 'Women and Eugenics' p. 490

sexological discourse of the interwar period in Britain and America: single women are 'unfulfilled' and 'incomplete' beings; normative heterosexuality (the missionary position) is what is considered 'natural' for women; spinsters are 'hard', 'dry' and unfeminine; women who exhibit a disinclination for heterosexual sex are definitely 'abnormal'. As discussed in Chapter One, the acknowledgement of the existence of female sexuality problematizes the role of women in society. Richard Evans argues that '1920 marked the end of the feminist era'; winning the right to vote brought women into the public sphere but did little to improve attitudes towards them.[16] The period between 1910 and 1930 that this chapter discusses does seem to represent a transition, from nineteenth-century feminism, located 'inside' the cage and outside society, towards a new emphasis on the rights of women as social members. Both women and the witch began to move inward, adopting the acceptable language of society, its groups and mores; each conceiving themselves as recognised alternatives to patriarchal hierarchies and mounting a challenge from within. But for women at least, that moving inward seems to represent a silence; later memories of the period were shaped by living veterans and commemorations of their fallen comrades, while it is only the names of heroes and battlefields which persist. Women's roles were erased and silenced. But the witch resists such silencing. Once more the women writers of the period use her image to express 'rage and rebellion' against patriarchal constraints, to shock and surprise. By re-locating the witch on the margins, she can achieve this to maximum effect.

'Making it Up as She Went Along': Margaret Murray

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[16] Richard J. Evans, *Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840 - 1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 330

'Making it Up as She Went Along': Margaret Murray

If there is one clear difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses

of femininity, it is that in the twentieth century, female sexuality became acceptable, if

only within the parameters of reproductive sex. Onto this stage of conventionality and

containment walks Margaret Murray, presenting previously unimaginable female

sexual deviance through her appropriation of the witch. Although Murray's official

area of expertise was Egyptology - she trained as a linguist and became a specialist in

Egyptian hieroglyphics, working on Sir Finders Petrie's excavations of Abydos in

Egypt in 1890s – during World War I, when she was unable to travel to Egypt due to

hostilities, she turned her attention to the witch trials of the Early Modern era.[17] *The*

Witch Cult in Western Europe (1921) was Murray's first monograph on the subject.

Murray proposed that the Satanic witch cult persecuted by the Church was, in fact, a

pagan fertility cult that had persisted in secret since the Christianisation of Europe.

The 'Devil' worshipped by witches was in fact the Horned God, known in the

classical world as Pan, but called Dianus by Murray (the male version of the goddess

Diana, so closely associated with witchcraft throughout the Medieval period). Murray

identified two forms of witchcraft. The first she termed 'operative witchcraft', which

signified charms and spells of folk magic practised harmlessly throughout the world.[18]

What she termed 'Dianic' or 'ritual witchcraft' was, she claimed, an organised

religion dating to pre-Christian times.

Borrowing heavily from Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière*, which describes witchcraft as a

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[17] Caroline Oates and Juliette Wood, *A Coven of Scholars: Margaret Murray and Her Working Methods* (London: Folklore Society, 1998), p. 60

[18] Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), p. 13

subversive fertility cult, in which the High Priestess copulates with a massive phallus, Murray identifies a chief witch, or coven leader, who takes on the role of 'Devil' and has intercourse with witches in their debauched revels.[19] The chief witch, usually but not necessarily a man, wore an outfit that led to him being described as 'horned'. In fact, the pervasive description that Murray creates is of the Devil as having cold flesh, with particular emphasis on a cold penis, which led her to posit that the leader of the coven was dressed in an all-over costume of leather. Although Murray presented this discovery as legitimate research, the Horned Devil lacks any basis in academic and historical fact, leading historians to suggest that it is a figment of her imagination.The aspect of her hypothesis that raised the most academic eyebrows was her claim that Britain had only been superficially converted to Christianity, taking on a veneer of that religion in order to maintain social respectability but continuing to practise the Old Religion in secret. Initially she made a distinction between the folk, witch religion of the rural peasant classes and the Christianity of the upper classes; by her third book, *The Divine King in England* (1954), she was claiming that the monarchs of Britain were hard-core pagan witches who submitted to periodic human sacrifice for the good of the nation.

Murray's ideas were from the beginning exposed to critiques from historians of witchcraft like C.L. Ewen, who described them as 'vapid balderdash'; such judgements were largely ignored by the post-war population who were titillated by her book.[20] It has since been widely accepted that her ideas, though well expressed, were

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[19] Jules Michelet, *La Sorciere*, [1862] (Paris: Garnier - Flammarion, 1966), p.32
[20] C.L. Ewen, *Are the British `Anglo-Saxons' or Celts? : The Onomatologist to the Aid of the Anthropologist* (London: C.L. Ewen, 1938), p.12

the result of misinterpreting and exaggerating evidence taken from limited sources. Nevertheless, the influence of her work and her witches is widespread, not least in texts considered in this study, and in the work of later feminists, such as Daly and Dworkin, who resurrect the concept of witchcraft as a subversive cult. But as a woman writer, perhaps more than a historian, her witches demand a critical attention that has, thus far, been denied. The following extract from her introduction to *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) sets up the implicit subversion that Murray sees at the heart of all witchcraft, a subversion that forms the crux of this thesis:

> The subject of Witches and Witchcraft has always suffered from the biased opinions of commentators, both contemporary and of later date. On the one hand are the writers who, having heard the evidence at first hand, believe implicitly in the facts and place upon them the unwarranted construction that those facts were due to supernatural power; on the other hand are the writers who, taking the evidence of hearsay and disbelieving the conclusion drawn by their opponents, deny the facts *in toto*. Both parties believed with equal firmness in a personal Devil, and both supported their arguments with quotations from the Bible. But as the believers were able to bring forward more texts than the unbelievers and had in their hands an unanswerable argument in the Witch of Endor, the unbelievers, who dared not contradict the Word of God, were forced to fall back on the theory that the witches suffered from hallucination, hysteria, and to use the modern word, 'auto-suggestion.' These two classes still persist, the sceptic predominating. Between the believer

worshipped chiefly by women. This is very probable, but at the time when the cult is recorded the worship of the male deity appears to have superseded that of the female, and it is only on rare occasions that the God appears in female form to receive the homage of worshippers.[21]

While Murray presents herself as providing 'critical examination of the evidence', the ultimate effect of her writing is to challenge existing patriarchal hegemonies. It also actively challenges the *fin-de-siécle* reduction of witchcraft to hysteria. Medical men 'fall back' on psychology, suggesting the weakness of their studies and perhaps the falseness of their argument.

Similarly, the Bible is only significant as primary evidence, whilst the reference to the Witch of Endor suggests the persistence of the witch despite the attempts of the Bible and Christian teachings to either demonise the witch or at least subdue her for their own ends. In the King James translation of the Bible, the chapter begins: 'Saul, had put away those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards out of the land.'[22] Although, in Biblical terms, the Witch of Endor story seeks to undermine the witch's power - her incantations are not her own, but the work of a higher, male power - her very presence in the tale challenges the authority of holy men who deny her existence. Murray draws attention to the fallacy of doing this, in a post-war society that clung, once more, to spirituality, whether in terms of religion or witchcraft to make sense of a world in ruins. The witch's presence, after nearly fifty years of extermination at the hands of psychologists, indicates the subversive persistence of witchcraft, threatening once more the very foundations of god-fearing society and surviving its attempts to

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[21] Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*, p.ii
[22] I Samuel, Chapter 28, Verses 3 and 7

once more, to spirituality, whether in terms of religion or witchcraft to make sense of a world in ruins. The witch's presence, after nearly fifty years of extermination at the hands of psychologists, indicates the subversive persistence of witchcraft, threatening once more the very foundations of god-fearing society and surviving its attempts to imprison her.

Equally challenging and equally dangerous, then, is the notion of the witch's deviant sexuality. In the copulation of thirteen witches with the phallicly 'Horned' Dianus, the witch goes beyond what was conventionally defined as 'natural' and 'normative' sexuality, undermining a generation of war veterans' need to assert masculine authority. The description of the chief female as 'somewhat obscure' is equally significant, in so far as it suggests the inability of conventional systems of knowledge and language to name her. As 'the Mother-Goddess worshipped chiefly by women' she not only undermines Christian doctrines but hints further at sexual deviance; worship[ping]' and 'receiving ... homage', for Murray, at least, signify intercourse. The idea of giving and 'receiving' prayers seems sexually suggestive, and the placing of the phallic horn, responsible in pagan legend for the continuation of humankind through fertility and hunting, in female hands is revolutionary. Potentially, because it exists independently of any male control, homoerotic bonding between multiple women would be, as Toril Moi suggests, a radical concept, so much so in fact that it cannot be fully articulated in a language dependent on the 'Word of God'; Murray even suggests the possible inaccuracy of the source.[23] Nevertheless, the witch in *The Witch Cult in Europe* goes far beyond the emancipation imagined for women prior to

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[23] Toril Moi, *Sexual/ Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 202

and during the First World War, hinting at a powerful pre-history and ominous future legacy.

The phallus in the hands of multiple women could not be articulated in 1921; its potential is fully realised to devastating effect ten years later, however. In *The God of the Witches* (1931), Murray re-interprets the histories behind August Eÿ's German folktale, *Ridden by a Witch*. In her version of the tale, thirteen witches kidnap a miner and subject him to 'unspeakable' acts, amplifying society's greatest fears about female sexual deviance:

> One of the hags came down, turned the miner over ... and mounted him. Then away they went through the air, following the others to Brocken. He could barely breathe ... [They] asked him if he could remain silent, or if he would like to be boiled in oil.[24]

Fictional texts can be seen as powerful examples of the way in which a culture thinks about itself. Margaret Murray's revision of Eÿ's *Ridden by a Witch* puts women at its centre, ordering a world that perpetuates the power of matriarchy and witchcraft. Her emphasis on the suggestive language of the tale indicates the witch's sexual domination and challenge to existing hierarchies. The reversal of the rape act, man's ultimate appropriation of the female, subjugates the male. The miner becomes a phallus, trapped beneath the 'heavy' body of the witch and reduced to his biological function. In this case, that is, as Ellman argues, 'not reproduction but female pleasure'.[25] For Lacan, the phallus is the lynchpin in the bowling hall of signification;

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[24] August Eÿ, *Ridden by a Witch*, cited in Margaret Murray, *The God of the Witches* (London: Clarendon, 1969), p. 335

[25] Maud Ellman, *Introduction to Psychoanalytic Theory* (London: Longman, 1998), p.113

knock it over and all the other signs and systems come tumbling down. Murray

suggests that subjecting the lynchpin to a supernatural, female power has the same

effect: it repudiates masculine authority and its language. The effect is that the witches

silence the miner, so that he can 'barely breathe', and cannot name his attackers.

Also hinted at in the 'mounting' of a man who is no less passive than a broomstick is

another ultimate deviance: masturbation. And the effect of this insurgency is to

empower the female, not just the witch, but also the wife, who subsequently restores

order. It is in Murray's version of the tale, not Eŷ's, however, that the wife, rather than

the husband, is responsible for restoring moral order. She names the witch as

responsible for the crime; the husband is reduced to a quivering wreck, unable to

negotiate language. The sense of female sexual pleasure is extended further in

Murray's description of the coven. The witches share 'mounting' the man and then

each other, indicating a potent lesbian impulse that fits with the pagan notion of the

Mother Goddess. The witch, throughout the end of the nineteenth century and the first

part of the twentieth, simultaneously embodies the rhetoric of female corruption and

the utopian thought that struggles to free itself from its patriarchal stronghold. Like the

old hag and the Wicked Queen, that struggle evades the dominant social reality faced

by post-war women.

Writing in Invisible Ink: Edna St Vincent Millay

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, and to a lesser extent, still today, female

same-sex desire was rarely presented in the mainstream or feminist press as a

conceivable *alternative* to heterosexuality; nor was it ever referred to without

circumspection or the taint of pathology previously applied to definitions of

witchcraft/ hysteria. In his review of *The Well of Loneliness*, entitled 'The Vulgarity of

Lesbianism', which appeared in *The New Statesman* in 1928, Cyril Connolly

denounces the 'widespread social phenomenon ... [of] professional man-hating',

nostalgically reflecting on the pre-war days when the lesbian was categorised as a

simple 'psychopath', replicating the language levelled against the witch in the late

nineteenth century.[26] The fundamental basis of Connolly's contempt for 'Lesbian

Love' stems from his perception that female homosexuality permits 'no restraints' on

female sexuality, a horrifying prospect for a culture in which women's knowledge of

their own sexual pleasure was severely circumscribed and policed.

The mainstream press's presentation of Edna St Vincent Millay remains, however, in

opposition to the 'revolting idea' of 'uterine deviance' and female sexuality without

'restraints'. Indeed, as the leading literary celebrity of her generation, she came to

embody a new acceptable ideal of femininity. In the 1920s, Millay was America's

most read, most beloved poet. Critical biographer Elizabeth Atkins gives some

indication of Millay's nationally 'intoxicating effect on people' in describing the

reception of her second collection, *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1927):

> To say it became popular conveys but a faint idea of the truth. Edna St.
>
> Vincent Millay became, in effect, the unrivalled embodiment of sex appeal,
>
> the It-girl of the hour, the Miss America of 1920. It seemed there was hardly a
>
> literate young person in all the English-speaking world who was not soon
>
> repeating [her verses].[27]

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[26] Cyril Connolly, 'The Vulgarity of Lesbianism', *The New Statesman* (March 1928), cited in Terry
Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, p. 107
[27] Quoted in Marion Meade, *Bobbed Hair and Bathtub Gin: Writers Running Wild in the Twenties*

Millay was particularly well-positioned to have an impact on the politics of twentieth-century poetry because she was seen by many as a prototype of the 'modern woman', especially in her assertion of the right to and need for female self-determination of, as Meade argues, 'body, mind, pocketbook, and voice'.[28] Virtually from the beginning of her career, critical discussion of Millay, favourable and unfavourable alike, had tended to treat her not merely as an individual writer but as an exemplary instance of 'the woman as poet', as John Crowe Ransom put it.[29] Thus her turn in the late 1920s towards poetry as the expression and form of political commitment was not only an individual choice; it allowed the potential for a broader thematic scope for female poets in general.

'Witch Wife', published in 1927 at the height of Millay's celebrity, is not, ostensibly at least, a political poem, but the very presence of the witch, once more, complicates readings. The relationship implied in the title is, in itself, paradoxical, as witchcraft implies a rejection of conventional relationships and societal norms, defying the apparent male control and domesticity imposed upon women in the 1920s and 1930s. It is fitting, then, that the representation of marriage it offers to the reader is complex and flawed:

> She is neither pink nor pale.
>
> And she will never be all mine;
>
> She learned her hands in a fairy tale,
>
> And her mouth on a valentine.

(New York: Doubleday, 2004), p. 70

[28] Ibid p. 22

[29] John Crowe Ransome, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941), p.87

She has more hair than she needs;

In the sun 'tis woe to me!

And her voice is a string of coloured beads,

Or steps leading into the sea.

She loves me all that she can,

And her ways to my ways resign;

But she was not made for any man,

And she will never be all mine. [30]

From the very first stanza, the witch defies male ownership and authority: 'she will

never be all mine.' This is one of the few occasions when Millay appears to adopt a

male speaking voice. Once more the witch propagates a sense of female liberation that

finds support in the politics of the feminist movement. The 'coloured beads',

outwardly attractive, which ultimately lead 'into the sea' reflect the concept of the

witch as siren, seizing control of the helpless male and leading him to his death. Hair

has become a traditional literary metaphor for sexuality; the fact that the witch has

'more ... than she needs', causing 'woe' to her husband indicates the lasciviousness

typically associated with the witch and hysteric, a sexual deviance also hinted at in

Murray's writings. The final two lines of the poem, 'But she was not made for any

man,/ And she will never be all mine', seem to suggest an alternative sexuality lurking

within. Adrienne Rich suggests that texts can be part of a 'lesbian continuum',

without explicitly stating lesbian content, by challenging the primacy of heterosexual

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[30] Edna St Vincent Millay, 'Witch Wife', *Selected Poems* (New York: Halliday, 2000), p. 45

relationships.[31] A witch/ woman who is 'not made for any man' suggests an inverted

sexuality and uniquely female desire. The excess of sexuality symbolised by her

excess of hair cannot be satisfied by 'normal' marital relations.

The relationship between the witch and the lesbian featured heavily in contemporary

anthropological texts. Homosexuality and primitive mysticism were regarded as

mutually constitutive, and 'inverts' were thought by some to be spiritually in advance

of their species. Edward Carpenter, in *Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk: A

Study in Social Evolution* (1914), argues that homosexuals have long been linked with

'female wizards, or witches', a congruence that speaks to sexology's attribution of

intellectual superiority to the invert:

> It is certain among primitive folk the prophet, the priest, the wizard and the
>
> witch-doctor largely unite their functions and are ... naturally [associated with]
>
> homosexuality.[32]

Elizabeth Meese's claim that 'lesbian' is 'a word written in invisible ink' not only

understands that the representation of lesbian desire has historically been subject to

the imposition of cultural restraints, but, I would add, in the case of Millay's 'Witch

Wife', suggests that witchcraft – as narrative practice – can be defined as a sort of

feminine conspiratorial inscription.[33] For the word 'lesbian' is at times, as Meese

intimates, a kind of disappearing hieroglyphic, readable and yet necessarily disguised;

the witch always facilitates its readability.

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[31] Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (London and New York: Norton, 2002), p.ix

[32] Edward Carpenter, *Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk: A Study in Social Evolution* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1914), p. 57

[33] Elisabeth Meese, *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989), p. 191

Unused Virgins and Subterranean Lesbians: Sylvia Townsend Warner

Although published to wide critical and popular acclaim in 1926, Sylvia Townsend

Warner's *Lolly Willowes* is relatively unknown today. Robert Caserio has summarised

the novel as 'a feminist manifesto deserving a place in the curriculum no less than

Virginia Woolf's texts', but while Warner's novel in fact anticipates many of the

issues concerning female autonomy that Woolf discusses in *A Room of One's Own*

(published three years later), *Lolly Willowes* has all but disappeared.[34] In contrast,

Woolf's essay enjoys a privileged position as one of the founding texts of modern

feminist literary theory. The subject of Warner's narrative is a forty-seven-year-old

woman who is magically transformed from traditional spinster into self-empowered

witch. Again, the witch is appropriated as a symbol for female liberation and

subversion. Equally, while the Sapphic subtexts of *A Room of One's Own* have been

widely addressed by critics, the lesbian implications of *Lolly Willowes* have largely

gone unnoticed.

Critics have rightly identified Lolly's retreat from marriage as a rejection of British

patriarchal social values, and seen her psychic transformation as a sign of her refusal

of conventional femininity, but this chapter has already established the use of the

witch as a code for lesbianism. Despite the near consensus that recognises in Warner a

'quirky, individualistic' sensibility, which relishes mischief and incongruity, critics

persist in reading this novel – a blatant valorisation of witchcraft – literally.[35] Lolly's

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[34] Robert Caserio, *Plot, Story, and the Novel: From Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 204
[35] Ibid

celibacy is repeatedly celebrated as the result of her autonomy, but is never

contemplated as signifying an alternative sexuality; her spinsterhood is consistently

read as asexual – that is, within the context of heterosexual norms – rather than as a

challenge to the boundaries of what constitutes sexuality. The conspicuous absence of

any explicit reference to female homosexuality in *Lolly Willowes* is not a strategy

unique to Warner, but is characteristic of much of the modernist writing that was

produced by her British and American contemporaries. It is important to remember

that the text was published during a transitional period when, despite the

reconfiguration of sex-roles, obscenity laws were used to censor the portrayal of

'immoral sexual themes'. Shari Benstock, in her attempt to specify a lesbian tradition

of modernist writing, distinguishes between women whose work was formally

traditional, yet whose subject matter was overtly Sapphic (such as Radclyffe Hall) and

those women 'who filtered the lesbian content of their writing through the screen of

presumably heterosexual subject matter or behind experimental narrative styles', such

as Woolf and Barnes.[36]

In one of the few critical analyses of *Lolly Willowes*, *Step-Daughters of England*, Jane

Garrity draws attention to the fact the Lolly is unlike 'most' women:

> ...a perception that is reinforced throughout the text by references to her
>
> 'oddness', her tendency, for example, to interrupt a staid dinner party by
>
> asking one of the guests, a man her family hope will marry her, if he is a 'were
>
> wolf'. Warner frequently employs the word 'odd' or suggestions of
>
> 'queerness' in describing Lolly: we learn, for example, that her clothes 'smelt

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[36] Shari Benstock, *Textualising the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre* (Norman: University of
Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 44

so queerly', that she relishes telling 'odd jokes' and gathering 'strange herbs',

'behaving ... oddly' and probing 'the strange places of her mind'.[37]

Terry Castle has argued that the word 'odd' and its derivatives may hint at a

'subterranean 'lesbian' meaning'[38] Indeed, by the end of the novel, Lolly remarks that

one of the greatest advantages of associating with witches is that 'they do not mind if

you are a little odd.'[39] But 'odd' does not only imply what Garrity has described as

Warner's 'own repressed homoerotic longings';[40] the addition of the witch also

articulates a deviant sexuality, unveiling the *femme couverte* at the Witch's Sabbat

with frightening social resonance:

> 'Where are you taking me?' she said. Mrs. Leak made no answer, but in the
>
> darkness she took hold of Laura's hand. There was no need for further
>
> explanation. They were going to the Witches' Sabbath. Mrs Leak was a witch
>
> too; a matronly witch like Agnes Sampson, she would be Laura's chaperone.
>
> The night was full of voices. Padding rustic footsteps went by them in the
>
> dark. When they had reached the brow of the hill a faint continuous sound,
>
> resembling music, was borne towards them by the light wind ... She laughed.
>
> Mrs. Leak squeezed her hand ...

> ... These depressing thoughts were interrupted by red-haired Emily, who came
>
> spinning from her partner's arms, seized hold of Laura and carried her back
>
> into the dance. Laura liked dancing with Emily; the pasty-faced and anaemic

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[37] Jane Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 192

[38] Terry Castle, *The Apparational Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 55

[39] Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, p. 245

[40] Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 50

her tingle from head to foot. She shut her eyes and dived into obliviousness –
with Emily for a partner she could dance until the gunpowder ran out of the
heels of her boots.[41]

Critics have widely accepted that Warner's version of witchcraft was highly
dependent on the writings of Margaret Murray, though perhaps taking a more
benevolent form. Her use of 1921 as the turning point for Lolly's relocation to Great
Mop coincides with the publication of Murray's *The Witch Cult in Europe*. Warner
read the book when it first appeared, and sent Murray a copy of her novel. While the
overt action of the Sabbat is to produce a sisterhood for marginalized women, Warner
also conflates the concept of spinster and witch, because each similarly poses a
contemporary threat to heterosexuality. Inquisitorial reports indicated, perhaps
fittingly, that witches were accountable for obsessive sexual desire in men as well as
male impotence, and in some cases, were accused of 'removing the male organ
altogether.'[42]

While spinsters were not vilified for literal castration, the rise of the sexually
independent woman created a crisis in masculinity, enabling men to accuse her, in
effect, of emasculating England. Both the spinster and the witch that Warner unites in
the Sabbat are dangerous precisely because each threatens the hegemony of male
sexual privilege. Indeed, as argued above, Murray notes that sexual rites play an
important role in the rituals of witchcraft, going so far as to suggest that participants
engaged in sexual activity with members of the same and opposite sex; therefore, it

[41] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes* (London: Pandora, 1994), p. 187, p. 192
[42] Willem de Blecourt, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (London: Athlone, 1999), p. 371

the Sabbat are dangerous precisely because each threatens the hegemony of male sexual privilege. Indeed, as argued above, Murray notes that sexual rites play an important role in the rituals of witchcraft, going so far as to suggest that participants engaged in sexual activity with members of the same and opposite sex; therefore, it seems impossible to ignore this interpretation of Lolly's 'whirl[ing]' with her female partner, as 'Fused' implies a joining of female bodies in a union that ironically replicates notions of marriage and heterosexual desire. The description of the two joined witches as 'like two suns that whirl and blaze in a single destruction' seems to echo the language of 'Witch Wife': 'In the sun 'tis woe to me!'. The linking of the witch, female subversion and the sun becomes increasingly important, suggesting the conflation of the three as life-giving and energy-providing sources, particularly among restricted women of the post First World War period. In Warner's writing, too, it is the traditional symbol of female sexuality, hair, which initiates the sexual transition. In a phrase loaded with sexual overtones, the 'strand of red hair came undone and brushed across Laura's face'. Red implies the dangerous sexuality of the female body, which becomes unleashed and 'undone' until it penetrates Laura, causing a 'divi[ing] into obliviousness' that echoes the euphemistic language used to represent female orgasm. As with the witch who 'rides' the passive miner, the male is not the cause of female sexual climax.

But Warner goes beyond the superficial linking of Lolly's feminist conversion with sexual inversion – an equation originally made by sexologists who claimed that female homosexuality was increasing because of feminism – by eroticising the body of the witch:

> While these thoughts passed through Caroline's mind, Laura was not thinking

92

at all. She had picked a red geranium flower, and was staining her left wrist

with the juice of its crushed petals. So, when she was younger, she had stained

her pale cheeks, and had bent over the greenhouse tank to see what she looked

like. But the greenhouse tank showed only a dark shadowy Laura, very dark

and smooth like the lady in the old holy painting that hung in the dining-room

and was called the Leonardo.[43]

Paula Bennett has suggested that a closer examination of the use of jewels and other

small objects (pearls, seeds, berries, buds and bees) in the work of Dickinson and

other nineteenth-century women poets reveals a deliberate employment of clitoral

imagery which is part of 'a highly nuanced discourse of female erotic desire' and

which amounts to the emergence of an 'independent female sexuality.'[44] The witch's

crushing of petals and staining her wrist is a highly eroticised gesture, symbolising a

literal 'de-flowering' and a sexual act in its product of a red, virgin-blood stain. The

petals of the flower, which bring Laura physical pleasure and distraction from

Caroline's talk of marriage, take on this sense of clitoral symbolism, not just encoding

social taboos such as homoerotic passion and the pleasures of masturbation, but also

presenting a version of female sexuality that is distinct from phallocentric models of

conventional notions of women as passionless and motivated solely by the drive to

reproduce.

Throughout the course of *Lolly Willowes*, flowers, such as the 'excessive and

expensive' bunches she purchases against the will of Henry the patriarch, the

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[43] *Lolly Willowes*, p. 3
[44] Paula Bennett, *Solitary Pleasures : the Historical, Literary, and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 104

'*marrons glacé*', 'round, smooth jars of fruit', beads, buttons and buckles, are all associated with illicit pleasure and eroticism, coming to instigate Lolly's movement to the witch-village of Great Mop.[45] The erotic association of painting her 'pale cheeks' with the flower petals seems to suggestively express what other public discourses repress or pathologise – the sexual pleasure afforded by the clitoris and its significance in masturbation and female sexual autonomy. Since the organ's only function is sexual pleasure, it represents what Bennett calls 'an excess of absolute sexual autonomy' for women.[46] Significantly, because of the pleasure-producing function, the witch's masturbation also presents a challenge to notions of what is the 'natural' and 'normal' sexual expression for women, normally referred to solely in terms of reproduction.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, when the clitoris enters into public discussion of female sexuality, whether through Freud's essays or in the marriage manuals which disseminated information about 'the new science of sex', its function, as a mark of sexual difference or pleasure, is down-played.[47] It is important to note that Lolly's act of symbolic masturbation occurs as Caroline is trying to emphasise the necessity for marriage and children to women's lives:

> A kind of pity for the unused virgin beside her spread through Caroline's
>
> thoughts. She did not attach an inordinate value to her wifehood and maternity;
>
> they were her duties, rather than her glories. But for all that she felt
>
> emotionally plumper than Laura. It was well to be loved, to be necessary to

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[45] *Lolly Willowes*, p. 80, 88, 92
[46] Bennett, *Solitary Pleasures*, p. 14
[47] Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace*, p. 298

other people. [48]

Kristeva's theory of abjection offers further insight into what the crushing of the petals can suggest. Kristeva suggests that abjection is caused by 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in between, the ambiguous, the composite.'[49] The woman's body is in itself abject because it transgresses boundaries, bleeds, gives birth and secretes; the flower, too, can become abject in being 'composite' in terms of its layered form and plural associations. The witch's body, however, is made doubly abject, in being female and in breaking down cultural taboos of homosexuality, rape and masturbation. Perceiving Lolly's 'stained' and written on body as an 'abject referant' which exerts a fascination and threaten to intrude upon and disrupt the clean and 'proper' body, reveals the potentially destabilizing effect the witch has on 'proper' masculine forms. By employing the paradigm of the crushed petals, Warner not only draws attention to women's sexual autonomy, but also challenges the economy which posits the binary opposition of penis/non-penis as the definitive structure of sexual difference, hierarchy and authority.

But it is not only within the confines of controlling English society that the threat of the sexual witch is unleashed. In keeping with late Victorian and modernist notions of imperialism and the threat of female pollution, the witch extends her deviance to embody not just latent female sexuality but also the sexuality of the foreign other. Critics such as Jennifer Nesbit have lamented the repressive colonial politics of

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[48] *Lolly Willowes*, p. 59
[49] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 309

Warner's *Lolly Willowes*, arguing that the text is liable to a reading in which Laura only accepts her insularity in exchange for territory.[50] But the significant linkage of race and sexuality in Warner's other works of the same period suggests that such ideologies demand reconsideration. Her second novel, *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (1927), takes an English missionary to a South Pacific island to confront the discursive power of Englishness, as his relationship with his native 'convert', a boy named Lueli, can only be named as homosexual: either it must exist as homosexual and depraved, or it must be unnamed.[51] In *Summer Will Show* (1929), the figure of Caspar, fighting on 'the wrong side' in France in 1848, evokes the complexities of interpreting local events geopolitically. It is perhaps only by considering post-colonial and feminist sexualities and ideologies in relation to the witch that such revisionist impulses can be fully understood.

The relationship between the witch, the lesbian and the savage is perhaps not surprising considering society's historical attitudes to each. Non-European peoples were imagined as more easily given to same-sex relationships; harem stories, in particular, fanned fantasies of lesbianism. In his account of early seventeenth-century Turkey, George Sandys contemplates what happens when women are cloistered with each other, engaged in long hours of massaging and pampering their bodies:

> Much unnatural and filthie lust is said to be committed daily in the remote
>
> closets of these darksome [bathhouses]: yea, women with women; a thing
>
> incredible, if former times had not given thereunto both detection and

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[50] Jennifer Nesbit, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Very Cultured Voice*', in Lucy Armitt (ed.), *New Criterion* (New York: Allen and Brooke, 2001), p. 293

[51] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Mr Fortune's Maggott* (London: Pandora, 1996)

punishment.[52]

At the same time, Leo Africanus, a converted African Moor whose real name was Al Hassan Ibn Mohammed Al Wezaz Al Fazi (on whom Othello is said to be based), in *A Geographical History of Africa* extended the reference to the witch as lesbian, claiming that in Fez, there were witches who:

> Have damnable custome to commit unlawful Venerie among themselves, which I cannot expresse in any modester termes. If faire women come unto them at any time, these abominable Witches will burne in lust towards them, ... yea, some there are, which being alluded with the delight of this abominable vice, will desire the company of these Witches, and faining themselves to be sicke, will either call one of the Witches home to them or will send their husbands for the same purpose.[53]

Such accounts do not exist in isolation simply as stories about the Other, but serve to define deviant and normative behaviour at home. This story of the witches of Fez is cited by the French surgeon Ambroise Paré, first to 'verify' his descriptions of female parts that 'grow erect like the male rod' enabling the women to 'disport themselves ... with other women', and then to defend the excision of such parts.[54] While Lolly only ever articulates a world for women within the boundaries of Britain and Europe, and as Garrity has suggested, in the end, tacitly endorses the narratives of colonisation that 'undergird her struggle for equality', I would argue that the text's representation of the witch as a feminised, colonised Other speaks as much in the silences, in 'the invisible

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[52] Cited in Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/ Post-Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 129
[53] Ibid p.435
[54] Donna Bassin, *Female Sexuality: Contemporary Engagements* (London: Jason Aronson, 1999), p.3

brewing beer – a family passion previously only enjoyed by male members, growing

medicinal herbs and devouring books on philosophy, demonology and botany. In

particular, it is Lolly's voracious and unrestricted appetite for unfeminine books –

'Locke on the Understanding or Glanvil on Witches' – that signals her nonconformity,

and unsettles the 'neighbouring mammas [who] considered her rather ignorant'

because of her unfamiliarity with books on conduct that their daughters' were

reading.[57] Owen Davies observes that literate witches were thought to enhance their

powers through the written word; such books and manuscripts were considered to be

dangerous signifiers of non-conformity, indicators that the witch was immersed in evil

doing.[58] Similarly, her body takes on the 'odd' appearance of the witch, becoming less

'feminine'. In the London cold, 'She developed chilblains, and this annoyed her.'[59]

The water roughens her hands, and as she embroiders - her sister-in-law does all the

'useful needlework' - the embroidery floss 'rasp[s] against her fingers'.[60] Over time,

Laura's face also stiffens until it expresses the role set out for her: 'It had lost its

power of expressiveness, and was more and more dominated by the hook nose and the

sharp chin. When Laura was ten years older she would be nut-crackerish'.[61] This last

description comes from Caroline, Laura's sister-in-law, and it marks the contempt of

those who function as 'normal' within English society for those who do not. Caroline

feels she is 'emotionally plumper' than Laura, an apt unity of the mental and physical

benefits she gains from her role as wife and mother.[62]

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[57] Ibid p.48
[58] Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736 - 1951* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 160
[59] *Lolly Willowes,* p.30
[60] Ibid, p.28
[61] Ibid, p.35
[62] Ibid

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benefits she gains from her role as wife and mother.[62]

However, this 'nut-crackerish' description is also a first hint that Aunt Lolly is not

what she seems: she may be a witch. The figure of the witch, associated, as we have

seen with lesbianism at this time, is defined by a social order that favours women who

marry and become mothers.[63] The witch as extreme, ugly, and deformed is both a .

creation of patriarchal heterosexual England and a marker of bodily subjection to the

conventions of an English domestic space. The parallel between Laura the witch and

her family's West Indian parrot further stress her displacement:

> Titus, her father, had made a voyage to the Indies, and had brought back with
>
> him a green parrokeet, the first of its kind to be seen in Dorset. The parrokeet
>
> was named Ratafee, and lived for fifteen years. When he died he was stuffed;
>
> and perched as in life upon his ring, he swung from the cornice of the china-
>
> cupboard surveying four generations of the Willowes family with his glass
>
> eyes. Early in the nineteenth century one eye fell out and was lost. The eye
>
> which replaced it was larger, but inferior both in lustre and expressiveness.
>
> This gave Ratafee a rather leering look, but it did not compromise the esteem

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[61] Ibid, p.35
[62] Ibid
[63] Garrity, p.134-5

in which he was held.[64]

Both the witch and the bird are brought outside their own environment at the hands of merciless colonists. While Ratafee is exported, caged and stuffed, Laura is removed from her spiritual home (the appropriately named Lady Place), with her botany, brewery and broomsticks, and transported into English domestic life, as 'an inmate', resident and prisoner of Apsley Terrace.[65] By literally and metaphorically clipping the wings of Ratafee and the witch, the imperialist authority is emphasised. Laura's confinement in London - 'into a state of Aunt Lolly' - highlights the cultural boundary of what constitutes normative feminine behaviour; a woman's birth-name is not, as Lolly's family supposes, a 'thing out of common speech' but names her according to her socially allotted role.[66] The problematic position that naming occupies within the text, for example, the numerous references to the Lolly-Laura bifurcation, is a gauge of the author's recognition that women have historically been exiled from linguistic self-definition. At the same time, the focus on duality reflects Warner's larger preoccupation with her character's split subjectivity – the friction between her conscious and unconscious selves, her domestic role as 'Aunt Lolly' and the disenfranchised Other that Laura comes to represent.

Central to the complicity of women in the ideology of imperial rule is the dominance of heterosexuality, symbolised by the 'noose of pearls'; Warner's reference to the romantic tales of Indian life as a harmless enticement to marriage alludes heavily to the common practice of government-sponsored emigration for dangerous British

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[64] *Lolly Willowes*, p.8
[65] Ibid, p. 26
[66] Ibid, p.40

spinsters in order to find them husbands or occupation as governesses. Garrity views

Aunt Emmy's exoticised and feminised image of India as a western fantasy of

European expansion, but encoded within, I would argue, is more than a critique of

empire[67]:

> Emmy unfolded her plan to Laura; that is to say, unfolded the outer wrappings
>
> of it. Laura listened with delight to her aunt's tales of Indian life. Compounds
>
> and mangoes, the early morning rides along the Kilpawk Road, the grunting
>
> song of the porters who carried Mem Sahibs in litters up to the hill-stations,
>
> parrots flying through the jungle, ayahs with rubies in their nostrils, kid-gloves
>
> preserved in pickle jars with screw-tops – all the solemn and simple pomp of
>
> old-fashioned Madras beckoned to her, beckoned like the dark arms tingling
>
> with bangles of soft gold and coloured glass. [68]

The bifurcation of Emmy with Emiline echoes, like Laura and Lolly, a sense of female

dual identity. The linking of the two women implies a witchery at the heart of Aunt

Emiline, as another spinster who invades the stability of the text.

Whilst her tales of India under the guise of Emmy are harmless and inconsequential,

as Emiline the witch, the phraseology takes on greater significance. The 'dark arms

tingling with bangles of soft gold and coloured glass' that 'beckon' sensuously to

Laura are entirely female; Loomba argues that the non-European woman always

appears as an intractable version of 'Amazonian' or deviant femininity:

> The Amazons are located by early colonial writings in virtually every part of
>
> the non-European world, and provide images of insatiable sexuality and

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[67] Garritty, *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 243
[68] *Lolly Willowes*, p. 28

brutality. Thus female volition, desire and agency are literally pushed to the margins of the civilised world. But not all margins are equally removed from the centre: skin colour and female behaviour come together in establishing a cultural hierarchy with white Europe at the apex and black Africa at the bottom. [69]

Whilst the 'beckoning' intimates homoeroticism, the 'mangoes', 'rubies' and 'glass' extend the imagery of clitoral stimulation initiated by Lolly's 'fingering' of the geranium petals and continued in her desire for African lilies. But there is a sense in which Laura's attraction to the 'dark arms' signifies nothing other than the perpetuation of imperialist aims, and the colonisation of the female subject, in so far as it replicates the other as exotic, as a spectacle or object of consumption for the white coloniser.

However, Laura does not become the coloniser, and as we have seen, remains estranged from the dominant society of the Empire. Instead, she adopts the subversive power of the repressed black female, adopting her image and inscribing witchcraft onto herself. After indulging in her books on witches and witchcraft, Laura is thus described:

> Her skin was brown, inclining to sallowness; it seemed browner still by contrast with her eyes, which were large, set wide apart, and of that shade of grey which inclines neither to blue nor green, but seems only a much diluted black. Such eyes are rare in any face, and rarer still in conjunction with a brown colouring. In Laura's case the effect was too startling to be agreeable.

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[69] Loomba, *Colonialism/ Post-Colonialism*, p. 45

Strangers thought her remarkable-looking, but got no further...[70]

The repeated emphasis on colour, on 'brown', 'sallowness' and 'diluted black' testify

to the witch's location as not just as sexually deviant, but also as a foreign other;

dominant English society has no language to define her.

The novel's invocation of feminist reform at times colludes with Anglo-centric

conceptions of womanhood as a subject race: as Lolly critiques empire, she

simultaneously appropriates the role of colonised Other. A clear example of this is

seen immediately following Lolly's departure from Apsley Terrace, when she joyfully

reflects on her triumph over her 'tyrants' – her nuclear family - and re-imagines

herself as a freed black slave who dances a 'derisive dance on the north bank of the

Ohio.'[71] But the effect of her location as Other is not to repress her. The addition of

witchcraft means that rather than being suppressed by the coloniser, she wreaks havoc

in the form of her own method of colonisation upon his much lauded 'green' lands.

Feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose have reconstructed the

anonymous Cartesian subject of geography into a subject that is sexed, classed, raced,

and - most importantly for my purposes here - embodied.[72] In its anonymous,

universalised form, the geographical subject in fact resembles a white, heterosexual,

Western male-and spaces and places are designed, constructed, and valued with this

subject in mind. Feminist geography thus encourages an analysis of spaces based on a

'power geometry' that varies with time, locations, and relationships.[73] As both

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[70] *Lolly Willowes*, p. 25
[71] Ibid, p.105
[72] Gillian Rose, *Women Writing and Space: Colonial and Post-Colonial Geographies* (London and New York: Guilford, 1994), p. 50
[73] Ibid p.50-51

geographers argue, the ways in which spaces are organised can tell us about who is expected to be there, to use the spaces, and to feel comfortable in them. As Henri Lefebvre has remarked, space is 'a product to be used, to be consumed, [but] ... also a means of production'[74]. Spaces and places become signifying systems that are the conditions of possibility for the subjects inhabiting them.

These observations implicitly call for a reconsideration of setting not as a background, symbolic or not, against which characters move and think, but as an ideological force in literary texts. Great Mop, the place where 'no one minds if you are a little odd', is supposedly part of the English Empire, but becomes colonised as the land of the Other, as the land of the witch.[75] The threat of the chaos portended by the witch, the woman and the foreign other is unleashed to devastating effect upon traditionally male lands:

> A witch of but a few hours' standing she rejected with the scorn of the initiate all the bugaboo surmises of the public. She looked with serene curiosity at the future, and saw it but little altered from what she had hoped and planned. If she had been called upon to decide in cold blood between being an aunt and being a witch, she might have been overawed by habit and the cowardice of compunction. But in the moment of election, under the stress and turmoil of the hunted Lolly as under a cover of darkness, the true Laura had settled it all unerringly. She had known where to turn ... More urgent for being denied this innocent service, the ruling power of her life had assaulted her with dreams and intimations, calling her imagination out from the warm safe room to

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[74] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* trans. Norbert Guterman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 10
[75] *Lolly Willowes*, p.109

wander in darkened fields and by desolate sea-boards, through marshes and

fens, and along the outskirts of brooding woods. [76]

The name itself subversively links together the implement of female domestic

restriction with the agent of the witch's power. The addition of Lolly's 'little bleeding

red footsteps of red ink' to the map of Great Mop does more than mark her journey; it

also alludes to her rebellion as witch by evoking menstrual flow and by re-writing the

land in female terms, adding contours and routes to the patriarchal Cartesian map.[77]

Titus's arrival in the land of female autonomy confuses the picture temporarily, as he

attempts to repossess the landscape. He threatens to return Laura the witch to 'her old

employment of being Aunt Lolly.'[78] Replicating an imperial language and mindset, he

envisions Great Mop as 'a body', remarking to Laura that he 'should like to touch

it.[79]' This 'possessive and masculine love' is a 'horror' to Laura, symbolising the

violation of the land to such an extent that she can no longer exist comfortably as an

embodied subject within it.

Titus's Great Mop becomes 'a pastoral landscape where an aunt walked out with her

nephew', thus seeming to restore the land to its proper use and ownership; the literal

and literary hierarchy of 'family, property, nation' is reasserted.[80] Ultimately, Laura

re-asserts her ownership of Great Mop and the sense of female liberation implicit in

her relocation to what can only be described as her own land. It is, then, difficult to

reconcile the conclusion of feminist rebellion with the fact that Lolly's witchcraft is

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[76] Ibid p.112
[77] Ibid
[78] Ibid p.113
[79] Ibid
[80] Ibid p.116

entirely dependent on the male figure of Satan, who supports her and saves her from

Titus's imperialism. In the final pages of the text, Warner seems obliged to reassert

dominant hierarchies, as if perhaps the threat that the witch unleashes on English

lands is too much to be fully articulated. This may be due to sensitivities about the

appropriation of lands and bodies which had recently been initiated by the Great War.

It also might serve to re-affirm the identity of the male as saviour and protector.

Nevertheless, the presence and persistence of the witch still represents a major threat

to dominant hegemonies. What emerges most obviously, in female writers'

representations of her, is that she now comes to symbolise all independent women.

It could be argued that female emancipation brought about a sense of equality,

removing the need for the witch's subversion that had been necessary in the texts of

Gaskell, Dickinson and Coleridge. However, the frequency with which she still

appears in women's writing of the early twentieth century suggests otherwise. It is

important to remember that *The Witch Cult in Europe,* 'Witch Wife' and *Lolly*

Willowes were all published during a transitional period in British life, when, despite

the reconfiguration of sex-roles, obscenity laws were used to censor the portrayal of

'immoral sexual themes' – and lesbianism was invariably one of the most prominent

casualties of the post-war public censorship of perverse behaviour and desire.[81] The

witch becomes the icon of such social perversion, permitting a sexual deviance that

allows women's escape from enforced domesticity into a community of English

witches. This seems to represent the ultimate liberation from compulsory

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[81] Richard J. Evans, *Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840 - 1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), p. 20

heterosexuality; women writers allowed their heroines to access sexual pleasure in a homoeroticised, foreign space that plays with conventional witchcraft imagery of broomstick, cats and spells. By the arrival of the 1930s, that liberation becomes increasingly difficult to access. In the writing of Murray, Millay and Warner, female sexuality encodes rebellion, but as the uncertainty of moving towards World War II intensified, the witch's sexuality becomes the justification for further violence against her.

Chapter 3:

Witch Burning: Fragmentary Female Bodies and the Witches of Hughes, Blyton, Plath and Boland

> Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.
>
> > - Genesis 3:16

> Why not walk in the aura of magic that gives to the small things of life their uniqueness and importance? Why not befriend a toad today?[1]
>
> > - Germaine Greer, *The Change*

Witchcraft in Male Hands

One of Margaret Murray's colleagues at the Folklore Society was a retired tea grower and civil servant named Gerald Gardner who had spent much of his life in the Far East. He had been interested in archaeology, native religions, spiritualism and nudism during the years of his working life, and when he retired to England, he devoted himself to occult interests full time. While Murray claimed to have discovered evidence that witchcraft was a real religion practised in the past, Gardner claimed to be practising that religion in the present. He said that he was inducted into a coven of hereditary witches located in the New Forest in 1939, and as he learned more about their practices, he wanted to write a book about witchcraft to correct the many

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[1] Germaine Greer, *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 325.

misapprehensions about them in popular culture. His high priestess initially forbade

any writing about witchcraft, but eventually the coven agreed he might write in the

guise of fiction. The result was *High Magic's Aid* (1949). Two years later, the anti-

witchcraft laws of 1736 were repealed; this meant not only that witchcraft was now

deemed irrational, but that claiming to be a witch was no longer considered fraud.

This removed one of the main obstacles to Gardner writing about his experiences in

non-fictional form. In 1954, he published *Witchcraft Today*. Witchcraft, more than

ever before, was, in male hands, becoming acceptable, part of a discourse that, whilst

never mainstream, could be controlled, owned and named. The development of Wicca

as a recognisable, organised religious movement ran, Ronald Hutton argues, in

parallel to the legalisation of the witch.[2] Whilst this could be seen as a powerful

gesture of liberation, there must be a sense in which such a repeal only occurred

because the witch was now considered safe, harbouring no revolutionary power for the

state to control.

Diane Purkiss argues that, like Murray, Gardner claimed that, 'his religion was the

same-old (or same Old) practised under Christian noses since the time of (ostensible)

conversion'.[3] Hutton notes, however, that Gardner's witchcraft forwarded many of his

non-magical interests, especially the practice of performing rituals naked, or 'sky

clad'.[4] One of his chief rituals was the raising of a 'cone of power', the accumulated

psychic energy aroused through dancing in a circle, outdoors, naked.[5] Walls and

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[2] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.29
[3] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 311
[4] Ronald Hutton, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century* (London: Athlone, 1999), p. 34
[5] Gerald Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (London and Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), p.50

clothes, he said, inhibited the movement of the energy and the ability to focus it where

the coven wanted it to go. Gardner also insisted on a balance of male and female

energy in rituals. As the whole notion of a dance-induced cone of power suggests,

Gardner's witchcraft was accomplished in a state of ecstasy and trance - a kind of

group shamanism. The response of critics to the work of Gardner reveals

contemporary attitudes towards witchcraft, particularly those constructed by male

writers and authority figures. Bengt Angaloo regards his desire for nudity as 'telling';

Hutton also sees his orgy-like cones as his primary motivation.[6] Witchcraft in the

hands of women is subversive; in the hands of men, it can become pornography, a

further method of objectifying and controlling women. Indeed, balancing this

experiential, ecstatic element of magic was the Book of Shadows, the textual source of

Gardnerian ritual. This collection of instructions and invocations had to be hand-

copied by each initiate into the coven. It thus became the literary equivalent of an

orally transmitted tradition, imposing both Gardner's own interpretations and,

therefore, a male literary heritage and process of signification onto the previously

chaotic, rebellious world of the witch.

And the downward spiral of the witch once more mirrors, to some extent, the fate of

women in contemporary society. Initially, Johanna Alberti suggests, feminism and the

women it claimed to represent had seemed to benefit from the social upheaval of the

First World War.[7] Women became more autonomous and less vulnerable in the eyes

of society and themselves when given more meaningful work to do. But in the

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[6] Angaloo and Hutton, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Twentieth Century*, p.129
[7] Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.8

decades after the Great War, in the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s considered in this

chapter, British and American society retreated from the feminist feeling that reached

its peak with complete political emancipation in 1928. Donna Bassin indicates that,

for women, 'despite the sonorous promises of a brighter tomorrow, or at any rate of

any opportunity to contribute to the post-war effort of reconstruction, the time had

come to give up hard-won gains'.[8] Some were labelled war-profiteers, others

incompetent, but all were asked to return home and to resume their traditional

occupations for the sake of the Veterans, the nation and the race, each becoming more

fragile with the growing political upheaval of the 1930s. Some refused, but others –

tired by years of toil and loneliness, or overjoyed at the eventual return of loved ones –

went willingly.

The pre-Second World War years witnessed, in both the United States and the United

Kingdom, marriages in unprecedented numbers; there was a veritable push to return to

private life, to an existence centred on the family, which Marcelle Capy, at one time

among the more radical French feminists, now saw as 'the Messiah, the great hope'.[9]

The literary movement, to some extent, also helped to construct this retreat; turn of the

century and even modernist feminist writing had permitted the constant revision of

definitions of masculinity and femininity; the thirties, forties and fifties, however,

were informed by 'renewed conservatism about gender roles'.[10] One of the most

obvious manifestations of this conservatism was the relocation of the dangerous body

of the witch away from the subversive aesthetic as embodied in the witches of

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[8] Donna Bassin, *Female Sexuality: Contemporary Engagements* (London: Jason Aronson, 1999), p. 44
[9] Marcelle Capy, cited in Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to Post-Feminism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 39
[10] Ibid, p. 42

Warner, Murray and Millay, into the traditionalist sphere of solidly conventional

representations. It is at this time that one of the most iconic representations of the

witch ever emerges. L. Frank Baum published *The Wizard of Oz* at the turn of the

century, but for most people, the memorable image of Oz comes not from the books,

but from the 1939 film, and of all the changes that the film made in its source

material, perhaps the most significant is the visual depiction of the Wicked Witch of

the West, the subject of nightmares for generations, as played by actress Margaret

Hamilton.[11] The unified image of the witch as a the hag on the broomstick, the

murderess who needs to be destroyed, is never more forcibly emphasised, excluding

the potential for multiple meanings and representations of the witch.

This recognition of the witch as a fantasy figure of malevolence complicates the

inherent relationship between witch and women, because such a categorisation

distances the witch from 'real' women. Indeed, the whole picture becomes even more

fraught in light of historians' responses to the witch trials. Many feminist reappraisals

of the European witch hunts of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries have concluded

that the women labelled 'witches' became the targets of the inquisitors and

demonologists because they were both outside of and threatening to patriarchal

control, particularly in respect of the exclusively male medical profession and of the

Church.[12] In recent decades, historians have argued that the women burnt as witches

were not 'real' witches but were usually poor, harmless and defenceless old women.[13]

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[11] Victor Fleming (dir.), *The Wizard of Oz* (Warner Bros: 1939)
[12] Robert Thurlow, *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose* (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), p. 377
[13] See Anne Llewellyn Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (San Francisco: Pandora, 1994), p. 291; H. R. Trevor-Roper, *European Witch Hunts of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 50

This comes close to arguing that the persecution of witches was unjustified because the women were not 'real' witches. The corollary is that if the women had been 'real' witches, they might have deserved the treatment they got - but also that real witches could exist.

While the accused witches were not given to eating babies and penises or to worshipping the devil, the activities the women were involved in – illicit healing, sorcery, the use of magical charms – as well as their connection with the pagan past were at least as distressing to the inquisitors. Jeffrey Russell foreshadowed a feminist interpretation of the witch in his analysis of the witch figure in folklore:

> She represents an elemental natural force possessing enormous and unexpected powers against which a natural person is unable to prepare or defend himself, a force not necessarily evil, but so alien and remote from the world of mankind as to constitute a threat to the social, ethical, and even physical order of the cosmos.[14]

From a feminist perspective, witches were not the pitiable victims of misogyny that Brian Levack describes, nor were they 'wretched women' duped by fantasy or illusion.[15] To interpret witches purely as victims, as many historians (including feminist historians such as Carol Karlsen) have done, is to ignore or deny the challenge these women represented to the dominant institutions within their societies. Similarly, to view the witch as a demonic Eve is equally limiting. The purpose of this entire thesis is to redefine the witch to mean a woman – whether a sixteenth-century

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[14] Jeffrey Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 402
[15] Levack, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, p. 99

village wise woman or a 1990s feminist – who challenges patriarchal control and claims independent knowledge and power.

'The Femme Fatale': Dorothy Hughes

I would contend that feminist criticism can also productively attend to texts with conventionally conservative ideologies, whilst still finding feminist relevance within them. Dorothy B. Hughes fits awkwardly into such a feminist agenda, but her texts encode conflicting notions of gender. In 2005, *The Feminist Press* released *In A Lonely Place*, Hughes' eleventh novel, as one of the three launch titles for their 'Femmes Fatales' programme, an initiative to bring back neglected female pulp writers into print. Priscilla Walton argues for Hughes' significance as a writer of detective fiction:

> Hughes didn't just pre-date Jim Thompson, she also pre-dated Patricia
> Highsmith, Ruth Rendell, and other so-called Masters of Psychological
> Suspense or Noir.[16]

Despite her apparent legacy, Hughes's work has been almost entirely ignored by literary critics, whether feminist, cultural critics or critics of genre. Furthermore, although Walton believes she is 'deserving [of a] place alongside the likes of Chandler and Hammett', she remains largely unknown.[17] Born in 1904, she published her first volume of poetry in 1931. Fourteen novels followed over a span of twenty-three years before she abruptly ended her writing career to care for her mother and grandchildren. She remained, though, a reviewer of mystery fiction and was the Grandmaster for the

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[16] Priscilla Walton, *Detective Agency: Women Re-Writing the Hard-Boiled Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 67
[17] Ibid, p. 69

Mystery Writers of America in 1978. Her representation of the witch comes, however, not in the mystery writing for which she is beginning to win acclaim, but in her wholly neglected volume of poetry, *Dark Certainty* (1931).

Despite the acknowledgement of the legacy of injustice against women implied in its title, 'Salem-Town', published in 1931, represents a disappointingly patriarchal view of the witch. She is a Siren, tempting helpless sailors to their deaths; a weak-willed, weak-minded Eve; a whore, dependent on male attention for any advance. Hughes's witch, who embodies contemporary ideals of female beauty, tricks countless sailors into her bed and to their deaths, whilst watching and knitting, as the town's women are all burned for their apparent 'witchcraft':

> Salem Town, Salem-town,
>
> The white ships sail,
>
> Why do ships go down
>
> Without a gale?
>
>
> She was just the right size
>
> With her shiny yellow hair
>
> And her sea-blue eyes
>
> With their wide baby stare.
>
>
> Sea boys were smitten
>
> Everywhere she'd go;
>
> She had a little kitten
>
> White as snow.

She wore flowered dresses

And lace pantalettes;

Her kind of caresses

Youth never forgets.

Of knitting she was fond,

She never dropped stitches,

Not even at the pond

Where they ducked the witches.

Salem-town, Salem-town

Douse the witches up and down!

They burned every witch

In the town square;

She didn't drop a stitch

Watching them there.[18]

Hughes's text immediately establishes the dichotomy of the innocent white of the

male sailors' ship with the 'scarlet' red of the witch and her knitted bed comforter.

The description of the witch as being the 'right size', with 'shiny yellow hair ... sea-

blue eyes ... wide baby stare', is surprisingly congruous with contemporary attitudes

to ideal femininity, suggesting a childlike innocence but also an alluring sexuality that

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[18] Dorothy B. Hughes, 'Salem Town', *Dark Certainty* (New York: Feminist Press, 1997), p. 12

is associated with the witch's guise of eternal youth.

It is this sexuality that draws men, but can also be seen to make them more susceptible

to the witch's curse:

> She invited each lover,
>
> One by one,
>
> Some night to come over
>
> When it was done.

> She drew each aside
>
> Whispered where she slept
>
> And each one in pride
>
> The secret kept.[19]

Female sexuality, rather than the witch's necromancy, is responsible for the

disintegration, death and disorder that the 'sea-blue eyes' and female oceans in which

'ships go down/ Without a gale' initiate.

Female sexuality, as a consequence, remained at the heart of cultural anxieties.

Andrea Dworkin sees men's fear of female sexuality as a projection of their fears

about their own sexual prowess:

> We are dealing with an existential terror of women ... stemming from a primal
>
> anxiety about male potency ... These terrors form the sub-strata of a myth of

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[19] Ibid

feminine evil which in turn justified several centuries of gynocide.[20]

Similarly, the *Malleus Maleficarum* is quite clear that women's insatiable lust was at the root of witchcraft. Ehrenreich and English write:

> In the eyes of the Church, all the witch's power was ultimately derived from her sexuality. Her career began with sexual intercourse with the devil. Each witch was confirmed at a general meeting (the witches' Sabbat) at which the devil presided, often in the form of a goat, and had intercourse with the neophytes.[21]

In Hughes's poetic narrative, it is the parson who adopts the role of Inquisitor, finding her 'shack', 'footsteps' and 'broomstick', but never discovering the identity of the woman who sits passively knitting whilst others are put to death for her crimes. The threat of the witch's sexuality, potentially lurking within all women, exists inside male society and challenges their institutions' exclusive control of knowledge and power. Even here, however, they are powerless to defend themselves against her.

Hughes produces a limited definition of the witch, warning society against her magic in tempting men from home and family. As the mobilization of men began once more in the 1930s in preparation for World War II, traditional gender roles were again advocated. The myth of man as protector of mother, loved ones, home and nation was thus strengthened. With the men moving away again, Alberti suggests that 'the state stepped into the father's role as disciplinarian'[22]; Hughes's polemic seems only to enforce the traditional options for women: either the witch-prostitute, who,

[20] Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974), p. 119
[21] Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: Feminist Press, 1973), p. 22
[22] Alberti, *Suffrage*, p. 76

subversive, powerful, and with lovers 'one by one', brings death to brave men and the

nation they represent, or the mild-mannered, self-sacrificing mother. Despite decades

of progress, the sexual options for women are revealed to be what they had always

been; a stark choice between radically opposed alternatives. More than ever, the

family is reinforced as the fundamental cell of society, while the dangers of sex with

unknown witches or witch-like women once more drew significant attention from

politicians, doctors and psychologists who sought to restore the patriarchal authority

damaged by decades of warfare, depression and suffrage campaigning.

'Witch Look', published in the same year as 'Salem Town', complicates this image of

the secret witch hidden within society, threatening to unleash her chaos at any time.[23]

In this poem, Hughes establishes the fail-safe guide to identifying the witch and the

dangerous woman, in order to protect family, society and nation. This patriarchal

definition of the witch contrasts with Hughes's representation of the witch in 'Salem

Town'. The conventionally beautiful witch threatened from within, but in 'Witch

Look', there is a clear distinction between the witch and other women, which closes

down multiple readings and potential subversion :

> Snake-green eyes,
>
> Hoof-marked chin,
>
> Black hair blowing
>
> Lank and thin;
>
> Long brown arms,
>
> Crooked finger tips,

---

[23] Dorothy B. Hughes, 'Witch Look', p. 90

Queer-sounding laughter

On your lips;

Sitting in the corner

Of the room,

Staring at and stroking at

The sweeping broom —[24]

This definite categorisation of the witch, with 'snake eyes' and 'crooked finger tips' undoes representations of the witch as invoking an unknown and unknowable pagan past, and inheriting the mystery and multiplicity of the Mother goddess. Whilst the reference to 'queer', which by this time was commonly used to denote lesbianism, and to her 'stroking at' the phallic broom testify to her subversive legacy, the dominant image Hughes creates is one of a nameable, identifiable, powerless entity, that bears much in common with the dominant image of the witch as comic horror, exemplified by the Wicked Witch of the West.[25] Once more, the witch in women's writing becomes code for women, in this case, reflecting the social conservatism that returned women to their homes. Whereas the witch's broom could, in earlier chapters, be interpreted as symbolising either her flight to freedom or her appropriation of the phallic organ, in this case, it now enforces female domesticity.

'Witch Snippit's Middle' : Enid Blyton

The familiar representation of the witch with the black pointed hat and long black hair, sitting astride a broomstick is one that Purkiss describes as 'the bugaboo of our

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[24] Ibid
[25] Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia 1993), p. 299

culture ... the source of countless children's nightmares'.[26] The return to conservatism

which Jacqueline Rose has associated with the literature of the 1930s and 1940s

repositions the witch firmly within the realm of fantasy and children's literature.[27]

This is the period in which major fantasy texts such as Robert E. Howard's *Hour of*

the Dragon (1935), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), T. H. White's *The Sword in*

the Stone (1939), Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan* (1946), C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the*

Witch and the Wardrobe (1950) and eventually Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

(1954) emerged, creating even more icons of witchcraft in male-ordered language and

terms.[28] At the same time, children's literature, along with government advertising

that encouraged women's return to domesticity, contributed to the formation of what

Hunt describes as 'the characteristic voice of children's literature: clear,

uncomplicated and generally neutral ... [establishing] the tone of voice, mode of

telling and the narrative contract between narrator and implied reader' that is familiar

today.[29]

It comes as no surprise that in addition to creating literature for what Lissa Paul sees

as 'empire builders' - for example, Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons,* and W.

E. John's *Biggles* - the dominant image of femininity in these decades was provided

by Pamela L. Travers's model of domesticity, *Mary Poppins.*[30] Representations of the

witch in children's literature remain closed, with any remnant of subversion deeply

[26] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 17
[27] Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan; or The Impossibility of Children's Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 91
[28] The witches present in Tolkien's epic are either male (thus black and evil) or female (white, aiding the hero's journey).
[29] Peter Hunt, *Children's Literature* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1991), p. 225
[30] Lissa Paul, 'Reading Otherways' in Sheila Egoff, Gordon Stubbs et al. *Only Connect: Readings in Children's Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 461

codified and contained within. It would appear that this subversive impulse,

considered to be at the heart of all witches and witchcraft, linking together the

liberation of the witch and the woman, is brought gradually under control by the rule

of the Establishment.

At the centre of the traditional, conservative and insidiously patriarchal world of

children's literature, is, of course, the ubiquitous Enid Blyton. Although many of the

ideologies present within her writing have latterly been considered sexist and racist,

she remains one of the most widely-read children's authors of all time. Her fanciful

lands of 'soft-eyed bunnies and singing birds' offer, David Rudd claims, 'an escape

from the troubles of the real world ... present[ing] an unquestioning portrayal of time,

protecting readers and offering them an unproblematised world.'[31] Her prolific output

of more than seven hundred books has been translated into more than forty languages

and sold in excess of four-hundred million copies worldwide. In Germany, Blyton is a

household name thanks to her pre-teen series *Hanni und Nanni* (*St Clare's*) and *Funf*

Freunde (*The Famous Five*). In France, *Oui-Oui* (*Noddy*) has been one of the best-

loved pre-school characters since the early 1960s; *Club des Cinq* (*Famous Five*) has

been in continuous publication in the prestigious *Bibliotheque Rose* since it first

launched in 1954. In The People's Republic of China, the Beijing Publishing House

has recently translated and published the twenty-four-part series of original Noddy

books.[32]

Despite her massive literary success, Blyton has been derided by critics such as

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[31] David Rudd, *Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature* (London: Macmillan, 2002), p. 49
[32] Extract reprinted on www.enidblyton.com [accessed 1ˢᵗ Aug, 2006]

Nicholas Tucker and Kimberley Rose for retrogressive textual politics.[33] In 1955, The

British Journal of Education carried a piece that criticised Blyton's devices and tone.

A 1958 article in *Encounter* by Colin Welch directed against the Noddy character

gave rise to the first rumour of a New Zealand 'library ban' on Blyton's books.[34]

British public libraries' policy on buying and stocking Blyton's books drew attention

in newspaper reports and by 1966, *The Guardian* had claimed that Blyton wrote more

insidiously dangerous right-wing literature than that published by fascist groups.

Modern reprints of some books have, for example, erased incidents of Noddy jumping

into bed with Big Ears, and replaced golliwogs with teddy bears, while in *The Magic*

Faraway Tree, Dick and Fanny have been renamed Rick and Frannie. Critics, too,

have excluded her from study, limiting readings to biography, such as those by

Barbara Stoney (1974), S.G Ray (1982) or Julia Eccles (2002). Hunt suggests she only

merits study because she is so widely read.

Representations of the witch within Blyton's writing might be expected, therefore, to

be similarly conservative. *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (1937) is, Nicholas

Tucker suggests, one of the most widely known children's texts ever, and introduces

the supporting character of Witch Snippit.[35] Perhaps fittingly, Witch Snippit is located

safely away from the dominant narrative action and from English society, on

Disappearing Island.[36] She remains a minor character, but even at this distance, Witch

Snippit codes a fantasy of female subversion that directly challenges contemporary

[33] Kimberley Reynolds and Nicholas Tucker, *Enid Blyton: A Celebration and Re-appraisal* (London: National Centre for Research in Children's Literature, 1997), p. 128
[34] www.enidblyton.com
[35] Tucker, *Enid Blyton*, p. 122
[36] Enid Blyton, *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 30

conservatism regarding gender roles. Witch Snippit and her feminist utopian fantasy hypnotise Mollie, the text's female protagonist. Her desire for the witch and the autonomy associated with her submit the traditional economy of Blyton's writing to the liminal forces of radical, subversive fantasy, creating a vision of 1930s, patriarchal society as neither 'unproblematised' nor comfortable.

Whereas the majority of the *Wishing Chair* books are subject to male control - Kimberley Rose suggests this is symbolised by Peter's authority over his sister, Mollie - the brief interlude in Witch Snippit's world works in opposition.[37] As I shall argue later, the witch, once more, inspires fear in male forces of authority:

> 'We mustn't go there,' said Chinky suddenly. 'That's Disappearing Island!'
>
> 'Well, why shouldn't we go there?' said Mollie.
>
> 'Because it suddenly disappears,' said Chinky. 'I've heard of it before. It's a horrid place. You get there and think it's all as beautiful as can be – and then it suddenly disappears and takes you with it.'
>
> 'You're not always right!' said Mollie, obstinately. 'I want to go there! Wishing chair, fly down to that lovely island…'
>
> The brilliant island came nearer and nearer. Mollie shouted in delight to see such glorious bright flowers, such shiny winged birds, such plump, soft rabbits. The chair flew swiftly towards them. And then, just as they were about to land in a field spread with buttercups as large as poppies, among soft-eyed bunnies and singing birds, a most strange and peculiar thing happened. The

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[37] Rose, *Enid Blyton*, p. 70

island disappeared! One moment it was there, and the sun was shining on its

fields – and the next moment, there was a faint blue mist – and then SPLASH!

They were all in the sea!

'…What did I tell you?' said Chinky angrily. 'Just like a girl to get us

into this mess!'

Mollie went red. How she wished she hadn't wanted to go to

Disappearing Island![38]

The 'Disappearing Island' recalls a biblical paradise; Blyton's use of adjectives, such

as 'glorious', 'bright' and 'shiny' all imply the divine. And Mollie, the innocent child,

recalls a biblical Eve in her desire for the carnal, sensual pleasures of the island.

Like so many women before her, Mollie harbours desires which oppose the control

mechanisms of prevailing male discourse. Both Chinky and Peter tell her that Witch

Snippit's home is 'dangerous' and 'horrid', but her determination to fulfil her desire

and, more significantly, to refute male authority, leads to disaster. Indeed, the

contingent sexual impulse, which is encoded in her 'blushing', initiates a deluge of

'faint blue mist' and the literal 'Fall' into the 'wet and shivery' sea. Similarly,

mankind, as represented by the boy and the pixie, place the blame for their 'fall' upon

the weakness of the lascivious female: 'Just like a girl to get us into this mess!'. Her

blushing labels her the fallen woman. Eve is exiled from Eden, and such an

association suggests that the island is similarly representative of a paradise from

which Mollie has been exiled.[39]

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[38] Blyton, *Wishing Chair*, p. 36

[39] Cixous maps Eden, as the eternal source, space and place of écriture feminine, 'from which [women] have been driven away as violently as from their own bodies. Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement,

But there is something more than a simple desire for 'buttercups as big as poppies' in

Mollie's desperate 'longing' to visit the Witch. Susan Stewart uses the term 'longing'

to refer not only to an exaggeration or unnatural overstepping ('the elongation') of the

limits of the real, but also a more sustained dynamic that requires the ongoing textual

interrogation of boundaries.[40] Blyton's 'longing' forms part of the dialectic of a

feminist utopia, extending the action and the desire far beyond the boundaries of the

word. Mollie 'longs' to go to 'Disappearing Island', to visit Witch Snippit's home,

and, I would argue, 'longs' equally for the associated disappearance. This desire

enacts a wish to flee the limits placed upon her body by a patriarchal society.

Ironically, 'shrinking' her body expresses a rage against post-Freudian models of

female sexuality, but submits the female body to the same forces. Kim Chernin writes:

> So we create a hell for the body, in which it can be afflicted with all the
>
> torments pornography inflicts upon the body of woman, the same sufferings
>
> our mythology reserves for sinners in the underworld. Thus, the female body is
>
> starved, emaciated, bound, driven, tortured with cold, shaken by rubber belts.[41]

The desire to disappear, to enact the witch's fantasy of vanishing, is to escape from

the imprisonment of misogynist society, encoding feminist ideologies not normally

believed to be located in the 'conventional' fantasy of Enid Blyton. It is important to

emphasise that although the actual island vanishes and appears at will, the Witch

herself controls her own bodily appearances and disappearances. Significantly, she can

bestow this power on anyone she chooses, and Mollie is her first recipient.

The Newly Born Woman. trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986,) p. 125

[40] Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing: Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 53

[41] Kim Chernin, *Womansize: The Tyranny of Slenderness* (London: Woman's Press, 1983), p. 60

Like the many eating disorders that ravaged the female body in the twentieth century, the desire to 'disappear' expresses not simply rage but also women's desire for control over their own needs. Mollie's shrinking into a sea of oblivion may constitute an attempt to resist her objectification as the child and the 'silly little girl'. The attempt to 'disappear' into the sea, to lose body parts and to make the body smaller, appears to conform to the dominant culture's requirements of femininity: that it is placed under reproductive and sexual control so that women take up less space. It seems to reflect also the cultural fear of inchoateness and vengeance against female maturity, which Showalter believes must be controlled via 'medicine, pop culture or welfare ... ensuring that women remain in appearance and behaviour like little girls'[42]; that they carry neither the reminder of ageing, death and mortality, nor the reminder of the all-powerful mother of infancy with her imagined threat to self-identity and independent agency. To keep the body small, or to cease to exist, expresses a desire to please, not to be needy, to be a person who, while serving and feeding others, appears herself to have transcended the importunate gnawing of need, hunger and desire. This quality is associated with an ideal of femininity, as it appears to suggest that the aspects of humans perceived as dark, irrational, bestial - and feminine - have been brought under rational control.

Indeed, after the fall into the sea which initially prevents her from visiting Witch Snippit, Mollie is chastised by the male voices she ignored. Mollie's proudest moment following her fall comes when she is left to tend the needs of Thomas, whose face

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[42] Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 193

stuck when the wind changed:

> 'Someone has to stay with Thomas, though,' she thought to herself. 'He'd only
>
> run home or go and find our mother or something, if we left him alone... I do
>
> hope Peter and Chinky find something to put it right!'[43]

Mollie's role becomes that of the Victorian Angel in the House, who 'waits' and

'watches' while the men take charge. The potent Eve, whose latent 'longing' is both

dissident and destructive, is domesticised into the comfortable conventionality that

critics such as Reynolds and Tucker always attribute to Blyton's narrative. This is the

opposite of powerful fantasy; the real effect of earlier transgression is revealed again

and again to be disappointing.

But the image of the disjointed and fragmentary female body that Mollie's longing for

disappearance suggests is highlighted further in the body of the witch, suggesting that

something more potent than previously acknowledged exists within Blyton's writing.

The character of Witch Snippit, who possesses magic paint that renders people visible

and invisible, re-introduces the theme of disappearance and shrinking, but this time,

without the regressive and misogynist script of The Fall. Her control of nature and her

ability to vanish at will indicate the presence of a feminist utopian economy which

appropriates the tools of fantasy for female gain:

> 'You *have* got a funny home,' she began – and then she stopped in surprise.
>
> Witch Snippit was all there except her middle! Oh dear, she did look quite
>
> funny!

---

[43] Blyton, *Wishing Chair*, p. 40

'Don't be worried,' she said to Mollie. 'I'm quite all right. My middle is really

there, but it's vanished for a few minutes. You can't meddle about with visible

and invisible without having a few things like this happen to you at times.'

As she spoke, her middle came and went back again, and, oh dear, her hands

and feet went! Mollie began to laugh. 'Whatever will go next!' she said.

All of the witch disappeared then – and the children and Chinky couldn't see

her anywhere. They knew she was in the room because they could hear her

laughing. 'Don't look so surprised,' she said. 'You should never be astonished

at anything that happens in a witch's house. [44]

An obsession with 'reducing' and 'disappearing' the female body expresses a real

dissatisfaction with current human relationships. It is not simply an exaggeration of

the cultural stereotype, but also a resistance to it. [45]

Just as the slim woman seems to conform to and accept cultural expectations, Witch

Snippit, whose very name suggests a fragment, becomes, with 'no middle' and thus no

reproductive organs, a horrible parody. She is both an exaggeration and implicit denial

of these cultural norms, in the same way, Lucie Armitt indicates, as 'the fat woman

explicitly denies [them].'[46] To be emaciated, or to be portrayed as a body

'disappeared', with only a laugh remaining, is to embody a rejection of femininity.

The body's invisibility permits escape from both surveillance and definition as a

commodity, that is as an object for controlled sexual consumption. Yet invisibility

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[44] Ibid p. 60
[45] Women are forced to seek an acceptance through their bodies, in order to reinforce what Gilbert and Gubar see as 'an inadequate sense of self, produced by their early individuation and socialisation'. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 337
[46] Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 142

also encourages spectatorship: 'they couldn't see her anywhere.'[47] Indeed, unlike Eve

deprived of Eden, the witch becomes a secularised 'super-being', beyond the limits of

patriarchy, and transcending the weakness and repulsiveness of the flesh. Susie

Orbach suggests in relation to the anorexic:

> 'Now it is her invisibility that makes her remarkable. Now she has a presence
>
> larger than her size. A presence which is a response rather than a reflex. In
>
> other words, 'Look at me!'[48]

Such behaviour expresses a deep cultural ambivalence towards femininity, both the

urge to rage against and the urge to control the female body (experienced by both men

and women) and the desire for possession or identification of 'The Female Essence.'[49]

Moreover, within the complexities and challenges of thirties' capitalist society, these

contradictions are rendered even more acute through the alienating effects of

commodification. As a consequence of their social alienation, women's bodies in

fantasy often become parts, 'a laugh', 'foot' or 'mouth'.[50] However, their

dissatisfaction with their appearance and desire for a different body, indicated by

Mollie's 'disappearance', can form the basis of a genuinely subversive fantasy of

social change. Indeed, the absence of patriarchal voices or forces in the above scene,

along with the obvious bond between Mollie and the archetypal 'disappearing

woman', Witch 'Snippit', suggests the persistence of that fantasy. Such feelings are

not necessarily simply turned back into masochistic rage against the body. The

experience of fragmentation and disintegration can become the starting point for a

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[47] Blyton, *Wishing Chair*, p. 45
[48] Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (London: Hamlyn, 1979), p. 110
[49] Ibid, p.111
[50] Blyton, *Wishing Chair*, p. 60

reconstruction of the feminine sense of self. Rosemary Jackson has noted the

characteristic fragmentation of 'character' in fantasy, arguing:

> Fantastic texts which try to negate or dissolve dominant signifying practices,
>
> especially character representation, become, from this perspective, radically
>
> disturbing. Their partial and dismembered selves break a realistic signifying
>
> practice which represents the ego as an indivisible unit. Fantasies which try to
>
> reverse or rupture the process of ego formation which took place during the
>
> mirror stage desire to re-enter the imaginary.[51]

In this light, Mollie's desire for dualism, and the actual dismemberment that occurs

when her stomach, leg and head disappear at Snippit's house, become symbolic of her

desire for the Imaginary and a subversion of patriarchal forces built upon the

Symbolic order.

Witch Snippit, who lives in a spinning house that stops at her will, is the embodiment

of feminist utopian fantasy, which runs counter not just to the conservative politics of

contemporary children's literature, but also to the restored patriarchal politics of the

1930s. Indeed, she offers a challenge that few seem to credit to the 'unproblematised'

world of Enid Blyton. Perhaps, for one of the most widely read and widely published

authors of children's literature in the world, this assertion would be too dissident a

possibility. Despite her feminist significance, Witch Snippit remains a marginal

character within Blyton's text, whose influence is felt heavily - if fleetingly - only by

Mollie. In *The Cult of Power*, Martin Pugh suggests that second-wave feminism and

the sexual revolution of the sixties find their roots much earlier than previously

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[51] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Art of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 156

acknowledged, perhaps in the post-war period of the forties.[52] I would argue, however, that it is visible even in the 1930s, in characters such as Enid Blyton's fantastic, revolutionary witch. More celebrated and widely known books, such as *The Secret Seven* and *The Famous Five* reinforce contemporary stereotypes; Blyton, like so many female writers before and after her, turns to the witch to code her subversion. As old certainties crumble with the onset of World War Two, literature, particularly for children, returns to a conservative, restorative politics that excludes the advances of the Suffrage revolution. But fantastic images of femininity and feminism nevertheless emerge; still able to unleash the horrific power of anger, rage and rebellion upon an unsuspecting world - albeit temporarily.

'A Body in Pain': Sylvia Plath

The emergence of a feminist, fantastic grotesque witch from within Enid Blyton's writing is perhaps surprising; as I've suggested, critics such as Hunt and Rose have largely abandoned their study of her work in recent years because of its simplistic presentation of sexism and racism. The fragmentation of the witch's body, however, anticipates some of the most dramatic images present in later women's writing. It is, then, perhaps useful to compare Enid Blyton's 'unproblematised', sexist writing with the work of a writer more conventionally associated with bodily disquiet, female rage, incarceration and the 'witchcraft' of the woman writer. Although writing more than two decades after the publication of *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair*, Sylvia Plath's poetry invites comparison with Enid Blyton's children's literature precisely because both writers, perhaps surprisingly, draw on the same image of the witch to

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[52] Martin Pugh, *The Cult of Power* (London: Historical Association, 1997), p. 237

express exactly the same notion of female bodily fragmentation.

Although Plath will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, 'Witch Burning',

published in 1959, demands comparison at this point, because of the ideas and

ideologies it shares with Blyton, notably the fragmentation of the female body.[53]

Whereas Blyton's revolution was shocking, Plath's representation is more ambivalent.

Drawing on a profound sense of injustice for the women murdered in the Salem

massacres, Plath evokes what Jacqueline Rose calls, 'the greatest violation of women

ever conducted across the world'.[54] But rather than perpetuating a sense of female

revenge and rebellion, Plath constructs a witch – the metaphor for all women – who is

helpless, broken and victimised in her fragmentation, and ultimately, who is burned:

> In the marketplace they are piling the dry sticks,
>
> A thicket of shadows is a poor coat. I inhabit
>
> The wax image of myself, a doll's body.
>
> Sickness begins here: I am a dartboard of witches.
>
> Only the devil can eat the devil out.
>
> In the month of red leaves I climb to a bed of fire ...
>
>
> ... If I am a little one, I can do no harm.
>
> If I don't move about, I'll knock nothing over. So I said,
>
> Sitting under a potlid, tiny and inert as a rice grain.
>
> They are turning the burners up, ring after ring.

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[53] Sylvia Plath, 'Witch Burning', *The Complete Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Virago, 1997), p. 34
[54] Although social historians such as Hutton and de Blecourt frequently compare the witch trial period to the atrocities of the Holocaust, which preoccupy much of Plath's writing, previous chapters have already considered the ways in which this analogy falls short.

We are full of starch, my small white fellows. We grow,

It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth.

Mother of beetles, only unclench your hand:

I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth.

Give me back my shape. I am ready to construe the days

I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone.

My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs.

I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.[55]

Following the end of the Second World War, the increased prominence of New

Religious Movements, particularly Wicca, led to a reinvention of the mythology of the

demonism of supposed witches during the Witch trial period. The rise of German

witchcraft cases during the 1950s has been frequently attributed to the influx of single

women into village communities after the war, at a point in history when society felt

itself most under threat.[56] Nevertheless, such instances and reports of witchcraft bear

testament to the fact that people were still prepared to believe in it, and in its power to

wreak havoc.

But there is no sense of the witch's enduring power or physical resiliance in Plath's

writing. Her aim is to inscribe the witch's fate of pain, death and suffering, rather than

reveal any of her historical subversion: 'If I don't move about, I'll knock nothing

over.'[57] The idea that it is women's destiny to suffer, due to an unfortunate fate to

which they are doomed by their weak bodies (and minds), has a long history in

medical, Christian and popular discourses, and has been captured by various

representations of women's bodies as sick or in pain (the image of Mary as suffering

mother, the figure of the hysterical woman, the translation of menopause,

menstruation, pre-menstrual tension and, more recently, cellulite and fat into women's

pathologies). In these representations, women emerge as 'walking wounded',

displaying their injuries during menstruation, confirming them during childbirth. Plath

revisits this discourse, but the result is problematic. The idea that 'red tongues will

teach the truth' might borrow the belief that execution by fire would test the validity

of the witch ('Only the devil can eat the devil out), but it also replicates patriarchal

ideologies of violation, which state that women should be *taught*, punished, corrected

and burned for historical rebellion against a masculine 'truth'.[58] While Plath seems to

oppose such a reading, her writing suggests that women can never truly escape it;

women and witches seem forced to accept their fate.

Indeed there is a deliberate pathos implied in language such as 'dartboard', 'doll's

body' and 'a little one' which suggests the impossibility of escaping. Plath's deliberate

repetition of 'brighten. Brightness' and 'all this light' seems a reference to the

Christian metaphor of light. 'It hurts at first' implies the sense of moral cleansing and

purging which both Christian ideology and modern legal systems identify as necessary

to preserve society; Fiedler sees this pain as being exclusively associated with women:

> Women experience more pain and non-life threatening illnesses than men, a

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[57] Plath, 'Witch Burning'
[58] Ibid

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propensity which has been attributed, at various times, to their weak biological constitution, their reproductive function, or the un-masculinity of sickness and pain. Alternatively, women's pain can be seen as the expression of the body 'making anger'.[59]

This sense of the 'body making anger' has particular resonance in women's writing, becoming a powerful symbolic resource for feminists as diverse as Simone de Beauvoir, Maria Cardinal, Alba de Cespedes, Marguerite Duras and Doris Lessing. But in 'Witch Burning', although there are many references to 'sickness' and disease, there is no 'anger, rage and rebellion'. Although she attempts to 'fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth', the witch is 'lost...lost'.[60] Flight has previously been recognised as female defiance of male laws, but it fails the woman and the witch, submerging her into flames of agony. Pain appears as an overwhelming burden, instigated by supposed 'truth', which comes to shatter witches' and women's lives, leaving the speaker with nothing but its debilitating presence.

According to Foucault, the body emerges at the point where social regulation and practices of the self meet, where discipline is inscribed on the self, and as a consequence, gender is inscribed on the body.[61] From a Foucaldian perspective, the making of the gendered self is the product of disciplinary practices of the body that ensure the reproduction of heterosexuality as a norm. The body is seen as material that is enrolled in the production of gender rather than as providing the biological foundation for gender differences. Theorists who draw on Foucault understand sex

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[59] Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 109
[60] Plath, 'Witch Burning'
[61] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 398

and gender as historically and culturally contingent, arguing that they are produced or made real through inscriptions on the body. For example, for Butler, sex:

> not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces
>
> the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of
>
> productive power, a power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate –
>
> the bodies it controls.[62]

The witch's and the woman's body, as we have seen, are always sexual by definition. Pitt-Rivers argued in the same year as the publication of 'Witch-Burning' that women were still 'sources of uncertainty' and that female sexuality was 'an anti-social force.[63] From this perspective, the sexed body of the witch that appears in Plath is one that seems to act as the passive recipient or bearer of inscriptions, with fire 'ascend[ing] [her] thighs', and as 'a dartboard' to be pinned and poked by dominant society.

The reference to the witch as a 'wax image' and 'a doll's body' indicates a sense of the emptying of her body and selfhood into the role ascribed to her by society, the role re-written on her body on the witch pyre. The pain inflicted upon the witch, 'turning the burners up, ring after ring' serves to 'un-make' or empty her identity; the 'wax image of myself' indicates the absence of any real meaning or signification beyond the façade. Similarly 'doll' suggests a toy or trifle, filled with stuffing and lacking the material of life; her demand, 'Give me back my shape' indicates a need for female autonomy and self-identification, but this is a need that is always denied. Pain can be seen to distance the witch from the society she once threatened, by rupturing her

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[62] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 403
[63] Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Politics of Sex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 48

relationship and attachment to the world. In her suffering, she is forced to 'shrink' into self-isolation and to become 'tiny and inert as a rice grain'.

While the reduction and dispersal of the bodies of Mollie and Witch Snippet provided the basis for a fantastic utopia of female subject-identity and self-revelation, the witch in Plath's poem is made small and insignificant. Witch Snippit accessed a female subversion because she controlled her own fragmentation, removing and adding body parts at will, creating a grotesque, utopian feminism in which the female body demanded attention, but resisted objectification. Plath's witch is, inevitably, a victim; her body is ripped apart by her oppressors. She is 'lost'. The emphasis on being 'small', 'a little one' and on closing down the dangerous female body prevents any challenge. The references to the burning 'under a potlid' evoke centuries of folk and fairy tales, which have long established the cultural norm of the witch as enemy, to be destroyed and re-written for the good of society.

Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, suggests that pain typically makes us shrink into the body, whilst at the same time, making us extend outside the boundaries of the body.[64] Scarry argues that, while other states of consciousness (feelings, emotions, self) are for something, pain can be characterised by its overwhelming presence and totality; it destroys everything (the world, the self):

> Pain begins by being 'not oneself' and ends by having eliminated all that is
> 'not itself'. At first occurring only as an appalling but limited internal fact, it
> eventually occupies the entire body and spills out into the realms beyond the

[64] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Virago, 1998), p. 231

body, takes over all that is invisible and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroys anything like language or world extension that is alien to itself and threatening to its claims. Terrifying for its narrowness, it nevertheless exhausts and displaces all else until is seems to become the single broad and omnipresent fact of existence. From no matter what perspective pain is approached, its totality is again and again faced.[65]

This overwhelming totality suggested by Scarry's analysis is anticipated in 'Witch Burning' as the merging, in both the title and in the poem, of the woman with fire: 'I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone'. While this serves to extend the witch's body beyond its limits, she can only form the detritus of dust, out of which nothing can emerge.

The infliction of pain upon the witch has always been entirely gendered, based, as this thesis has already argued, on contemporaneous and historical concerns with 'dangerous' femininity and 'uterine deviance'. Equally significant is the witch's association with and ownership of a pagan magic that threatens to unhinge patriarchal control, and drives her to eat penises, children, crops and livestock. There remains even in Plath's writing, a dominant cultural need to explain away the danger of the witch. Despite the witch's attempts to resist, to 'fly through the candle mouth' and to remain still, so as to 'knock nothing over', she recognises the impossibility of doing so.[66] The witch must be made a woman, who, in the apparent weakness and sickness of her body can always be forced 'into a parrot cage' and made submissive to male force. The gender of the witch is made real and enforced through the material violence

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[65] Ibid
[66] Plath, 'Witch Burning'

and brutality levelled against her in 'the bed of fire'[67]; in its metaphorical form, the 'bed' also refers to sexual rites of matrimony which can equally connote female violation.

Although the sexed body of the witch is not 'natural' or biologically given, it cannot be reduced to a blueprint of cultural encodings and artefacts, for body has the potentiality for sentience, for pain and death, even if the ways in which pain and death are experienced and represented are culturally mediated. As Eve/ Evelyn, the character in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1988) exclaims after her/ his forced sex-change operation, ironically replicating *The Merchant of Venice*:

'I am not natural, you know – even though, if you cut me I will bleed.'
It is the ability of the body to bleed and to 'hurt' when it bleeds and 'burns' that makes for its 'reality conferring function.' The flesh of the burning witch's body provides, in this case, a vivid and compelling reality (the presence, certainty, immediacy and totality of pain). However, the hurting flesh can only lend its 'reality' or 'materiality' to ideas because of its referential instability; pain has no external referent, meaning that its reality and totality can be re-appropriated to give substance to ideas.

Butler suggests:

Injured bodies are emptied of their meaning and appropriated as containers of other verbal constructs, in the process the pain is also appropriated.[68]
Injuring provides, because it opens the body, a way of connecting disembodied beliefs or ideas, such as the witch, with the force and power of the material world (the flesh).

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[67] Ibid
[68] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 39

The substantiation or 'making real' of the witch as a controllable woman involves

breaking down her body, and submitting it to male authority, so that it may be re-

formed as a male-ordered text. Injuring dangerous female bodies empties them of

meaning (Klaus Theweleit suggests this is due to severing connections to materials

that would fill in the self with meaning) and allows them to be refilled with beliefs

and ideas that lend them materiality. Juxtaposing a wounded body with an idea

bestows the force of the material world on the ideational. Theweleit argues:

> The body tends to be brought forward in its most extreme and absolute form
>
> only on behalf of a cultural artefact or symbolic fragment ... that is without
>
> any other basis in material reality: that is, it is only brought forward when there
>
> is a crisis in substantiation.[69]

Similarly, the cultural construction of gender is substantiated by being crafted onto

women's hurting flesh. So gender is inscribed on women's bodies but it can only be

crafted onto women's bodies through injuring, through pain, through emptying these

bodies of meanings.

As Theweleit argues above, it is empty bodies that act as containers of ideas, severed

from connections that gives meanings to the self. Where Enid Blyton saw the potential

for female subversion in a witch who could lose her 'middle', her reproductive organs,

at will, Sylvia Plath presents a far more limited reading of female fragmentation. By

drawing on the images and crimes of the Witch Craze, Plath reinforces the idea that

the distortion of the witch's 'doll's body' always results in the infliction of pain, and

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[69] Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Vol.1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*. trans. Stephen Conway, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 146

pain always re-inscribes witches as women and women as male-ordered texts. Her witch has no power of her own, no resilient spirit or magic, and cannot fly away from the society that seeks to restrain her.

The fragmented witch, with a body in bits, becomes one of the most significant representations of feminism of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. In the case of Enid Blyton's Witch Snippit, that sense of fragmentation permits liberation, from both patriarchal objectification and control, and also from critics who claim to know Blyton. Sylvia Plath's 'Witch Burning' places this sense of fragmentation in male hands, submitting women, almost inevitably, to violation and murder, creating the witch as a victim. Dorothy Hughes reduces the witch to mere parts, that cannot construct either a self or a narrative. But the evocation of burning, broken witches is not exclusive to these writers. It was in this period, in 1953, that Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, first opened on Broadway, in New York.[70] Miller stated that the purpose of the play was to draw parallels between the injustices of the Salem Witch Trials and of the Second Red Scare from 1948 to 1956, when America was under the influence of McCarthyism. Like the witches on trial in Salem, Communists were viewed as having already silently infiltrated the most vital aspects of American life and security, presenting a clear and present danger to the community at large. Nevertheless, Miller's witch burnings perpetuate the sense of female violation; female characters are either, in the case of Abigail Williams, 'real' witches, who manipulate men with their sexuality and, according to Miller's text, 'deserve' to be punished , or they are the helpless victims portrayed in Plath's poetry. Destroying dangerous female bodies

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[70] Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (London and New York: Penguin, 1996)

perhaps links to renewed conservatism; once more, witches and women required social control.

Restrictive attitudes, and the closing down of representations of the witch, initiated in the thirties, forties and fifties, are apparent, to varying extents, in all of the female writers considered in this chapter. Also variable in extent, however, is the coded subversion that nevertheless lurks within. Dorothy Hughes's restricted reading of the witch allows little potential for multiplicity. Yet Enid Blyton creates an image of fantastic fragmentation in the character of Witch Snippit who anticipates much utopian feminist thought of the next three decades. Sylvia Plath sits uneasily on the borders between the two, acknowledging the historical injustices perpetrated against women and witches, but never allowing her witches to flee their captors. Representations of witches are closed down in the texts of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, but they still perpetuate some sense of subversion, a subversion that is limited still further in the second-wave or post-feminist ages. Eavan Boland's 'Anorexic', considered in detail in Chapter Six, replicates identical ideologies of female rejection and repression, again using the witch to convey bodily fragmentation. However, what is important in Boland's poem is that the forces that break down and objectify the female body are not the external forces of patriarchy. Rather, it is the woman herself who destroys her own body. The witch represents the bodily desire to eat - both for nourishment and to resist conforming to stereotypes. But the woman overrules the witch and patriarchal control of the female body is re-asserted. Indeed, although, as Chapter Four discusses, the revision of patriarchal scripts such as myths and fairy tales is itself an act of subversion, frantic images of incest, rape, cannibalism and witchcraft - along with the women they represent - still remain restricted

Chapter 4:

The Witch Must Die: Feminist Revisions of Fairy Tales in the 1960s and 1970s

'Mirror, mirror upon the wall, Who is the fairest fair of all?'

And the mirror answered,

'O Lady Queen, though fair ye be, the *young* Queen is fairer to see.'

Oh! How angry the wicked woman was then, and so terrified, too, that she

scarcely knew what to do ... No sooner did she enter the palace than she

recognized little Snow-White, and could not move for terror. Then a pair of

red-hot iron shoes was brought into the room with tongs and set before her,

and these she was forced to put on and to dance in them until she could dance

no longer, but fell down dead, and that was the end of her.[1]

<div align="right">- Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Little Snow White</div>

Beauty is a simple passion,

but, oh my friends, in the end

you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes.[2]

<div align="right">- Anne Sexton, 'Snow White'</div>

The blood jet is poetry.

There is no stopping it.[3]

<div align="right">- Sylvia Plath, 'Kindness'</div>

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[1] Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'Little Snow White', *Grimms' Fairy Tales* trans. L. L. Weedon. illus. by Ada Dennis and E. Stuart Hardy (London: Ernest Nister, 1986), p.20

[2] Anne Sexton, 'Snow White', *Transformations* (New York: Virago, 1972), p. 55

[3] Sylvia Plath, 'Kindness', *Complete Poems* (New York: Virago, 1997), p. 17

The hangings, burnings, violations and fragmentations evoked by female writers such as Hughes, Blyton and Plath draw upon the historical legacy of witch trials across the Western world. It is this heritage that constructs the witch as the persecuted victim of patriarchal hegemonies. The other, more literary, heritage that informs representations of witches is that derived from folk and fairy tales. Either as Mother Goose or the Wicked Queen, fairy tale witches divert attention away from injustices against women, instead creating women as villains. This chapter will again look at the poetry of Sylvia Plath, but this time, my readings will focus on the appropriation of fairy tale witches in her writing. I will also consider their appearance in the poetry of Olga Broumas and Anne Sexton, which reveals shocking representations of witches who codify the most dramatic of social taboos. Fairy tales might form part of a patriarchal discourse, but in the hands of the witch, there remains the potential for catastrophe.

Fairy Tale Witches

Fairy tales have always been associated with women. Whilst the tales themselves have, over the course of centuries, become widely attributed to male archivists and folklorists, such as Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, their sources are predominantly female. In a preface to an early edition of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Wilhelm Grimm describes his informant:

> [This woman] who retains fast in her mind these sagas - which talent, she says, is not granted to everyone. She recounts her stories thoughtfully, accurately, with uncommon vividness and evident delight - first quite easily, but then, if required, over again, slowly, so that with a bit of practice it is possible to take

down her diction word for word.[4]

This 'special' feminine talent, which inspires and dictates much of the material at the heart of fairy tales, has proved central to this thesis. The term 'saga' is defined as both a tale or story and also as the feminine of *sage*, meaning wise-woman or witch; the witch and the female writer are, once more, intertwined by language.

Furthermore, fairy tales, like the ballads to which they are closely related, have come to be seen as a communal folk art, derived from the uneducated, non-literate classes, and hinting at the subversiveness of the underclass that the witch represents. Marina Warner argues that the very expression 'fairy tale' calls to mind 'a quintessential female sensibility; the tales are 'old wives tales' or 'Mother Goose tales'.[5] But at the same time, the association of women, witches and fairy tales has often been pejorative, signalling the banality of 'happily ever after', or the alternative of the nightmare of female violence and cruelty. Violated female bodies seem to be everywhere. In 'The Girl Without Hands', first published by the Grimms, a father chops off his daughter's hands to save himself from the devil, and in the example of *Little Snow White* that opened this chapter, the torture and death of the Wicked Queen are especially brutal.[6] The story of the enchanted sleeping maiden, first recorded by Giambattista Basile in 1634, is one of the earliest written versions of the sleeping beauty saga.[7] Titled *Sun, Moon and Talia*, it contains all the typical fairy tale ingredients: a sleeping maiden under a deathlike spell, a long internment in a castle,

[4] *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p. ix
[5] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York: Farrar, 1994), p.74
[6] Roger Sale, *Fairy Tales and After* (London: Longmans, 1993), p. 319
[7] Cited in Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 404

and deliverance by a handsome prince. Also typical is the retributive death of the witch - in this case, the evil wife - who is 'thrust into the flames ... [and] twisted in the fire.'[8]

Whilst references to witch burning similar to those found in Sylvia Plath's poem are, perhaps, coincidental (although prior to the witch trial hysteria, it is worth bearing in mind that burning on pyres was still a common way to 'deal' with wayward women), the role that the witch occupies in fairy tales is stylised and repetitive: she must die.[9] Indeed, over three hundred years after Basile's tale, and one hundred years after the end of witch burning, another wicked woman suffers a similarly horrible fate:

> Dorothy picked up the bucket of water that stood near and dashed it over the Witch, wetting her from head to foot.

> Instantly the wicked woman gave a loud cry of fear, and then, as Dorothy looked at her in wonder, the Witch began to shriek and fall away.

> 'See what you have done!' she screamed. 'In a minute, I shall melt away.'[10]

In perhaps the most popular children's tale of the twentieth century, Dorothy, an apparently helpless child, can easily melt the Wicked Witch of the West into a formless mass. In the gap between Basile's *Sun, Moon and Talia* and L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1901), hundreds of fairy tale witches and their counterparts - sorceresses, ogresses, vengeful queens and evil stepmothers - have met similar fates.

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[8] Ibid p. 406
[9] Diane Purkiss has argued that the death of the witch is necessary to maintain social order and silence the 'bugaboos' of society in *The Witch in History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 35
[10] L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz* [1901] (London: Penguin, 2002), p.123

In the Grimms' retelling of *The Juniper Tree*, the evil stepmother is crushed to death by a millstone; in *Hansel and Gretel*, the witch is burned in the oven; in *Little Snow White*, as the epigraphs to this chapter demonstrate, the witch dances to her death.[11] The witch not only dies, but dies violently.

Whilst Purkiss has recognised the social function of the witch's death in terms of its reassertion of order - the banishment of 'the bugaboos' and the triumph of reason over superstition, both Bettelheim and Tatar have argued that in fairy tales, the desire to murder the witch is more symbolic.[12] The witches of fairy tales are far closer to the classical evil woman and to the demonic witches of the witch hunt era than to folk magic practitioners; the primary goal of both mythical and fairy tale witches is to threaten fertility. Bettelheim takes *Hansel and Gretel* as a case in point.[13] At the beginning of the tale, the wicked stepmother encourages the children's father to abandon them so that there will be enough food for the adults - an inversion of the traditional maternal role of feeding everyone in the family at the expense of herself. Her concern is to preserve her own life at the expense of the future generation; Zipes suggests that she does not so much want to thwart their fertility as to preserve her own.[14] Indeed, the fact that the witch wants to eat the children herself demotes them to the level of cattle to be fattened for slaughter; although it is worth bearing in mind that while Hansel is fattened in a cell, Gretel is fed crab shells and forced to work. Even

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[11] Grimms, *Complete Fairy Tales*, p. 40
[12] Maria Tatar, *Off with their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 18
[13] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 51
[14] Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: The Enchanted Forest to the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 9

the witch here enforces domestic imprisonment. The only way in which the witch or

Gretel can eat is by feeding on food that is forbidden to them.

The witch's greed within *Hansel and Gretel* in particular, but also in the genre as a

whole, inverts, then, the traditional maternal role of self-sacrifice and starvation. In

her study of the witch and the fairy tale, *The Witch Must Die*, Maria Tatar argues that

the witch exists precisely to offer opposition to the traditional maternal role. By

representing separation from the maternal realm, she occupies a central role in the

child's development:

> Much of human existence entails reconciling basic divisions in the self that
>
> govern our relationships with each other: lovable versus unlovable, loyal
>
> versus disloyal, worthwhile versus worthless, good versus evil. These
>
> divisions have their beginnings in the infant's crude separation of the world
>
> into satisfying (good) sensations and unsatisfying (bad) sensations: fullness is
>
> good, emptiness is bad; warmth is good, cold bad. Long before children are
>
> able to assign verbal labels to what is good or bad, a primitive sensory
>
> intelligence enables them to recognise that the world is divided into good and
>
> bad.[15]

Whilst the mother is, for the infant, 'all-giving and all-loving', symbolising these

'satisfying (good) sensations', the fairy tale witch is placed in conflict, linked

inextricably to hunger, cold and dissatisfaction:

> The way in which young children deal with the loss of a maternal Nirvana is

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[15] Maria Tatar, *The Witch Must Die* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 98

by mentally 'splitting' the mother into two psychic entities: a gratifying 'good mother' and a frustrating 'bad mother' [the witch]. The child responds to each image as if it were a separate and distinct entity so as to inject some semblance of order into what otherwise would be a highly unpredictable world. This allows children to respond internally to their maternal caretakers as both good and bad without having to reconcile the inherent inconsistency.[16]

As the child matures, Tatar argues, the two maternal figures - the 'good' and 'bad' mothers - are psychologically 'metabolized' into the child's developing self. As a result, the internalised good mother comes to be experienced less as an external figure and more as part of the self ('the good me'), while the greedy witch is experienced as a negative, suppressible part of the self ('the bad me').

The death of the witch within the fairy tale, then, becomes essential to what Tatar sees as the tale's psychological purpose: the witch must die because she embodies the sinful parts of the self.[17] She is contained, controlled and ultimately silenced, and the scale of her threat is revealed by the need to use brute force to kill her. Indeed, if a witch proves too formidable or elusive, a fairy godmother or some other benevolent figure is always waiting in the wings to lend a helping hand. In the end, the child always emerges victorious and order always prevails: Gretel cooks the witch; Snow White defeats the Evil Queen; Dorothy dissolves the Wicked Witch of the West. There are few tragic finishes, frightening finales or apocalyptic conclusions in the

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[16] Ibid p. 99

[17] Her role within this maternal drama would seem to explain the dominance of female characters within the fairy tale. There are many more witches than ogres, and demonstrably more fairy godmothers than fairy godfathers; according to Tatar, these female stereotypes function as the fantasy derivatives of early childhood splitting.

versions of tales that have most commonly been told since the nineteenth century. As G. K. Chesterton explained it: 'Fairy tales are more than true - not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.'[18] Fairy tales are tales of transcendence of the complications of life. Once the witch dies, everyone lives happily ever after, because, as discussed in previous chapters, the threat to the systems of authority that she portends is extinguished. Social order is restored.

Given the historic demise of the witch and the suffocating, patriarchal conventions of the traditional tale, it is perhaps surprising that so many feminist poets of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s appropriate the fairy tale genre to represent the witch. This period is generally identified as the beginning of feminism's second wave. Whereas first-wave feminism focused largely on *de jure* (officially mandated) inequalities, second-wave feminism saw *de jure* and *de facto* (unofficial) inequalities as inextricably linked issues that had to be addressed in tandem. The movement, in both the United Kingdom and the United States, encouraged women to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicised, and reflective of a sexist structure of power. If first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage, second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, ranging from the economic to the reproductive. Second wave feminism often tried to foster a common female identity in which all women could find political solidarity, a tendency that third-wave feminism would later criticise extensively.

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[18] G.K. Chesterton, *Chesterton's Essays*, ed. K. Whitehorn (London: Methuen, 1953), p. 74

What the second wave attempted to challenge were iconic images of femininity and

the way in which they coerced women into following the conventional social script of

marriage and maternity; the silenced, petrified and imprisoned bodies of heroines such

as Snow White and Sleeping Beauty expressed, as Gilbert and Gubar have argued,

'the acceptance and perpetuation of female repression'.[19] Once again, women writers

adopt the witch (or 'bad mother'/ 'bad me') as a deliberate foil to the silenced,

sleeping, imprisoned heroines of fairy tales, Tatar's 'good mother[s]'. Many

significant female writers of the period, such as Angela Carter, Sylvia Plath, Anne

Sexton, Jane Smiley, Patricia Beer, Louise Gluck, Margaret Atwood and Shirley

Jackson, borrow 'the wicked stepmother' motif in the course of their retelling of fairy

tales, often revising her usual trajectory as a way of opposing societal mores. The

remainder of this chapter will consider the appropriation of the fairy tale witch in

radical feminist poetry of the 1960s and 1970s in greater detail, and, in relation to

Anne Sexton's poetry in particular, will debate conflicting ideologies of the good/ bad

mother dichotomy.

For the majority of readers, folklorists and literary critics alike, the defining image of

the witch in the twentieth century is a conflation of two literary and cinematic women:

the Wicked Witch of the West and Snow White's Wicked Queen. In 1900, published

in the same year as Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, L. Frank Baum

created the first of his many books abut the land of Oz, *The Wizard of Oz*, which

introduced the infamous Wicked Witch of the West, made visually iconic by the

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[19] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 45

actress Margaret Hamilton in the 1939 film version of the text.[20] Although Baum

presents the alternative 'good' mother figure in the benevolent form of Glinda the

Good, and represents male witchcraft in the impotent Wizard, the primary villain

throughout the series of novels is the 'bad' mother or female witch. Similarly, Barbara

Walker sees the vilification of the Wicked Queen from the Grimms' *Little Snow*

White, later revised in Walt Disney's film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, as

being a direct result of her status as witch and her witchcraft practice:

> The last bastion of female spiritual power fell when the church declared its all-
>
> out war on witches, the name they gave to rural mid-wives, healers, herbalists,
>
> counsellors, and village wise-women, inheritors of the unravelling cloak of the
>
> pre-Christian priestess. A queen who was also a witch would have been a
>
> formidable figure, adding political influence to spiritual mantra.[21]

But perhaps equally significant is the Wicked Queen's all-consuming desire to be 'the

fairest of them all', a maddening obsession with youth and sexual attractiveness most

obviously demonstrated in her attempts to murder Snow White. As discussed in

Chapter One, the threatening excess of the witch's body is made obvious as she

devours what she believes to be the heroine's liver and lungs. This hunger goes

beyond the witch's overturning of maternal roles. Victorian psychiatrists, Showalter

argues, had linked the woman's desire to eat meat to female lasciviousness and the

fulfilment of sexual cravings. Once again, the overt demonstration of female sexual

desire seems central to her power. [22]

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[20] Baum, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: Wordsworth, 1990)

[21] Barbara Walker, *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power* (London: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 103

[22] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture* (London: Virago,

But it seems that there is yet another, even more challenging witch, lurking at the

margins of *Little Snow White*. The desire that Snow White herself reveals in her lust

for the forbidden apple seems comparable to the Wicked Queen's hunger:

> When Snow White saw that the peasant woman was eating part of the apple,
>
> her desire for it grew stronger ... She bit into it, but she barely had the bite in
>
> her mouth when she fell to the ground dead ...

> ... Snow White lay there in the coffin a long, long time, and she did not decay.
>
> She was still as white as snow and as red as blood, and if she had been able to
>
> open her eyes, they would still have been as black as ebony wood. [23]

The two women seem inextricably linked by their desire to defy acceptable female

behaviour through eating, by their objectification in the patriarchal mirror, by the

sexuality implicit in 'red as blood', and by their equal ability to disable and disrupt.

There is a sense in which the Wicked Queen becomes Snow White's demonic double,

a rebellious and reactionary version of her compliant self, the whore to her virgin,

acting out the darkest desires of the 'snow white' angel until she too incorporates the

blackness of the witch.[24] Perhaps it is through consuming Eve's fateful apple that

these witches can escape the prison of their tale. In adopting the guise of the old hag

and shrouding her body in black, the Wicked Queen actively repudiates beauty and

'fairness'. Similarly, eating the apple (and embracing death) offers Snow White the

only method of escape from the forces of patriarchal authority - either the dwarfs that

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1987), p. 15

[23] Grimms, 'Little Snow White'

[24] Gilbert and Gubar argue that the two women are linked by being trapped aesthetically in the glass mirror and coffin Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 36

Jenny Sharp describes as 'seven little fathers' or her husband, the prince - that seek to rationalise the witch into a world of female silence and containment.[25]

Roger Sale has argued that there is a sense in which Snow White 'wants to be laced, combed and eat the poisoned apple'.[26] Although combs and laces can be seen as the props of patriarchal conformity, it is also possible to view them as methods for internalising her stepmother's witchcraft and insurrection. Indeed, through the realisation of her sexual desires on her wedding night, Snow White actually becomes the Queen in name, and eats hungrily once more at her wedding banquet, echoing the same events that inspired the violent madness for 'fairness' initiated by her predecessor. While Marina Warner suggests that the function of the fairy tale is to flatter the male hero, the witch disrupts plot resolution: she marries the prince.[27] But Snow White, the new Queen, must, inevitably, be held in the same patriarchal traps as her predecessor. Both witches must dance in the same hot shoes of repression if any semblance of social equilibrium is to be restored. As we have seen, the witch must always die in the fairy tale; the threat she portends is too great. This is the story of Snow White's future, excluded from male versions of the tale but voiced by feminist poets of the period.

It is subversive potential that inspires so much feminist poetry of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In the introduction to her poetry anthology, *Trail of Stones*, poet Gwen Strauss

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[25] Jenny Sharp, *Kay Vandergrift's Snow White Page*, www.rutgers.edu (accessed 20th May 2005)
[26] Roger Sale, *Fairy Tales and After* (London: Longman, 1993), p.30
[27] Marina Warner, 'The Absent Mother: Women against Women in Old Wives' Tales' in Egoff, Stubbs et al., *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.199

describes the process of spinning fairy tales into poems in magical terms:

> Whether it is a princess calling down a well, a witch seeking out her own
> reflection, children following a trail into the woods, falling asleep or into
> blindness, a common thread in our portraits is that each of these characters is
> compelled to turn inward. Though each confronts different issues - fear of
> love, shame, grief, jealousy, loneliness, joy - they have in common a time of
> solitude. They are enclosed within a private crisis. They have entered a dark
> wood where they must either face themselves, or refuse to, but they are given
> the choice to change. The momentum of self-revelation leads them towards
> metamorphosis, like a trail of stones drawing them into the dark forest.[28]

Strauss's anthology contains dramatic monologues by familiar fairy tale characters at a

moment of crisis or confrontation: Hansel and Gretel's father tells how the pebbles he

gave his son 'rattle in his dreams'; the wolf imagines how Red Riding Hood 'will

have the youngest skin / he has ever touched, her fingers unfurling / like fiddle heads

in spring'.[29] As my earlier analysis of Coleridge, Dickinson and Millay has

demonstrated, female poetry can form part of a sort of sublimation, a 'Titanic Opera'

that creates a liberation from and subversion of dominant authority.[30] And it is this

that all of the authors considered in this chapter attempt to access.

'Avant la Lettre': Sylvia Plath

Women's poetry indeed seems to offer the witch the greatest deliverance from the

conventions of the genre that permit her murder and silencing, and radical feminist

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[28] Gwen Strauss, *Trail of Stones*
[29] Strauss, 'Hansel and Gretel' and 'Little Red Riding Hood', *Trail of Stones*, p. 20 & 55
[30] Emily Dickinson, '593' *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin, 2000)

poetry would appear to be its extreme. Like Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath was born in Massachusetts under the shadow of the Salem massacre, of, as she described it, 'those million brides [who] shriek out', and also like Dickinson, she is most widely referred to in terms of her own psychoses, depression and eventual suicide.[31] Linda Wagner-Martin comments in *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, 'The temptation to do little but re-create Plath's biography through readings of her work - and implicitly, to try to unearth the complex reasons for her tragic suicide - overtakes the most focused reader.'[32] But Steven Axelrod argues that Plath's psyche is both 'crucial and problematic' in terms of her texts, suggesting that her legacy is one that 're-wrote the story that women could tell ... Writing *avant la lettre* of American feminism and before Adrienne Rich's feminist awakening ... Plath wrote unforgettable poems concerning women's victimisation, rage and rebellion.'[33] Indeed this combination of female madness and poetry recalls the notion of the female writer as a witch; the frequency with which Plath returns to witchcraft, fairy tales and classical myth furthers this resonance, suggesting that by appropriating male genres and witches, she can become the same 'acolyte of magic' as Dickinson.

The analysis of 'Witch Burning' in Chapter Three demonstrated the significance of witches and women to Plath, but her movement away from witch trials to fairy tales allows more liberating politics to escape. There is, indeed, a strong sense of the mythic invested in her poetry, and in the weeks before she died, Plath spoke on the

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[31] Sylvia Plath, 'Vanity Fair', *The Complete Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Virago, 1997)
[32] Linda Wagner Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (London: Vermillion, 1988), p. 20
[33] Steven Axelrod, 'Sylvia Plath', *The Literary Encyclopaedia*, http://litencyc.com, (accessed 29th March 2005)

BBC about the need for the modern female poet to draw on myth while making 'the metaphor-moral ... intrinsic to the poem, working back and forth on itself, not expressed prosaically at the close, like the moral of a fable.'[34] Fables, fairy tales and witches are central to 'Vanity Fair', published in 1956, which appropriates aspects of the Snow White tale discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Perhaps unsurprising, considering the subversive nature of its content, is critics' negativity, and in some cases, deep ambivalence towards the poem. Early on in the biopic film *Sylvia*, one of the St. Botolph's crowd Hughes ran with (and possibly Hughes himself) accuses Plath of writing 'essentially commercial, bourgeois, nakedly ambitious' poems.[35] There seems to be something in the naked ambition of Plath's poems - their willingness to exceed boundaries, to hold up a new set of preoccupations (motherhood; the crucible of an unstable self) and to oppose oppression - that displeases. Once again, the witch is both a focus for and source of that displeasure.

'Vanity Fair' interpellates the witch to draw attention to the ambition and rebellion of which society so obviously disapproved. Liminal spaces are filled with images of entrapment, death, and human, evil intent, written on the body of the women in the poem. A witch sidling through thick frost has 'fingers crooked' by 'a hazardous medium'; her 'eye's envious corner' suggests her marginal status and implied malevolence. Crow's feet are a cultural signifier of ageing, but also hint at the death her presence portends. The witch manipulates the fates of vain girls, virgins, beauties, those seeking love. This is the 'sorceress' from 'Snow White', setting up mirrors as

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[34] Sylvia Plath cited in Gary Lane, *Sylvia Plath: New Views on Poetry* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1979), p. 109

[35] Christine Jeff (dir.) *Sylvia* (Paramount, 2003)

traps for the vain to fall into, and the witch from 'Hansel and Gretel', deceiving the

young with sweet poisoned lies, before cannibalising them.[36] The appropriation of the

mirror of repression that traps both Snow White and the Wicked Queen is particularly

relevant:

> Against virgin prayer
>
> This sorceress sets mirrors enough
>
> To distract beauty's thought;
>
> Lovesick at first fond song,
>
> Each vain girl's driven
>
>
> To believe beyond heart's flare
>
> No fire is, nor in any book proof
>
> Sun hoists souls up after lids fall shut;
>
> So she wills all to the black king.
>
> The worst sloven
>
>
> Vies with the best queen over
>
> Right to blaze as satan's wife;
>
> Housed in earth, those million brides shriek out.
>
> Some burn short, some long,
>
> Staked in pride's coven.[37]

Active verbs such as 'sidles', 'sets' and 'cleaving' imply the control and dominance of

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[36] Gina Wisker 'Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath's Gothic', *Gothic Studies* 6.1 (October, 2004), 103

[37] Sylvia Plath, 'Vanity Fair', *The Complete Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Virago, 1997), p.96

the witch within both the narrative and patriarchy. The fact that it is the 'sorceress [who] sets mirrors' suggests that the witch is able to seize some sort of control over the male-ordered systems that trap women into obsessive and oppressive narcissism.

But the term 'narcissism' is ambivalent; there is no suggestion that the witch's or wife's self-absorption ever gives her pleasure, or that the desire for power through sexual attractiveness is itself a sexual feeling. This sense of the split female self, caught between desire for and incarceration by the male gaze, is a typical gothic trope; Jacqueline Rose argues that the whole of Plath's writing problematises such ambiguities, inherent in women's sexually and socially-constructed roles - mother, wife, lover, whore, creative artist - showing each to be a version of self, each a performance.[38] Women's potential for flight and for autonomy is revealed as potentially dangerous for mothers and wives whose dependency on a family for their identity undercuts their ability to realise different life-choices. In 'Vanity Fair', the desire of all women to be 'the best queen' or the 'fairest of them all' encodes a longing to conform to male ideals of femininity. Whilst the witch initially sets the mirror against 'virgin prayer' in an attempt to trap young women and to incorporate their youth, the 'million brides' that they become are themselves linked explicitly to witchcraft by their location within the 'coven'. All women, as potential witches, remain trapped in the fairy tale, 'whose instruments of torture include equally poisoned combs and apples, suffocating laces, glass coffins and golden castles.'[39]

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[38] Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 195
[39] Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 80

The only option available to witches and women is the 'right to blaze', which

ironically replicates the punishment received by the Wicked Queen for her vanity -

that is, dancing in shoes of fire - and by the supposed witches of the trial period.

While critics such as Irving Howe, Leon Wieseltier, and, to some degree, George

Steiner, have accused Plath of brazenly appropriating events such as the Holocaust to

represent her own unhappiness, Plath's interpellation of the witch trials is generally

ignored.[40] The reference to the burnings of many wives united by their witchcraft, to

'Some burnt short, some long' goes beyond the personal and also beyond the male-

defined limits of the fairy tale, evoking, as in 'Witch Burning', the injustices of crimes

against womanhood. The consequence of women's repression is submission, to 'will

all to a black king' and succumb to endless cycles of self-hatred, narcissism, anger and

dancing in 'hot shoes.' Whilst witchcraft, in some cases, provides the means for some

kind of subversion, the dialectic of narcissism between witch, woman and patriarchal

mirror excludes rebellious possibilities, imitating a new 'witch-craze'. The wicked

stepmother and the 'vain girl[s]' are not just objectified by patriarchy, but are forced

to assault their own souls, demanding a reassurance of their desirability which is never

articulated.

The male gaze and patriarchal mirror are conflated further in 'On Looking into the

Eyes of a Demon Lover', published as part of Plath's juvenilia collection.[41] 'Demon

Lover' never refers directly to a specific fairy tale, but borrows aspects and motifs

from many, such as the mirror, the witch, toads, crones and black magic. The 'Eyes'

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[40] The most opinionated is Leon Wieseltier, *Against Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.131

[41] Sylvia Plath, *Juvenilia* (London: Virago, 1998), p. 15

referred to in the poem's title are mythical: 'two pupils/ whose moons of black/ transform to cripples all who look.' The allusion to Snow White's mirror, with its 'transformative gaze' reflects the same narcissistic, patriarchal critique of femininity employed in the original tale's generation of the repressive ideal of a woman who 'is the fairest of them all.' And the consequences, too, are much the same. Women are rendered 'cripples', as 'each lovely lady/ who peers inside/ takes on the body of a toad.' The language of the fairy tale is hinted by bodies trapped inside toads and by crippled old crones, but the poem also represents the self-loathing derived from women's culturally-induced fear of getting older and losing their sexual attractiveness. The disgust that women internalise is revealed as the consequence of dependence upon the 'two pupils' and the patriarchal gaze they symbolise. Sandra Gilbert argues that female beauty in Plath's writing is not the aesthetic category defined by canonical writers, but is, instead, a disciplinary one.[42] More than any objective or visual category or pleasure, it is a rigorous regime for directing and constraining the female person. In 'Demon Lover', beauty actively creates disgust for the woman's body; in 'Face Lift'; the speaker's desire to be 'pink and smooth as a baby' serves not only to return her to childhood, but also to erase her experiences and knowledge.[43] This is what Jan Montefiore calls the 'cultural imperative' for women to be without experience, without history, without a formed self, pliant and blank to be written by men.[44]

Plath's 'On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover' does complicate such a

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[42] Sandra M. Gilbert, 'A Fine White Flying Myth: the Life/Work of Sylvia Plath', in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds), *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 251
[43] Plath, *Complete Poems*, p, 109
[44] Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry* (London: Pandora, 2004), p. 72

conclusion, however. 'Demon Lover' draws upon Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'demon

lover' from 'Kubla Khan', which, like Dorothy Hughes's 'Salem Town', creates a

siren or witch who is in control of her fate. In direct contrast with the closed,

hierarchical readings of witches in 'Vanity Fair', 'Demon Lover' moves away from

the 'lovely ladies' of polite discourse and patriarchal appropriation; here the witch is

set in direct opposition to the objectified, silenced women. Whereas much female

writing, as I have argued in earlier chapters, merges the concepts of woman and

writer, representing both as Emily Dickinson's 'acolyte of magic', Plath separates

them, releasing in the gap a radical fantasy of opposition and alternative that is equally

as potent as those of her literary grandmothers, such as Dickinson and Sylvia

Townsend Warner:[45]

> I sought my image
>
> in the scorching glass,
>
> for what fire could damage
>
> a witch's face?
>
>
> So I stared in that furnace
>
> Where beauties char
>
> but found radiant Venus
>
> reflected there.[46]

By once again splitting herself into woman and witch/ writer, the speaker of the poem

is able to find liberation from the imprisonment of the male gaze. Incorporating the

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[45] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 209
[46] Sylvia Plath, 'On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover', *The Complete Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Virago, 1997), p. 45

witch into her own body, and replacing her own image with that of a 'witch's face', Plath creates the potential for the woman to discover her own sense of self, one which is free from cyclical narcissism and 'dancing in the hot shoes' of repression that the textual presence of the fairy tale portends.

What she creates in its place, however, is not a female self-image based on sexual attractiveness and male desire, epitomised by the 'beauties [who] char'. Rather, 'radiance' transcends ageing and patriarchal classification, furthered by the reference to the goddess of love. This female insurrection, rising from the flames, turning the 'furnace' of female oppression of the witch-trials on its head, anticipates Plath's more celebrated poem, 'Lady Lazarus'. This key Female Gothic poem dramatises more obviously women's performativity, otherness, nightmares, and death; Ferrier suggests that it is here that Gothic horror, carnival and saturnalia combine to offer up a final challenge.[47] From oppressive destruction, the poem's speaker insists on her own phoenix-like rising, a daring, harpy figure who challenges men and everything conformist and restricted:

> Out of the ash
>
> I rise with my red hair
>
> And I eat men like air.[48]

The witch takes on the identity of both Lazarus himself and the type of Christ he signifies in the act of 'rising'. Her act of 'eat[ing] men like air' merges several ideas associated with witchcraft and permits a feminist rebellion. 'Eating' men echoes

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[47] Carole Ferrier, 'The Beekeeper's Apprentice', in Gary Lane, *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 300
[48] Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', *Collected Poems* p.109

typical crimes of witches, who were said to consume penises and babies, and also

suggests the witch's dominance over patriarchy. Similarly, the reference to 'air'

connotes the witch's liberation throughout flight. The witch, once again, hints at

female salvation and release.[49]

'Receive me, Mother': Olga Broumas

That same sense of release pervades much women's poetry of the period. Olga

Broumas is relatively unknown in the 1960s and 1970s field of lesbian poetry, which

also includes more celebrated writers such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. Her

work is always located outside of even the supposedly more inclusive literary canon

constructed during and since feminism's second wave. Close analysis reveals,

however, that this marginalisation is often deliberate. Broumas's first published work

was *Caritas* (1976), an unbound collection of five broadsides declaring one woman's

love for another. She chose the Greek word for her title because 'none of the available

English words signifying affection are free from either negative heterosexist

connotations, or limitations of meaning so severe or so totally genital as to render

them useless as names for our womanly songs of praise.'[50] Her influential anthology,

Beginning with O (1976), is more widely acknowledged. In the same year, the poet

and literary critic Stanley Kunitz chose *Beginning with O* as the seventy-second

winner of the Yale Younger Poets Prize. In his introduction to the volume, Kunitz

said, 'This is a book of letting go, of wild avowals, unabashed eroticism; ... Broumas

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[49] 'Lady Lazarus' is one of the most widely discussed and analysed of all Plath's poems; see Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Anna Tripp, *The Death of the Author: Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Resistance* and Elisabeth Bronfen, *Sylvia Plath*. I am therefore more concerned with Plath's less well-known works..

[50] Olga Broumas, 'Introduction', *Caritas* (New York: Virago, 2000), p. iv

aspires to be an archaeologist of "the speechless zones of the brain" to grope her way

back to the language of the ancestral mothers.'[51]

Like Plath's 'Demon Lover', *Beginning with O* offers a complete revision of the male

fairy tale tradition; in her powerful version of 'Cinderella', Broumas acknowledges

the restricted role of what she refers to as 'the token woman':

> Apart from my sisters, estranged
>
> from my mother, I am a woman alone
>
> in a house of men
>
> who secretly
>
> call themselves princes, alone
>
> with me usually, under cover of dark.
>
> I am the one allowed in
>
> to the royal chambers, whose small foot conveniently
>
> fills the slipper of glass. The woman writer, the lady
>
> Umpire, the madam chairman, anyone's wife.
>
> I know what I know. [52]

The women she refers to in 'Cinderella' are all defined by language that prioritises the

male: the paradox of the 'madam chairman', the unnecessary qualification of

'Umpire' with 'lady', the loss of self associated with 'anyone's wife'. The inclusion of

'Woman writer' suggests the problems - and perhaps the impossibility - of women

attempting to converse in a language that they never can fully own.

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[51] Cited in Olga Broumas, 'Introduction', *Beginning with O* (New York: Pandora, 1997), p. 12
[52] Ibid

Broumas's witch in 'Snow White' is free from such restriction. Although 'Snow White' is much less commented upon in literary criticism than 'Cinderella', it is perhaps more potent because of its inclusion of the witch.[53] Broumas's revision in 'Snow White' bears fewer obvious references to the original tale than other feminist re-writings of fairy tales; indeed, the only explicit mention is the title. By erasing the original, misogynist constraints of the tale, and by prioritising feminist elements, Broumas uses the figure of the witch to challenge and subvert. As my earlier analysis of the Grimms' version, *Little Snow White*, and Plath's revision of 'Vanity Fair' has revealed, the witch and Snow White, representing the angel/ whore dichotomy, are linked by their mutual containment in the mirrors, coffins, and castles. Indeed, even though Broumas's poem is not highly dependent on the original tale, the bond between Snow White and the Wicked Queen is tangible.

In Broumas's version of 'Snow White', however, the relationship between the witch and Snow White is even more complex, as summed up in the epigraph to the poem:

> *I could never want her (my mother)*
>
> *Until I myself had been wanted.*
>
> *By a woman.*[54]

Maria Tatar's conflation of the witch and the mother, discussed in the first part of this chapter, is here conflated further. The title of the poem has announced the poem as a revision of 'Snow White', but, if, as previously, we take the witch to be the corrupt

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[53] For example, Jan Montefiore's *Feminism and Poetry* refers to 'Snow White' once, whereas three pages are devoted to her discussion of 'Cinderella'.
[54] Olga Broumas, 'Snow White', *Beginning with O*, p. 29

(bad) mother, then it follows that Snow White is the innocent virgin daughter. Yet

here, Broumas endows the daughter with a lesbian desire that displaces the role of the

hero of the tale. Broumas defines lesbianism as an epistemological as well as a carnal

enterprise. In the poem, 'Perpetua', she asserts that 'braille / is a tongue for lovers'

and flaunts her lesbian affection by taking what she calls 'unspeakable / liberties as /

we cross the street, kissing / against the light.'[55]

The incestuous relationship between the witch (mother) and her daughter makes

classification according to the old tale impossible; who is the innocent virgin and who

is the demonic Wicked Queen? Broumas's is less a revision of an old tale and more a

brand new writing.

> Three women
>
> On a marriage bed, two
>
> mothers and two daughters,
>
> All through the war we slept
>
> Like this, grand-
>
> mother, mother, daughter. Each night
>
> between you, you pushed and pulled
>
> me, willing
>
> from warmth to warmth.[56]

The language of the first stanza, which links together Snow White and her demonic

double 'On a marriage bed', evokes exclusively female bonding, from which the

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[55] Olga Broumas, 'Introduction', p. 10
[56] Broumas, 'Snow White'

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'princes' of fairy tales are notably absent, making 'war'. War seems a surprisingly useful method to distract them; indeed, earlier chapters of this thesis have considered how the First and Second World Wars brought greater female liberation, even though they also resulted in greater conservatism about gender roles. The 'marriage bed' emphasises the bond that exists between the women, furthered by the fact that 'the only passion' which exists in the home after the father has returned is in the arguments between the women. Male points of reference are totally excluded; upon his return from war, the unnamed, insignificant father is 'blanched in his uniform/ battlelined forehead milky'.[57] 'Blanched' and 'milky' connote the innocence formerly attributed to Snow White, who seems to have replaced the patriarch both in his bed and in his authority. The male is omitted from communication between the 'mad/ women' around him.

The textual strategy of the line 'mother, mother, daughter', like 'you, you' links the women linguistically. It seems important that the 'grand' of the first matriarch is placed on the previous line, as if to divert attention from its hierarchical connotations. The sensuous repetition of the vowels in 'warmth to warmth' suggests a sexuality that might equally be read in the women sleeping together in the 'marriage bed'. These transgressive references to incest imply an eroticising of the maternal relationship, hinting at the sexual deviance previously associated with all witches, but, because of the poem's dependence on the original fairy tale, with the Wicked Queen from *Little Snow White* in particular. Repeated references to madness and insanity further this.

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[57] Ibid

The poem's title locates the relationships that take place in the poem within the framework of the fairy tale; the mother and the grandmother, who are socially defined as sexually corrupt because they have conceived children, and because they represent female aging, occupy the role of witch or Wicked Queen. The daughter, who 'willing[ly]' indulges in their witchcraft, is forced into becoming Snow White due to the subsequent arrival of her 'prince'; note here that she is 'repulsed by [her] husband's flesh.'[58] The allusion to 'two halves/ of a two-coloured apple' returns the poem to the Snow White text once more, as well as suggesting the sexual deviance associated with Eve.

The mother and daughter in Broumas's poem willingly incorporate the temptation of the witch, in a shocking challenge to the family structure and to contemporary boundaries of acceptability. Images of sexual intercourse persist throughout; phrases such as 'that night you straddled/ two continents and the wet/ opulent ocean' are loaded with eroticism. Claudia Ingham suggests in *Sappho's Legacy* that the vowel 'o' has come to represent female orgasm; the repetition and assonance of the 'o' seems to indicate this; 'wet' furthers it.[59] The use of the symbolic 'o' and 'unbroken circles' are indicative of a narrative that denies linear progression,

> A woman
>
> who loves a woman
>
> who loves a woman

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[58] Ibid

[59] Claudia Ingham, 'Sappho's Legacy: The Collaborative Testimony of Olga Broumas and T. Begley' *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 19.1 (Spring 2000): 105-20

who loves a man.[60]

The links between the witch and lesbian have been established elsewhere in this thesis, as 'odd' women, both code a challenge to ideological hegemonies. The lines above prioritise the experience of the woman as witch/ lesbian by locating her at the top of a visual hierarchy which demotes masculinity to the bottom. Broumas's 'Snow White' has no need for a prince, a king or seven dwarves. She fittingly defines the location of a lesbian space in the same terms as what Liz Gibbs has called a 'radical redefinition of the heroic'; once more, the witch permits that redefinition.[61]

Broumas echoes Warner, Millay and Murray in linking the witch to what Adrienne Rich calls the 'lesbian continuum.'[62] She eroticises maternal relations as lesbian; the witch comes to access a maternal space, which is not seen in the patriarchal terms of incest, but is one that returns women to a pre-Oedipal state, and which denies the need for relationships with men:

> Don't curse me, Mother, I couldn't bear
>
> the bath
>
> of your bitter spittle.
>
> No salve
>
> no ointment in a doctor's tube, no brew
>
> in a witch's kettle, no lover's mouth, no friend

---

[60] Broumas, 'Snow White'
[61] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outside* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 77
[62] Liz Gibbs, *Daring to Dissent: Lesbian Culture from Margin to Mainstream* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 112

or god could heal me

if your heart

turned in anathema, grew stone

against me.

       Defenseless

naked as the day

I slid from you

twin voices keening and the cord

pulsing our common protest, I'm coming back

back to you

woman, flesh

of your woman's flesh, your fairest, most

faithful mirror,

       my love

transversing me like a filament

wired to the noonday sun.

       Receive

me, Mother.[63]

In the Lacanian theory privileged by contemporary French feminists, the maternal

realm, in which Broumas locates the witch, is the pre-Oedipal stage of psychological

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[63] 'Snow White'

development, dominated by 'the undifferentiated relationship with the mother and is a

stage that remains in the subconscious as it does in the subconscious of language.'[64]

Upon entering the symbolic world in which meaning is ordered by binary oppositions

and by gender difference, the subject comes under the law of the father as a split

subject, always desiring and never being fulfilled. The maternal presence of the witch

has the potential for the disruption of this repressive Oedipal order.[65] Based upon the

Lacanian distinction between maternal and paternal realms, French feminists theorise

women's writing as an expression of the woman's different libidinal drives and

body.[66] In Broumas's 'Snow White', what is conventionally termed incest becomes a

powerful force of feminism, represented by 'A curious/ music, an un-/catalogued

rhyme, mother/ daughter.' The surprising location of line and punctuation breaks

already disrupts, hinting at alternative eroticisms.

Broumas's insistence on a specifically female sexuality and imagination leads to the

consideration of the lesbian or witch as a possible alternative image for the repressed

'woman writer' mentioned in 'Cinderella'. The description of the daughter as 'your

woman's flesh, your fairest, most/ faithful mirror' replicates the language of the Snow

White tale, but significantly, women now possess and control the 'mirror', which

emits 'love' rather than a controlling gaze; mothers and daughters are not set against

each other in jealous war, but are united as 'fairest ... faithful' versions of each other.

Once more, the witch is associated with the defiance of patriarchy and the re-writing

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[64] Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 101
[65] Marilyn Farwell, 'Feminist Constructions of the Witch as Fantasmic Other' *Body and Society* 10 (2000), 113-133
[66] Gallop, *Feminism*, p. 102

of its narratives. Hélène Cixous draws equally on the image of the witch - in this case,

of the mythical Medusa, to interrogate the relationship between women and writing.

Cixous calls *écriture feminine* a woman's communication that is at one with her

bodily rhythms, a connection at times determined in relationship to another woman:

> Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman.
>
> There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other.
>
> The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of
>
> herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself
>
> and return the love in the body that was 'born' to her.[67]

The powerful declaration that concludes Broumas's 'Snow White', 'Receive/ me,

Mother', suggests a desperate desire to return to this maternal space, to rejoin with

'the cord/ pulsing our common protest.'

Yet Broumas's description of the woman to witch to woman connection draws equally

on the lesbian possibility hinted at in *Lolly Willowes*. The erotic language allows for a

feminine space that is potentially lesbian as well as maternal, because, as Georgiou

argues, the pre-Oedipal, or maternal, also become the defining context for the

lesbian.[68] By repeating the same stories over and over again - 'a woman/ who loves a

woman' etcetera - and by returning the daughter to her point of departure, the

mother's womb, the witch posits a new story of what appears to be the physical and

intellectual exchange between two lesbian lovers. Broumas's lyrical and rapturous

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[67] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 35

[68] Michael Lassell and Elena Georgiou (eds), 'Introduction', *The World in Us: Lesbian and Gay Poetry of the Next Wave* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. xi

language leads the reader to imagine a female-female sexuality based upon a different system of bodily pleasure: in the lines, 'my love/ transversing me like a filament', the dislocation of syntax places new emphasis on female 'love'. Because the woman's body is more multifaceted and less linear, more connective and less separative than the male body, the new writing reflecting female desire must, out of necessity, according to theorists of *ecriture feminine*, deploy a total disruption of syntax, chronology and order, what Cixous calls a 'song', what Irigaray labels 'linguistic chaos' and what Broumas's witch names 'an un/catalogued rhyme.'[69] In narrative terms, then, the lesbian may exist only in the lyrical mode of the pre-Oedipal space, but the relocation of the patriarchal fairy tale, a burning witch and a sleeping, silent heroine into the space of female poetry still spells radical, utopian, subversive fantasy.

Broumas's 're-visioning' of the witch in 'Rapunzel' imbues her with another defiant version of female eroticism, further conflating concepts of witchcraft, maternity and lesbianism:

> Climb
>
> through my hair, climb in
>
> to me, love
>
> hover here like a mother's wish
>
> You might have been, though you're not,
>
> my mother. You let like hair, like static
>
> her stilled wish, relentless

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[69] Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), p. 60

> in me and constant
>
> as tropical grown ...[70]

The difficulty of narrativising lesbian desire is equally present in Anne Sexton's version of the same tale, which is not just a reworking of the oral versions of the original fairy tale, the Grimms' version or Broumas's tale, but a combination of the three.[71]

'I Will Eat You Up': Anne Sexton

Like so many of the female literary giants considered in this study, Anne Sexton's biography is dominated by references to hysteria, depression and mental illness. After giving birth to a daughter in 1953, Sexton was diagnosed with postpartum depression, suffered her first mental breakdown, and was admitted to Westwood Lodge, a neuropsychiatric hospital that she would repeatedly return to for help. Despite a successful writing career - she won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967 for *Live or Die* - she lost her battle with mental illness and committed suicide in 1974 at the age of 46.[72] At her memorial service, Adrienne Rich reminded other feminists that Sexton had written 'poems alluding to abortion, masturbation, menopause, and the painful love of a powerless mother for her daughters, long before such themes became validated by a collective consciousness of women.'[73] Such themes were not just unmistakably, they were un*speak*ably female: these were the things that, Jane Hedley

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[70] Olga Broumas, 'Rapunzel', *Beginning with O*, p.76

[71] Anne Sexton, *Transformations* (London and New York: Virago, 1976), p. 22

[72] Anne Sexton, *A Self Portrait in Letters* (New York: Pandora, 1977) p.xii

[73] Clare Emily Clifford, ' "Suicides Have a Special Language": Practicing Literary Suicide with Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman' in John Fagan and Ellen Andrew (eds), *Making Sense Of: Dying and Death* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: At the Interface, 2004), p. 59

argues, 'we had learned to do - and suffer - without expecting to read or to write about them. There were no dysfunctional families on Sunday night television, and the marriages in *Ladies' Home Journal* never had to be saved from incest or abortion or spousal abuse.'[74] But Sexton's transgressiveness involved more than her themes or subject matter; it also had to do with the positioning of her poems' aggressively female speakers. Whereas Rich and Levertov were both inclined to depict their poet-self as 'not-a-woman' in some important sense, Sexton always led with her femaleness.

Fittingly, in *Transformations* (1971), the collection from which 'Rapunzel' is taken, Sexton's metafictional concern is the traditional movement of plot, which, especially in fairy tales, demands closure in heterosexual marriage. She exposes such narrative mechanics as an inevitable doom for the heroines of fairy tales, and sets the witch, once more, in opposition to this. In her re-working of 'Cinderella', 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' and 'Briar Rose' (Sleeping Beauty), Sexton reveals the macro story of a young girl's maturation that inevitably traps her in a stifling relationship with the male.[75] The story is ruthless. As Janet Badia suggests, for the girl to enter into sexuality and adulthood - the tale that these stories inevitably tell - is to enter into time, and as a result, 'into narrative, to be trapped by a system that will ultimately turn her into the wicked stepmother, the aged and the useless.'[76] The description of Snow White - 'The virgin is a lovely number' - points bitterly to both her vulnerability and

[74] Jane Hedley, ' "I Made You to Find Me": Sexton, Lowell, and the Gender of Poethood,' *Raritan: a Quarterly Review*, 19:3 (Winter 2000), p.87
[75] Sexton, *Transformations*, p. 41
[76] Janet Badia,' "One of those people like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath": The Pathologized Woman Reader in Literary and Popular Culture' in Janet Badia and Elisabeth Bronfen (eds), *Reading Women: Literary Figures and Cultural Icons from the Victorian Age to the Present* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 297

her position as a commodity of patriarchy.[77] The narrator positions herself, however, as the older woman who has already entered into the story and knows the iconic position of women within it.

Hedley has argued that Sexton's narrative is highly confessional:

> In the poems that created her reputation as a confessional poet she is almost always confessing *to* someone: she has an interlocutor within the poem itself. 'The Double Image' is addressed to her three-year-old daughter, Joyce; more typically, however, the 'you' she conjures up is adult and male, a father-doctor-mentor figure whose authority the poem's speaker both covets and is seeking to undermine. In such poems there is difference not only of gender but also of status or power between the speaker and her 'confessor' - a difference that is taken for granted by the society at large but that Sexton's poem highlights and destabilizes.[78]

But Sexton reveals in *Transformations* an alternative persona whose effectiveness derives in a different way from the social power dynamic to which it calls attention: the persona of a 'middle-aged witch,' an outlaw storyteller who is mockingly inward with her own society's myths of gender. This 'witch' characterises the virgin as a doll, who has yet to enter time, and so is forever young and vulnerable. Snow White is 'fragile as cigarette paper', with 'china-blue doll eyes'; Sleeping Beauty is a 'Little doll child'.[79] But her first physical symptoms of maturity, determined by her body, rather than the heroic adventure that marks the boy's entry into manhood, brings

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[77] Sexton, 'Snow White'
[78] Hedley, p. 90
[79] Sexton, 'Snow White' and 'Briar Rose', *Transformations*

together textuality and sexuality.

Instead of the conventional 'happy ever after' ending, Sexton returns to the same

image of stasis to sum up the female condition: 'Meanwhile Snow White held court,/

rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut.'[80] In 'Briar Rose', the witch narrator

reveals the exchange of a young girl from father to husband in which the girl is erased,

sometimes violently. In the last scene of the last poem in her collection, Sexton's

unravelling of narrativity ends with a devastating image of father - daughter incest that

contrast with the sensuality of Broumas's mother-daughter bond. After being

awakened from her long sleep by her prince, Briar Rose is a woman who suffers

insomnia and whose only memories are of 'my father thick upon me/ like some

sleeping jellyfish.'[81] Sexton constructs a witch who once more stands outside of

society, but who, sardonic and cynical, is restricted by discourses of violence and

oppression that still keep women in their place.

But the witchcraft presented in 'Rapunzel' is far more subversive. Sexton immediately

interrupts the expected plot with her first line: 'A woman/ who loves a woman/ is

forever young', seemingly echoing and perpetuating the female erotic of Broumas's

lesbian cycles.[82] But the poem differs from Broumas's version of the same tale in that

it gestures towards a lesbian relationship as a female story, but cannot follow it

though. The lesbian story is revealed to be a non-story, what D. A. Miller calls 'the

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[80] Ibid
[81] Ibid
[82] Sexton, 'Rapunzel', p. 38

non-narratable'; not the unspeakable, but its 'incapacity to generate a story.'[83] The

witch, Mother Gothel, keeps Rapunzel in a tower, and when she asks Rapunzel to let

down her hair, the witch climbs up it to be with her. Their togetherness lasts until the

prince arrives and destroys the female bond. That female bond signifies a refusal to

enter into time, and therefore, to enter the plot; as the witch says, outside of their

relationship, death and deflowerment are synonymous: 'Let me hold your heart like a

flower/ lest it bloom and collapse.'[84] While, as if to ally herself with Freud, Sexton

perceives this relationship as an immature stage of development, however lovely and

enticing, at the same time, she eschews her usual satirical tone and instead describes

their relationship in the overtly idealistic terms of 'two clouds/ glistening in the bottle

glass.'[85] The coy phrase for their love-making, 'mother-me-do', alludes both to a

mother-daughter relationship but also a sense of maternal control and smothering that

will ultimately justify Rapunzel's rescue. In the middle of the poem, the interlude of

the garden 'more beautiful than Eve's', Sexton underscores the aura of unreality yet

purity associated with a lesbian continuum and a female utopian fantasy.

But even in this Eden, there is a sense of stasis. Rapunzel is lonely, and the prince

who rescues her is strangely yet powerfully masculine:

> What is this beast, she thought,
>
> with muscles on his arms
>
> like a bag of snakes?

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[83] D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton,
NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.16
[84] Sexton, 'Rapunzel'
[85] Ibid

What is this moss on his legs?

What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?

What is this voice as deep as a dog?

Yet he dazzled her with his answers.

Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick.

They lay together upon the yellowy threads,

swimming through them

like minnows through kelp

and they sang out benedictions like the Pope.

In the stanza reserved for the moral of the tale, Sexton ironically dismisses lesbianism

as a stage to be outgrown, 'just as the fish on Friday', but the witch remains

surprisingly sentimentalised:

As for Mother Gothel,

her heart shrank to the size of a pin,

never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,

hold me,

and only as she dreamt of the yellow hair

did moonlight sift into her mouth.

The images highlight the Edenic unreality of the witch's garden, but also create

sympathy in the reader, questioning the platitudes which describe the necessity of

heterosexuality.

In this way, the witch disrupts a sense of plot movement; which, as Montefiore argues,

'will disturb the power of the traditional narrative to exact death from its female

inhabitants.'[86] For feminists, the broken sentence becomes a way to disturb 'an ideological monster: the master plot.'[87] In twentieth century women's writing, feminists contend, it is linearity that traps the female figure in male-dominated positions of subjectivity and of closure, always marriage and/or death. The primary elements of narrative movement - sequences determined by cause and effect, time or verb tenses and narrative closure - all work to privilege an ideology, in this case, patriarchy. In *A Room of One's Own*, Mary Carmichael, Woolf's mythical novelist, is described: 'Mary is tampering with the expected sequence. First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence.'[88] Woolf adds that she must do this 'not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating.'[89] The sense of female creativity and release through linguistic subversion is one that Cixous and Irigaray developed further.[90] According to them, there are two types of narrative - one linear and the other circular, which reflect male and female economies of desire, replicating the symbolic 'o' of Broumas's erotic. Cixous's *écriture féminine*, in its feminine disruption of the sequence, its fragments and impressionistic leaps, signals the rupture of the male symbolic order, defined by gender separation and hierarchy, and determined by male desire. Female desire, or entry into the realm of the maternal, produces a different text. Indeed, narrative closure for Sexton can only signify either the doll-like stasis of Snow White or the molestation of Briar Rose. It is the addition of the witch as a protagonist that challenges such limitations.

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[86] Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, p.291
[87] Ibid
[88] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 48
[89] Ibid
[90] Cixous, p. 102

The splitting of the self that Marina Warner described in the opening of this chapter posits, as I have argued, the good mother against the bad mother, the angel against the witch. In the folktale of *Hansel and Gretel* the good mother is absent; in early written versions, it is the children's birth bad mother who sends her children to their death; in the Grimms' interpretation, she is dead and replaced by the Wicked Stepmother. Anne Sexton's re-writing of 'Hansel and Gretel', also published in her collection *Transformations*, locates maternity far away from the 'mother-me-do' loving bond and maternal eroticism present in 'Rapunzel'.[91] The witch, who, as discussed earlier, often comes to embody a maternal figure, is represented as entirely malevolent. While the potential for renewal and subversion existed within the relationships between the young woman and the witch-mother in other feminist fairy tales, Sexton conflates the bad mother and the witch; both exist in turn in the earlier sections of the poem, and the death of the witch in the narrative coincides with the textual erasure of the mother.

Since the mass hysteria of the witch trials, with their emphasis on malevolent maternity, critics and commentators have noted the difficulties in articulating the existence of infanticide or 'the bad mother'. Dymphna Callaghan notes, 'Women were persecuted as mothers: as bad old mothers for witchcraft, and as bad young mothers for infanticide.'[92] Naomi Miller observes that, 'mothers and other female caregivers appear as both objects and agents of sacrifice in early modern texts and images, sometimes represented as Madonna and monster at once.'[93] Susan Frye concludes that

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[91] Anne Sexton, 'Hansel and Gretel', *Transformations*, p.15
[92] Dymphna Callaghan, *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.74
[93] Naomi Miller, *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period* (Aldershot:

the maternal role has historically been an 'unstable' one; the struggle to imagine a

'self' rendered motherhood a confused, anxiety-producing state in early modern

England.[94] Indeed, Bettelheim and Zipes have argued that the greatest crime

committed by women in early versions of *Hansel and Gretel* is not the witch's attempt

to cook the children, but the inability of the mother (or later, step-mother) to provide

food for her children; the traditional ideal of female behaviour demands that the

woman is the last to be fed.

Sexton dramatically intensifies this dialogue, however, by merging the (step)mother

with the wicked witch. From the very first line, maternity, cannibalism and sex are

connected in a concoction of textuality, sexuality and witchcraft:

> Little plum,
>
> said the mother to her son,
>
> I want to bite,
>
> I want to chew,
>
> I will eat you up.
>
> Little child,
>
> little nubkin,
>
> sweet as fudge,
>
> you are my blitz.
>
> I will spit on you for luck

Ashgate, 2000), p.6

[94] Susan Frye, *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford, 1999), p.13

for you are better than money.

Your neck as smooth

as a hard-boiled egg;

soft-cheeks, my pears,

let me buzz you on the neck

and take a bite.

I have a pan that will fit you.

Just pull up your knees like a game hen.

Let me take your pulse

and set the oven for 350.

Come, my pretender, my fritter,

my bubbler, my chicken biddy!

Oh succulent one,

it is but one turn in the road

and I would be a cannibal![95]

Rather than simply repeating the linear narrative of the conventional fairy tale, Sexton

opens with the horrific voice of the mother, as yet not established as the witch. 'Little

plum' connotes both maternal endearment and also genitalia. The fact that this voice

is so obviously 'the mother to her son' intensifies the infantile fear of infanticide and

maternal deviance.

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[95] Sexton, 'Hansel and Gretel

Bettelheim sees the Grimms' version of *Hansel and Gretel* as being entirely concerned with the child's obsession over the lost parent, as a symptom of the anxiety of abandonment: 'the fairy tale expresses in words and actions the things that go on in children's minds'.[96] But it seems to me that this is only half the story. Whilst *Hansel and Gretel* does 'give body to the anxieties and learning tasks of the young child who must overcome and sublimate his primitive incorporative and thus destructive desires', this is a tale of witchcraft, too.[97] The witch's potential cannibalism is surely the worst of crimes against a person, but her powerful invocation, 'I would be a cannibal!' is loaded with excitement and sexual desire. References to 'my pears', 'pull[ing] up your knees' and biting 'on the neck' bring together concepts of sexual and bodily incorporation, suggesting vampirism. The lust for blood is, as Auerbach suggests in relation to the vampire, in part derived from the same desire for youth and immortality present in the Wicked Queen's attempts to murder Snow White.[98] Cannibalism, Tatar suggests, is often 'the business of men' in fairy and folk tales; in Sexton's revision, it becomes all the more shocking because the witch's cannibalism is merged with the maternal.[99] The witch desires to incorporate the children within herself. In the original tale, this may be an attempt to 'steal' their potential fertility - a conventional crime attributed to witches - and introduce it into the barren bodies of the old crone and the childless step-mother.

But Sexton conflates the two. The witch and the mother (rather than the step-mother)

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[96] Bruno Bettleheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 199
[97] Ibid
[98] Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 43
[99] Maria Tatar, *Off with their Heads!* p. 109

are the same woman; they speak each other's words in the opening stanza, and take

turns to control the direction of the narrative as the poem progresses. When the witch

is killed, the mother has coincidentally died too ('you'll be glad to hear'). The

merging of the mother, rather than step-mother, and witch is significant because it

creates a body that is already maternal and fertile. Judith Brewer sums up the link

between the maternal and death: 'The womb will be a tomb if the growing individual

is forced back into it.'[100] This link with motherhood makes the witch's crime all the

more shocking. Gone is the gentle maternity represented by Broumas's desire to

'Receive/ me, Mother', and in its place is the murderous force of deviant maternity

that wreaks havoc upon society by repressing future fertility.

Whilst it is impossible to forget the dominant action and closure of the narrative - that

is, the witch must die - it is worth noting that in Sexton's 'Hansel and Gretel', the

male and female protagonists are subject to highly gendered treatment at the hands of

the witch, almost to the extent of harking back to the Victorian notion of separate

spheres. Whilst both Hansel and Gretel commit the same 'crime' of eating the witch's

house and chocolate chimney, Hansel is imprisoned and fattened to be slaughtered.

The traditional tale puts Gretel to work as a slave, but Sexton omits this element. Until

the witch's hunger begins, she treats Gretel almost as a companion or as an equal:

> She spoke to Gretel
>
> And told her how her brother
>
> would be better than mutton;

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[100] Judith Brewer, *Life and Death: Murder and Maternity* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1998), p. 376

how a thrill would go through her

as she smelled him cooking;

how she would lay the table

and sharpen the knives

and neglect none of the refinements.

Gretel

who had said nothing so far

nodded her head and wept.

She who neither dropped pebbles or

bread

bided her time.[101]

The fact that the witch 'spoke', 'told' and 'explained' things and considers sharing her

feast with Gretel, whose name, first imposed by the Grimms, suggests a German

Everywoman, indicates an oral relationship between the two women that stands in

direct contrast to the imprisonment of the male; the witch violates and controls the

text's representative of patriarchy. Indeed, critics such as Selway and Warner have

observed that the gingerbread house, with its 'chocolate chimney', is a symbolic

body.[102]

If we extend the point established by Enid Blyton's Witch Snippit, that the witch's

house is indeed symbolic of the witch's body, then the crimes which Hansel, as a

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[101] Sexton, 'Hansel and Gretel'
[102] Maria Warner, *Off with their Heads!* p. 78

male, carries out in his devouring of the cottage are different from those committed by Gretel. He violates the female body, whilst Gretel's homoerotic eating is less repulsive. The imprisonment of Hansel, 'the smarter, the bigger, the juicier' represents the imprisonment of the patriarch, in so far as Hansel, in his placing of pebbles and bread, occupies the dominant role. His feast is described as being like one 'after a holy war'. Implicit in this 'holy war' is the idea of witch trials, often referred to as the Church's war on women; the consumption of Hansel, of the patriarch, would be the witch's revenge; the witch's explanation of the 'thrill' that would go through both her and Gretel 'as [they] smelled him cooking' is again, sexualised, and unites the women as potential allies. 'Saucy lass' refers once again to the conflation of food and homoerotic consumption. Indeed, it is her greedy decision to eat Gretel, rather than Hansel, that initiates her death. Gretel's decision to push the witch into the oven, secures 'her moment in history', a powerful reminder of the dominance of masculine discourse.

The need for the fairy tale witch to suffer a horrific death has already been discussed, but it is impossible to escape either the sardonic irony or the dreadfulness of her death:

> The witch turned red
>
> as the Jap flag.
>
> Her blood began to boil up
>
> like Coca-Cola.
>
> Her eyes began to melt.
>
> She was done for.
>
> Altogether a memorable incident.

The burning of the witch in the womb-like oven is perhaps the most dramatic and redolent image of the whole poem; the 'melt[ing]' eyes and 'boil[ing]' blood evoke the horrific deaths that the supposed witches of the trials suffered. Despite the narrative resolution achieved through the return of the children to their father's care, the legacy of Sexton's poetry is not one of reassurance. Instead, she resurrects the haunting effigy of the persecuted witch; the fact that the nightmares return 'Only at suppertime' suggests the problems of reconciling apparent female evil that brought about more historical persecutions:

> Only at suppertime
>
> whilst eating a chicken leg
>
> did our children remember
>
> the woe of the oven
>
> the smell of the cooking witch,
>
> a little like mutton,
>
> to be served only with burgundy
>
> and fine white linen
>
> like something religious.

Comparing the witch to 'mutton' serves to echo the ill-treatment of millions of women as animals and 'lambs to the slaughter'. Similarly, the combination of the red wine of communion with the 'fine white linen' of the Christian altar cloth contributes to the feeling of 'something religious', and the apparent justification, once more, of the murder of witches in the name of the church. The children of folk and fairy tale become 'our[s]' and the lingering 'smell of the cooking witch' hangs heavy within contemporary social consciousness. The guise of the fairy tale hints at a legacy of

injustice and articulates it violently for a more modern and egalitarian readership.

For most people, whether literary critics or cultural consumers, the witch from the fairy tale comes to define all witches. She is the old crone in the edible cottage, the hag on a broomstick, the wicked stepmother, the malevolent fairy. And, conforming to patriarchy's entrenched logic, she must always die. It is, perhaps, not surprising, then, that when, in the fifties, sixties and seventies, feminists sought to challenge cultural images of female repression, women authors began to re-write the witch. This decision would seem to construct the witch as a victim to be rescued. Indeed, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton return to images of burning female bodies and the violated witches from the witch trials to express a sense of the perpetual injustices suffered by women. But all of the female writers considered in this chapter go beyond the suggestion that witches and women are forever trapped in endless cycles of repression. As we have seen elsewhere, the witch always enables subversion. In 'Demon Lover', Plath uses 'the witch's face' to access liberation and female self worth; Olga Broumas confuses the Snow White/ Wicked Queen dichotomy to promote an exclusively female bonding, which hints at the beginning of a lesbian continuum. The conflation of the lesbian relationship with the mother-daughter bond, both in Broumas's and Sexton's poetry, suggests the prioritising of a female bonding that cannot be characterised in the patriarchal terms of a fairy tale, or by social authoritarian language as incest. Once more, poetry permits the woman writer to access a sort of feminist magic - a witchcraft - that is not merely a recognition of the legacy of injustice, violence and murder suggested by the witch trials, but a violently subversive challenge of which the witch is the medium.

Chapter 5:

'Lover, Priestess, Wisewoman, Queen': Witches as Heroines in the texts of Marion Zimmer Bradley.

Morgan le Fay was not married, but put to school in a nunnery, where she became a great mistress of magic.[1]

- Thomas Malory, *Morte Darthur*

We heard slogans about the return of witches, the moon, the tides, matriarchy, the primal. There was blood in the air and slaughter on the horizon.[2]

- Catherine Clement, *The Feminine and the Sacred*

I suspect Witches were the original Women's Lib; they were the ones who refused to be martyrs to somebody's notion of what a woman ought to be and do.[3]

- Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Witch Hill*

Sylvia Plath, Olga Broumas and Anne Sexton both clarify and complicate the triangular relationship between the Wicked Stepmother, the persecuted trial witch and the witch as feminist icon; as I have demonstrated, each variant acknowledges the dualism of female victimisation and feminist rebellion. Whilst one of the main developments of second-wave feminism in the 1950s and 1960s was to articulate a

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[1] Thomas Malory, *Morte Darthur*, ed. Helen Cooper (London: Oxford, 1998), p. 329
[2] Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (London: Palgrave, 1991), p. 40
[3] Marion Zimmer Bradley, *Witch Hill* [1978] (New York: Tor, 1990), p.108

sense of female injustice to a wider audience, such readings of fairy tales and feminist poetry close down representations of the witch, reducing her to the role of a scapegoat, of wounded prey, unable to defend herself against misogynist hate crimes. In contrast, women's writing of the 1970s and 1980s expounded a more radical version of feminism and a more insurrectionary witch. Perhaps more than in any other era, the witch invades every area of female literature. Theorists such as Daly, Cixous, Clément and Dworkin, historians such as Mor, Purkiss and Gimbutus, and novelists such as Alice Walker, Angela Carter and Fay Weldon allow the witch to occupy a dominant role. However, conceptions of the witch were perhaps even more strongly influenced by writers of popular literature, who produced readings which were notably more ambiguous and multiple than their high culture counterparts. Marion Zimmer Bradley dominates this chapter because she inhabits the conventional, patriarchal world of Arthuriana, but also moves into the alternative world of feminist fantasy fiction.

Daughter of Bilitis: Marion Zimmer Bradley and Second Wave Feminism

Marion Zimmer Bradley was born in Albany, New York, during the Great Depression, and sold her first story to *Vortex* magazine in 1952. During the 1950s, she joined the cultural and campaigning lesbian group, the Daughters of Bilitis, conceived as an explicitly lesbian alternative to homophile groups of that era. Her own writing mirrored her radical feminist politics, resulting in some of the most shocking portrayals of lesbian relationships of the era, many of which were considered pornographic at the time of publication. Texts such as *I am a Lesbian* (1962) written under the pseudonym, Lee Chapman; *No Adam for Eve* (1966), published as John Dexter; and *My Sister, My Love* (1963), as Miriam Gardner, served to distance

Bradley from the mainstream literary establishment. Her marginalisation increased in later years, when her husband, Walter Breen, was arrested in 1991 for illicit relations with teenage boys. Bradley eventually acknowledged that she knew of his relationships with several boys; his accusers claim that she supported him in hiding it in subsequent years.

Bradley was the editor of the long-running *Sword and Sorceress* anthology series, which encouraged submissions of fantasy stories featuring original and non-traditional heroines from young and upcoming authors. Bradley's most famous work, however, remains the renowned feminist Arthurian text, *Mists of Avalon* (1979), which spawned a series of sequels, including *Mistress of* Magic (1994), *Lady of Avalon* (1997) and *The High* Queen (1994), all of which served to give voice and visibility to the previously neglected women of Arthurian myth. It is in *Mists of Avalon*, and, to a lesser extent, in her more marginal text, *Witch Hill* (1988), that Bradley is able to draw out some of the most subversive literary witches, focussing not, as we have seen in previous chapters, on the historical discriminations of the witch trial era, but instead on a pagan pre-history that places a Great Priestess at the centre of a matriarchal society.

This idea of female authority is, however, juxtaposed with the legacy of subversion that this thesis has associated firmly with representations of the witch. As women, thanks to the progress of feminism, gained political visibility and professional status, ultimately highlighted by the appointment of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979, the shock value of women holding high office becomes more difficult to sustain. As women are drawn into society, there must, then, be an extent to which the

subversion of authority that the witch signifies diminishes. It is this division of the witch and the woman - formerly inextricably linked - that this chapter will investigate.

On 22nd January, 1973, the United States Supreme Court passed Roe versus Wade. The landmark ruling, which legalised abortion throughout America, gave all women control of their own reproductive systems, on the grounds of the right to privacy enshrined in the Constitution . Women, rather than the state, could legitimately claim ownership of their own bodies. The consequences were felt globally, coming to exemplify a whole era of activism, shifting barriers and social revolution. Elaine Showalter characterises the period as a phase of 'intellectual rebellion, gynocentricism and critical separatism.'[4]

What is particularly surprising, then, is the extent to which the witch, once a symbol of utopian female freedom, is still a recurrent image of subversion. Radical feminist theorists, populist female novelists and respected academics return to the crone again and again:

> Precisely because it operates on a basis of assumed identity politics,
>
> the use of the witch emerges repeatedly to create ultimately a feminist
>
> mythology, constituting a challenging alternative to the established,
>
> (Western) male-centered master story.[5]

And the alternative resurrected by the witch serves to revalorise the roles of mid-wives, healers, herbalists and crones in the exilic narratives of contemporary Anglo-

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[4] Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia, 1997), p.46

[5] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History* (London: Athlone, 1998), p. 14

American feminist texts. While Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Gaskell created a

witch from 'without', female writers of the seventies, in particular, also appropriated

the witch to represent women returning from the 'Dark Continent of Desire', from

'always', from 'the heath where witches are kept alive', from 'below', from 'beyond

culture'; 'from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them

forget.'[6]

Alice Walker's references to witches in the ethnic context of her African heritage

suggest this sense of 'without', of women centuries apart bonded by patriarchal

violation and repression:

> [the] first witches to die at the stake were the daughters of the Moors.
>
> It was they (or, rather, we) who thought the Christian religion that
>
> flourished in Spain would let the Goddess of Africa 'pass' into the
>
> modern world as 'the Black Madonna'... Instead, whole families in
>
> Africa who worshipped the goddess were routinely killed, sold into
>
> slavery, or converted to Islam at the point of the sword. Yes... I was
>
> one of those 'pagan' heretics they burned at the stake.[7]

This renewed interest in the word, the image and the motif of the witch created highly

emotional 'digging' through several layers of history and led to the discovery of witch

pogroms of the late Middle Ages as incontestable archaeological proof of female

oppression. Throughout the 1970s, feminist academia and female writers created their

own witch-craze. Archaeologist Marjia Gimbutas challenged traditional

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[6] Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 70

[7] Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (New York: Phoenix, 1994), p. 3

representations of Greek and Roman goddesses as mere foils to greater male forces, by presenting the possibility of a matriarchal age of peace and egalitarianism, under the patronage of a goddess with different local names but universal witch qualities.[8] Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor argued similarly against misogynist representations; *The Great Cosmic Mother* (1981) traced the worship of the Goddess from the Neolithic to the early Bronze Age, when her multivalency became narrowed to simply mother goddess.[9] Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman* (1976) uncovered the suppressed history of goddess worship in the Near East during Biblical times, suggesting that the patriarchal format of Judeo-Christian religion was retrospectively invented by the writers of the Old and New Testaments in order to bolster their claim to religious and cultural authority.[10] Where feminism in its first wave had been concerned with the public sphere and legal rights, the witch came, in the 1970s to symbolise resistance to the social oppressions of the private sphere.

But perhaps the most dramatic example of the witch's radical resurrection is Clément's and Cixous's revolutionary *The Newly Born Woman*. The witch figure they present replicates subversive symbols from a pre-feminist era – the evil eye, menstrual pollution and the castrating mother – but also evokes a pagan, feminist symbol of transcendence in the Mother Goddess. By combining the medical and sexual implications of her dual identity as sorceress and hysteric, Cixous constructs the witch as a trope for the female condition, for cultural incompatibility and social deviance,

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[8] Marjia Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe, 6500-3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 10
[9] Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Re-discovering the Religion of the Earth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p.332
[10] Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman* (New York: Pandora, 1976), p. 265

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which - as the witches of the late nineteenth century demonstrate - if excessive, will

be 'vomited into protected spaces – hospitals, asylums, prisons.'[11] By adopting this

radical feminist identity during the second wave, the witch comes to represent

strategically both the historical female figure subjected to torture and death, and a

radical fantasy of renewal that will return periodically to haunt her patriarchal

oppressors. This sense of dualism, of a cultural transformation that 'has not yet

happened' and also a figure who already marks that transformation is anticipated by

Dickinson, Gaskell, Townsend Warner and Blyton.[12] Cixous and Clément develop

this sense of 'Her-story', suggesting that the feminist witch is always able to subvert

her own abject identity by converting it into a political fantasy.[13] So even in an era of

supposed egalitarianism, the witch is a central female symbol for women writers,

evoking once more a subversive transcendence.

The cohesion of history and potential within the witch is drawn on likewise in the

writings of both Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin. In *Woman Hating*, Dworkin posits

the witch simultaneously as a female source of authority and as a patriarchal

scapegoat, describing the magic of witches as 'an imposing catalogue of medical

skills concerning reproductive and psychological processes... a sophisticated

knowledge of telepathy, auto and hetero suggestion.'[14] According to Daly, in

particular, the witch-hag is a female *eccentric*, derived from the Greek *ek* (out of) and

kentrum (centre of the circle). This definition seems to fit with my reading of women

writers who link the witch's subversion to her location 'outside' of the society

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[11] Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p.19
[12] Ibid, p.41
[13] Ibid
[14] Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974), p.20

threatened by her existence, emphasising repeatedly her deviation from established

patterns and her possession of gynocentric cultural boundaries. Daly extends this:

> [The] malevolent stereotypical hag still haunts elder women today. If a
>
> man is old, ugly, wise, he is a sage. If a women is old, ugly, wise, she
>
> is a saga – that is, a witch.[15]

Deliberately echoing the language of *The Original Craft*, she draws upon the hag's

metamorphosis from wise woman into witch, transforming her medieval cauldron

'from sacred symbol of regeneration into a vessel of poison.'[16] Accused of stealing

male fertility (or even dismembering the male body), the all-devouring, death-dealing

hag equally comes to symbolise the protective, maternal instincts of an archetypal

Mother.

Significantly, Daly creates a witch who is the guardian of birth-giving, as well as

virginity and homosexuality, 'unstained by patriarchal semen.'[17] Her re-writing of

hagiography as *Hagography* modulates the witch as the embodiment of radical

rebellion and feminist sisterhood:

> Our foresisters were the Great Hags whom the institutionally powerful
>
> but privately impotent patriarchs found too threatening for co-
>
> existence ... For women who are on the journey of radical being, the
>
> lives of witches, of the Great Hags' hidden history, are deeply
>
> intertwined with our own process. As we write/live in our own story,

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[15] Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Meta-Ethics of Radical Feminism* (London: Women's Press, 1979), p.46

[16] Ibid p. 60

[17] Ibid

we are uncovering their history. [18]

Their story, for Daly, is our story, while we become crones – the survivors of the original witchcraze – 'as a result of having discovered depths of courage and strength of wisdom in *ourselves*.'[19] So the witch becomes, once more, part of a language of female rebellion, perhaps not, as was the case in the work of earlier women writers, to exceed the limitations of their own society, but to avenge the oppression of all victims of phallogocentric hegemonies. Silenced voices spoke; 'slavish chains of obedience' were torn away.[20] Progress, it seemed had arrived, and the witch was its most obvious symbol.

'The Great Goddess': Mists of Avalon

In my time I have been called many things: sister, lover, priestess,

wise-woman, queen. Now in truth I have come to be wise-woman and a

time may come when these things may need to be known. I have no

quarrel with Christ, only with his priests, who call the Great Goddess

a demon and deny that she ever held power in this world.[21]

The radical reclamation of the witch by feminists is summed up succinctly by Hélène Cixous, in her essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa'.[22] The witch is 'the universal ... woman in her struggle against conventional man.'[23] Whilst this assumption derives above all from mythic stories of 'The Burning Times' and 'The Craft of the Wise'

[18] Mary Daly, *Hagography* (London: Women's Press, 1973), p. 12
[19] Ibid p.13
[20] Mary Wollstencroft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 3
[21] Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 109
[22] Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in L. Exton (ed.), *The Cixous Reader* (London: Palgrave, 2000), pp 60-76
[23] Ibid p. 62

during the medieval and post-medieval witch-craze, something seems to be lacking. Implicit in the sense of 'struggle' are weakness, frustration, subjugation and, most importantly, victimisation. Marion Zimmer Bradley's acclaimed Arthurian narrative, *The Mists of Avalon*, shifts its critical interest somewhat, creating instead the witch as a 'Great Goddess', and a matriarchy more fitting to the era of the text's production.

The Mists of Avalon is widely accepted as 'one of the most original and emotional retellings of the familiar Arthurian legend'; however, in many cases, critics have objected to the 'thinly-veiled feminist propaganda':[24]

> The main male cast arguably comes off badly. Arthur and Lancelot are depicted as so tortured, insecure and brooding that it is hard to suppose that they are two of the finest warlords ever, Gwenhwyfar's father is a prototypical family tyrant, Gorlois is perceived as a typical wife-batterer, Taliesin as near-senile and Patricius as a rabid religious zealot.[25]

Indeed, Morgaine, derived from the Arthurian legend of Morgaine le Faye, inhabits a world of more radical feminism. The first words of the novel, '*Morgaine speaks*', are immediately defiant.[26] At once, centuries of female silence and oppression are reversed; the witch is given control and ownership of the narrative and of male-ordered language; female authority is asserted. While the male literary tradition, as symbolised by the *Vulgate Arthuriad*, Malory and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, construct her as, 'the most extreme villain of Arthurian romance', Bradley's multiplicitous Morgaine presents the witch as the pagan Great Mother to whom kings,

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[24] Marilyn Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 108
[25] Ibid
[26] Bradley, *Mists of Avalon*, p. i

knights, wizards and warriors are subservient:[27]

> [Morgaine] bowed her head to [Arthur]. He had known her even
>
> through the veil. Perhaps she should kneel to the King. But a Lady of
>
> Avalon bends the knee to no human power. Merlin would kneel and so
>
> would Kevin if he were asked; Viviane, never, for she was not only the
>
> priestess of the Goddess, but incorporated the Goddess within herself
>
> in a way the man-priests of male Gods could never know or
>
> understand. And so Morgaine would never kneel again.[28]

Bradley's witch, Morgaine, is, as Lucy Paton suggests, derivative of the Welsh

Morgen, 'sea born …[linked] in point of etymology with the Irish Muirgen, one of the

names of the aquatic lady Liban'.[29] This association clearly evokes a Celtic concept of

le Fay and, incidentally, of the witch, as the pagan priestess in command of

Showalter's 'female element': the sea.

The link between the witch and the sea is stressed throughout the text, but particularly

in relation to Morgaine and the Lady of the Lake. Repeatedly, the order and regulation

of patriarchal society is thrown into chaos by the aquatic women who later claim

Arthur's body for their own. By creating women who rise from lakes, rivers and seas,

Bradley evokes the Darwinian concept of *Natura Naturans*, specifically, a life that

evolves from the swamp and the sea, and places a female progenitor at its centre. So

not only is the witch shown to portend disorder through her link to water, but she also

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[27] Raymond Thompson, 'The First and Last Love: Morgan le Fay and Arthur' in Thelma S. Fenster (ed.), *Arthurian Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p.331
[28] Bradley, *Mists of Avalon*, p. 200
[29] Lucy Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1960), p. 9

acquires a sense of natural authority, coming to fulfil Cixous's more utopian concept

of the witch's potential to become the 'subject who must bring all women to their

senses and to their meaning in history.'

Fittingly, *Mists of Avalon* is loaded with references to female authority. King Arthur,

the 'lion' of English society for contemporary culture, has come to symbolise male,

national and royal ruler-ship, but when faced with the feminist witch, all previous,

patriarchal, hierarchies are rendered meaningless: the phrase 'human power' overtly

suggests that man is impotent in comparison with omnipotent Mother Goddess. The

Christian faith and its defender submit equally; 'man priests' are ignorant, and

subjugated to the capitalised 'Lady'. A visual hierarchy is, instead, established, with

the male protagonists kneeling to Morgaine and Viviane. In addition to suggesting a

female ruler and progenitor, Bradley also invokes much earlier feminine derivation.

The cult of the Magna Dea, hinted at in the priests's description of the witch and

'Great Goddess' as a 'demon', inspired so much fear in the early Christian hierarchy

that it tolerated, and ultimately encouraged, the icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a

safer counterbalance.[30] The 'incorporation' of the Goddess is also challenging, hinting

at the idea of maternity or impregnation implicit in both Darwin and the Magna Dea,

which seems crucial to the witch's – and the woman's – supremacy. I will develop

this idea in the course of this chapter.

Prior to maternity, however, is the latent sexuality that has proved crucial to my

analysis of the witch in literature so far. Diane Purkiss indicates that the 1970s was

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[30] Judith Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reading in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), p. 205

the most crucial period in women's history in terms of its recognition of sexuality as the site of women's oppression, in the same sense that labour was, for Marx, the site of class oppression:

> Rape, sexual violence, pornography, wife battering and eventually
>
> child sexual abuse became the central signifiers of patriarchy,
>
> replacing signifiers such as legal asymmetries and pay differentials. [31]

Once more, it is Bradley's witch, Morgaine, who overturns this oppression, creating a female sexual ownership and domination:

> *But the strife is over; I could greet Arthur at last, when he lay dying,*
>
> *not as my enemy and the enemy of my Goddess, but only as my*
>
> *brother, and as a dying man in need of the Mother's aid, where all*
>
> *men come at last. Even the priests know this, with their ever-virgin*
>
> *Mary in her blue robe; for she too becomes the World Mother in the*
>
> *hour of death.*
>
> *And so Arthur lay at last with his head in my lap, seeing in me neither*
>
> *sister nor lover nor foe, but only wise-woman, priestess, Lady of the*
>
> *Lake; and so rested upon the breast of the Great Mother from whom*
>
> *he came to birth and to whom at last, as all men, he must go. And*
>
> *perhaps, as I guided the barge which bore him away, not this time to*
>
> *the Isle of Priests, but to the true Holy Isle, in the dark world behind*
>
> *our own, that Island of Avalon where, now, few but I could go, he*

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[31] Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, p. 97

repented the enmity that had come between us. [32]

Male subjugation to the witch is suggested in phrases such as 'his head in my lap' and 'rested upon the breast.' Whilst these are, on one hand, sexual images, there is also a sense in which Arthur, the King and Leader of the Knights of the Round Table is forced to assume the position of the helpless child at its mother's bosom. His 'repent[ant]' death scene, which returns his body to the Great Mother and her oceans overturns, again, Christian systems of meaning and authority. Rather than returning his body to the earth, symbolic of male order and control, he is submerged in female, chaotic, primordial waters.

In fact, the only Christian element which is retained is 'the ever-virgin Mother…[who] becomes the World Mother in the hour of death.' The limiting, Christian concepts of the witch as a fallen Eve figure and the Virgin Mary merge. Significantly, *Vitae Merlin*'s *Insula Avalonis* names Morgan's home of Avalon as 'the isle of the apples'.[33] The same apple – the Christian symbol of female lasciviousness and evil – here reverses the notion of The Fall, which imprisoned women in a world of pain and subjugation, by giving the witch control and ownership of paradise, as a land of rhythms, flows and flux where: 'few but [she] could go.' The absence of theory, explanation or even the exact terms for describing a world in flux – let alone one that puts a female progenitor or 'World Mother' at its centre - displaces all existing conventions and systems of identification.[34]

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[32] Bradley, *Mists of Avalon*, p. 200
[33] Basil Clarke (ed.), 'Introduction', *The Life of Merlin* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 14
[34] Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook* (New York: Garland, 1998), p. 309

Repeated references to the 'Lady of the Lake' and to the bodies of water through which Morgaine guides Arthur's body emphasise the female link to fluidity and creation. The oceans that flowed from the witch's body, as discussed in relation to the presence of witch in women's poetry, serves once again to break down linguistic systems and repudiate signification based on the Nom-du-Père. The ambiguities and pluralities created by her tempest are evident throughout the text, and locate Morgaine and her lake in the pre-oedipal stage, before the acquisition of language and the capacity to name objects. Loomis sees her mythological forbears as both 'mother of life ... and at the same time mother of death'.[35] Morgaine's lake, her unchanging element, out of which evolving forms have emerged, but within which primal forces remain, offers an escape from the stranglehold of patriarchal domination. The cultural representative of male authority is returned to the beginning, to the 'Mists of Avalon' and the pre-symbolic era of the sea, the swamp and the witch-mother.

Crucial to her subversion, then, is the movement of the witch from the radical feminist rhetoric of 'only wisewoman, priestess' into a pre-Christian natural world, of the 'Mother', 'Great Mother' and 'World Mother'. Camille Paglia's *Psychoanalysis and Women* stresses the apparently 'automatic' link between women and nature.[36] Indeed, the identification of the witch with nature was universal in pre-history, where witchcraft was honoured as an immanent principle of fertility. Literature's inhospitableness to the witch-mother and the woman springs from, Paglia suggests, man's inability to control fertility, women and nature, all of which are seen as

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[35] J. Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Legend* (Chicago: Academy, 1997), p.170
[36] Camille Paglia, *Psychoanalysis and Women* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 86

'unknown and unknowable' dangers. [37]

Mists of Avalon stresses instead mythology's original identification of the witch and

nature. Male influences are fittingly marginalised from the main narrative: the hero of

English culture and history ends his life: 'not as [Morgaine's] enemy and the enemy of

[her] Goddess, but only as ... a dying man in need of the Mother's aid.'[38] Again, the

capitalisation of 'Mother' and the fact that she is referred to using the definite article

serves to elevate her to a unique position of divine authority that replaces any inferior

male god. Fittingly, the male contribution to the procreation that the witch dominates

is, as many feminist psychoanalysts have shown, momentary and transient.

Conception is, as Belsey argues, a pinpoint of time, another phallic peak of action.[39]

The 'incorporation' of Viviane with the spirit of the Goddess is something that no

man can comprehend; the pregnant woman is 'daemonically, devilishly complete.'[40]

She needs nothing and no-one. The 'incorporat[ing]' witch, like the pregnant woman,

brooding for months upon her own creation, is the pattern of all solipsism, and, as

Paglia suggests, the historical attribution of narcissism to woman, hinted at in the

repression of the fairy tale mirrors, becomes real and rebellious. Male bonding and

patriarchy, as symbolised by the 'Isle of Priests' rather than 'the true Holy Isle in the

dark world beyond our own', are the recourse to which man is forced by his terrible

sense of woman's power and her archetypal confederacy with nature.[41] In *Mists of*

Avalon at least, the witch's body, whether in the form of the fluidity of the Lady of the

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[37] Ibid p.87
[38] Bradley, *Mists of Avalon*, p. 402
[39] Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 11
[40] Paglia, p. 90
[41] Bradley, *Mists of Avalon*, p.403

Lake or in the incorporation of the Priestess of the Goddess, is a labyrinth which man cannot decipher or control, 'a walled garden, the medieval *hortus conclusus*, in which nature works its daemonic sorcery'.[42] In a revolutionary extension of radical feminism, Bradley presents the witch as the primeval fabricator, the real First Mother, turning 'a gob of refuse into a spreading web of sentient being, floating on the shaky umbilical by which she leashes every man.'[43]

'Beautiful Objects and Magic Mirrors': *Witch Hill*

In *Fantasy: The Art of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson argues that modern fantastic writing is largely preoccupied with vision and visibility, 'for it is structured around spectral imagery.'[44] It is, indeed, remarkable how many of the texts considered in the course of this thesis contain mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits or eyes that see things myopically, or distortedly, or out of focus, not only, as Jackson argues, to effect a transformation of 'the familiar into the unfamiliar', but also to explore a fraught female politic.[45] In addition to the texts already discussed, Lewis Carroll's Alice moves *through* the looking glass into a paraxial realm, where anything can happen. Vane, the narcissistic hero of George Macdonald's *Lilith* (1900), has access to his imaginary realm through the mirror in his bedroom: 'I touched the glass; it was impermeable ... I shifted and shifted the mirrors ... until at last ... things came right between them'.[46] In Valery Brussof's strange tale, *The Mirror*, a woman loses her identity when she is literally replaced by her mirror image, and she herself steps

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[42] Maud Ellman, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis and Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 57
[43] Paglia, p.90
[44] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Art of Subversion* (London: Palgrave, 1987), p. 56
[45] Ibid
[46] George Macdonald, *Lilith*, reprinted in Lewis Carroll (ed.), *Phantastes and Lilith* (London: Gollancz, 1962), p. 42

through into the area behind the mirror, an area she describes as 'this protracted actuality, separated from us by the smooth surface of glass, [which] drew me towards itself by a kind of intangible touch, dragged me forward, as to an abyss, a mystery'.[47] In each of these texts, the mirror device introduces an indeterminate area, where distractions and deformations of 'normal' perceptions become the norm, and at the heart of which, anxieties about the role and place of women seem to lurk.

However, the mirror has even more significant literary heritage in texts of witches and witchcraft. The fairy tales of the Grimms and Andrew Lang, and even the literature from the witch trials, contain stories of divination mirrors and enchanted glasses. And in the most famous case of all, the Wicked Queen's 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall', becomes an object of obsession and frustration as well as enchantment. Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Witch Hill*, produced three years later than *Mists of Avalon*, borrows heavily from fairy tales in its dependence on mirrors, looking glasses and portraits. Practically ignored by criticism on Bradley, *Witch Hill* is one of the most significant representations of witchcraft and female sexuality of its time. Desiring like her predecessor to be 'the fairest of them all', the witch Sara Latimer is haunted by the mirror's reflection. Language such as 'trapped in glass' and 'gilded female reflection' imply its role in female repression and containment.

The significance of female self-image as an instrument of self-revulsion and patriarchal control is highlighted by Gilbert and Gubar:

> Learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about – perhaps

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[47] Valery Brussof, *The Mirror* (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 65

even loathing of – her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphoric looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to 'reduce' her own body. In the nineteenth century ... this desire to be beautiful and 'frail' led to tight-lacing and vinegar-drinking. In our own era it has spawned innumerable diets and 'controlled' fasts, as well as the extraordinary phenomenon of teenage anorexia.[48]

But a far more subversive possibility exists behind the visible, echoing the witch's legacy of insurrection hidden in the work of female writers as diverse as Enid Blyton and Sylvia Plath. *Witch Hill* is a tale of one woman's gradual acknowledgement and acceptance of the witch within herself.

There is, however, a marked contrast between Sara Latimer and the presentation of witchcraft in Warner's *Lolly Willowes*. Firstly, Bradley names the witch from the beginning, suggesting the liberation her legacy portends :

> It was easy to believe she was a witch. But the original witches were supposed to be real glamour girls, weren't they? Isn't that where the world *glamour* originally came from? Look, Sara, it's like looking in the mirror. It was, indeed, very much like looking into a mirror. The woman in the painting was tall, slight, full-figured – a bit more so than I – and wore the typical Victorian high-necked shirtwaist, ruffled at the neck with white. But the face was my own, pointed into a slender triangle of wide forehead and narrow chin, with straight, dark eyebrows, wide green eyes – Roderick had said they made me look like a cat – and loose, wavy red-blonde hair. The

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[48] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Shakespeare's Sisters* (London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 99

colouring was unusual enough that I'd long given up trying to wear makeup – I just looked painted. It occurred to me that if Father had grown up in a house with this painting in the hall, he must have been reminded every day, that one of the ill-fated Sara Latimers had, indeed, been born into his family. Yet he had never spoken of it until the family tragedy had broke down his reticence. A mystery indeed! [49]

Like the painted portrait in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait of Sara Latimer's ancestor functions as an iconographical establishment of both similarity and difference, illustrating the possibility of the self as other, and also the potential for the duplicity and multiplicity of selves. Sara initially attempts to differentiate herself from the witch in the painting, by referring to her as 'the woman', with whom she shares the same name, by objectification, 'the face', and by contrast: 'a bit more so than I'. These comparisons also function to detract from the obvious sexuality of the witch in the painting, as Sara's analysis makes her less sexual and less threatening.

However, the fact that the face is '[her] own' merges the two women/ witches back together, until it becomes possible to see the witch in the portrait as the previous Sara Latimer, who represents dark forces, compared with the knowable heroine from whose perspective the narrative is told; the witch to Sara's innocent angel; the whore to her virgin. The witch, like in so many previous representations, becomes the demonic double of Everywoman, lurking unseen behind the mirror. In a culture that equates the real with the seen and gives dominance to the eye over other senses, the witch, unseen and so un-real, is given a subversive function. Knowledge and reason

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[49] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p.43

are established through the power of the *look*, through, as Bersani argues, 'the eye' and 'the I' of the human subject, whose 'relation to objects is structured through his field of vision'.[50] The witch, then, suggests the instability of the real and systems of thought dependent on it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the forces of patriarchy represented within the text attempt time and again to resurrect that real and to restore the forms of certainty that the witch's presence disrupts. Brian Standish, the doctor and representative of male Western culture, the hero of the text, tries to impose an etymological framework: 'Isn't that where the word *glamour* originally came from?' in addition to restoring the male gaze: 'Look, Sara, it's like looking ...' The vilified ex-boyfriend Roderick resorts also to the male gaze in his physical, objectifying descriptions of her, whilst Sara's father remains at odds with the text both in life and death: in life, he resorts to silence and secret by denying the existence of his sister and ancestors, all of whom were witches. His death means that such secrets are never revealed and the presence of witchcraft remains unspoken. The witch's mirror defies their control and objectification, however, going beyond the conventional suppression of the fairy tale mirror. By presenting images of the self in another space that is both familiar and unfamiliar, the mirror provides versions of the self transformed into another, becoming something or someone else. In the case of the witch, that someone is always more powerful.

But the witch's appropriation of the mirror has even greater consequences, as there

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[50] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 10

must be a sense in which Sara's experiences, caught between mirrors, portraits and

glasses, effects a transformation of her self. She is not just split into woman and witch.

The witch takes precedence and dominates in subsequent chapters. The timing and

location of her maturity into witchcraft suggest the point at which her former self,

body and subjectivity are altered; this language invokes the Lacanian mirror stage:

> There was a small marble sink in the corner, with ornamental bronze taps,
>
> where I could brush my teeth without going downstairs, if I chose. An
>
> enormous wavering mirror over it gave me back my own face, my still
>
> windblown hair puffed loose until it looked uncannily like Sara the
>
> First's. Damn Sara the First! If she'd been the witch my father said, she was
>
> probably already well damned without any interference from me...In the
>
> corner was a huge dressing table, high on ornately carved legs, marble-topped,
>
> with an old fashioned, ivory-backed comb, brush and hand mirror. I sat down
>
> for a moment on the low bench, looking into the big, wavering, tilted mirror
>
> above, picking up the hand mirror. *For such an old lady, Aunt Sara had had a*
>
> *passion for mirrors*. Scattered on the vast marble top were small bottles and
>
> jars. Many of them were silver-topped or cut glass, all very beautiful and quite
>
> expensive. The image in the mirror wavered and for a moment it seemed that
>
> Aunt Sara's painted face looked out at me. The lips were moist, red, and
>
> parted; the hair sensuously tumbling, long around the shoulders; the eyes
>
> gleamed green, and the shoulders were bare above small, hard, pointed breasts
>
> —
>
> I raised my head at Brian's footsteps; he set the overnight case down beside
>
> me, and came and stood behind me, two hands on my shoulders, his face
>
> looming closer over mine in the mirror, and for a moment it seemed that his

face, too, flowed and twisted, until it seemed that a naked man stood there – I

wrenched my eyes away from the illusion, flushing.[51]

The number of references to mirrors is astonishing; there are hand mirrors, wall

mirrors, reflective marble surfaces, silver tops and cut glass, all of which seem to

enhance the significance of the witch's mirror scene. The mirror stage is, for Freud

and Lacan, positioned in the transitional Oedipal stage, between primary narcissism

(love for self) and attachment to loved objects (love for other), that is, between the

first and second stages of development. Freud sees the child as existing initially in a

state of 'un-differentiation', experiencing 'natural self love, un-separated, and not yet

distinguishing between self and other'.[52] This distinction 'appears' when a libidinal

drive is directed from the self to an object external to it. What is formed in this shift is

recognition of the self as object, as it is seen in the mirror, 'the mirror constituted by

the looks of others.' This self is Freud's 'ego', and becomes the means of self-

definition and identification.[53]

The mirror phase, as Lacan argues, effects a shift from 'the body in fragments' and

'asubjectivity of total presence', to the idea of a whole body in a unified, 'constructed'

subjectivity.[54] Ironically, it is with this sense of a unified, constructed self that Sara

begins the novel. She is a docile female, 'unable to light a kerosene lamp', and

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[51] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 90

[52] Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*, extract reprinted in Peter Gay (ed.), *A Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 45

[53] Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane, *In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria and Feminism* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 13

[54] Maud Ellman, p. 96

submissive to the patriarchal forces around her.[55] At the start of this extract, before

she becomes locked between the mirrors, she is appropriately terrified by the prospect

of a witch's house, relieved by the presence of Brian Standish and by the fact that she

'could brush [her] teeth without going downstairs.'[56]:

> 'I'm sorry; I know you're a doctor, and if you have a patient waiting, I know I
>
> mustn't keep you. Only if you haven't – I wish you'd stay and at least go
>
> through the place with me. I feel like a ninny to be scared – I mean it's been
>
> my family home for I forget how many generations, but still -'
>
> 'If that's the way you feel, you can't get rid of me...'[57]

Her passivity and weakness constitute not just what Spack calls 'appropriate female

behaviour', but also a precise embodiment of adult ego formation in so far as it

establishes traditional gender roles.[58]

But something alters in the course of the scene. The dualism of the woman and witch

creates a fragmentary body and identity. Sara and the witch merge into 'image[s]', 'the

lips', 'the eyes'; 'my own face' becomes 'Sara's painted face'. The choice of the

indirect object furthers the sense of confusion, showing no discrepancy between the

self and the other. The witch reverses the mirror stage, reconstructing a primal

narcissism, and returning, as Jackson argues in relation to all fantasy, to 'the paradise

lost by the fall'.[59] And there is much to emphasise this sense of primary narcissism

and indifferentiation in Sara's behaviour. Her own descriptions of the witch's

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[55] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 22
[56] Ibid p.37
[57] Ibid
[58] Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Prentice Hall, 2000), p. 107
[59] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy*, p. 75

reflection are particularly seductive: 'hair sensuously tumbling long' functions on a sonic, as well as visual level of eroticism, while 'lips ... moist, red and parted' is an overtly sexual metaphor.[60] In the extract about the painting, Sara the woman tried to distance herself from her sexual other; here, the two are merged into a self that is neither subject nor object, and which evades final definition. The consequence of challenging the cultural construction of the ego is a powerful subversion.

Where Sara the woman was once submissive to the all-powerful hero of the text, she returns to an original narcissism and the associated freedom to explore natural desires. She conjures in the glass ' a naked man', with a face that 'flowed and twisted'; by objectifying the male, she destroys the male subject identity; and in her 'flushing', creates an orgasmic, primal pleasure that cannot be described in language, hence her dependence on the hyphen, broken sentences and multiple voices stressed by the italics. Kristeva's exposition of Lacan's theories views the mirror stage, and the subject's insertion in a symbolic order, as inseparable from the acquisition of language, 'syntax', by which social order is created and sustained.[61] The symbolic is, for her, 'social order constructed by discrete units of meaning, by a network of signifiers, and is opposed to the imaginary, which is without - before - signifiers'. To break the symbolic by dissolution or deformation of its language (or syntax) is taken by Kristeva to be a radical, subversive activity. And it is only Sara's immersion into a world of witchcraft, mirrors and narcissism that permits such a feminist subversion.

One of the most important aspects of Freud's writings on the Mirror Stage was the

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[60] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p.49
[61] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 16

presence of a primal dyad, in which the infant was merged with the mother, before ego

formation. With the help of the father's intervention, the child 'has to break this

symbiosis in order to establish the limits of its body and desires'.[62] According to this

model, the significance of patriarchal authority cannot be over-estimated in terms of

its ability to bring about a unified, constructed subjectivity and is equally important in

restricting the witch's feminist subversion. *Witch Hill* features several of Sara

Latimer's 'fathers'. At the beginning of the novel, she relies heavily upon her father's

support after the death of her brother and mother. The influence of Roderick, her first

lover, is equally felt, with constant references to his controlling male gaze that

permeate her own thoughts: 'Roderick had said that they made me look like a cat';

'Roderick used to say that no-one would like me if ...'[63] Dr Maclaren, her university

professor, provides the typically male voice of reason and repression during the return

of Sara's 'witch memory' and her descent into a cult of sex magic: 'I wouldn't pay

that much attention to all that old hokum...'[64] And perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the

hero of the tale who, after the death of Sara's father, takes over the patriarchal role.

Brian Standish is the local (but Boston- educated) doctor, who accompanies her to

Witch Hill on her first night, and, in keeping with the romance hero he becomes,

provides her with groceries, transportation, light, warmth and, ultimately, love. As the

text's representative of western medicine, thought, logic and reason, he dismisses

witchcraft as a psychiatric disease: 'Well, you have been under a lot of pressure,

lately...'[65] Indeed, though for a while, the text toys with the idea of a feminist sexual

rebellion through witchcraft, it is worth noting that, as discussed later, textual closure

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[62] Freud, p. 90
[63] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 20, p. 55
[64] Ibid p. 60
[65] Ibid p. 88

reinforces patriarchal attitudes and restores Standish as the hero of the tale.[66]

It is perhaps surprising, then, that, immediately after the aforementioned mirror scene, when the heroine and hero consummate their relationship, it is Sara the witch, rather than Brian the doctor, who is dominant. In a primary, narcissistic stage, Sara is free from what Lacan describes as 'wilderness ... decoy... trap'.[67] Although later in the novel she does oscillate between her former self and her identity as witch, at this point, she is surprisingly controlling. The magic of 'enchantment', of dividing herself is exactly the state of 'jubilation' that Lacan describes, allowing her a sexual freedom that not only can undress a man before her eyes, but also gives her control of the sex act[68]:

> There was none of the tenderness I had always desired before. There was
> nothing gentle or romantic. It was a wild, frantic, almost animal coupling,
> going on and on and on until I thought I should explode in the frenzy of it, and
> wild thoughts spun in my head ... *back, back from the darkness ... Asmodeus,*
> *Azanoor, dark above me ... my body to the beast and my soul to hell...*
> with the frantic writhing of my own hips, the incessant drumming beat of his
> movements ... then I heard his savage shout of exultation and my own scream
> of mindless delight, mingling with it and drowning out the final roll of
> thunder.

The textual closure of a marriage and children and the emphasis on the relationship between the hero and heroine suggest that *Witch Hill* is, fundamentally, a romance;

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[66] Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 29

[67] Jacques Lacan, *Female Sexuality* trans. Jacqueline Rose, (New York : Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 107

[68] Ibid

however, Sara's first sex scene as a witch differs greatly from the moans and euphemisms of classic formula romance: what Coward describes as 'the bruised lip syndrome'.[69] 'Coupling' implies an equality in the sex act, furthered by the description of a climax that prioritises neither one orgasm nor the other. The verbs of action, 'exploding', 'writhing', 'biting', traditionally belonging to the male, here belong to the witch. She gets exactly what she 'had always desired', perhaps for the first time in literary history; the supposed female requisite of 'tenderness' during sex is relegated to a previous life of sexual submission. Now a witch, she sees the purpose of sex as female pleasure, rather than reproduction or the fulfillment of 'natural male desires'.[70] The male is an arbitrary by-stander, excluded from her 'dark ... hell[ish]' desires. So the witch, in this scene at least, functions to exclude the male, the agent of patriarchy, allowing a return to indifferentiation and, therefore, to follow the reversal of the mirror stage trope, the reformation of Lacan's primal bond or dyad.

What becomes apparent in Sara's incantations to the world of the witch, '*back, back from the darkness ... Asmodeus, Azanoor, dark above me*', is the presence of something beyond conventional forms of representation. The primal dyad, then, is formed, between the woman and the witch, creating the witch not just as a darker 'other' but also as a mother. The return of Sara's 'witch memory', her acceptance of her own sexuality and her descent into witchcraft must all be linked to the reforming of her union with the witch, until neither is separate from the other.[71] The repeated references to portraits that are 'like looking in a mirror', inherited houses, books,

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[69] Rosalind Coward, *Patriarchal Precedents* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 251
[70] Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, p. 307
[71] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p 80

mirrors and ointments, the apparent legacy of Sara the First, the merging of names and identities and the prioritising of female desire all reveal a matriarchal bond and system of order. The significance of the Great Priestess, particularly in the form of Wicca that the villagers worship, similarly suggests feminine authority. Like that of Morgaine and her priestesses in *The Mists of* Avalon, the divine maternity and matriarchy of a pagan religion that pre-dates patriarchy is here revealed to devastating effect. Arthur, Merlin and the men of *Witch Hill* become symbolic of men of the Western world, unable to challenge the new activist feminism, and the witch who represents it.

And that challenge becomes even more frenzied as the text progresses. Sara Latimer's baptism into a world of witchcraft is marked by her participation in the Witches' Sabbath, evoking a sense of female transgression, a spectacle of 'trans, a trance and trace', associated with the monstrous, dislocated elements of the fragmentary, carnival-esque female body[72]:

> Bodiless hands raised my body, and with the touch I felt myself flying upward through the colourless astral light.
>
> > 'How shall we travel?'
> >
> > 'Fly, fly! The broomsticks await!
>
> The room vanished. Someone thrust a broomstick between my hands. Of course. How else would a witch fly to the Black Sabbath? I climbed astride it. It felt soft, like a great phallic organ between my hands, too enormous for entering, but nevertheless come to welcome and comfort me. I stroked it longingly ...

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[72] Paglia, p.219

'Ride out! Ride out! Sisters and brothers of the Dark One, take to the sky![73]

In her feminist treatise of the seventies, Andrea Dworkin draws on the image of the 'trans-formed broomstick' as 'an almost archetypal symbol of womanhood, as the pitchfork was of manhood'.[74]

Indeed, there must be a sense in which the broomstick, for all witches in history, provided what Cixous described as 'an orgasmic freedom', liberating her from housework, domestic ties and oppression.[75] Tibby, the bi-sexual witch who brings about Sara's initiation, describes the attraction:

'Let's face it, what else is there for women here? I suspect witchcraft got its hold in Salem, and other places, because it was the only way women could be *people* – not just sleeping partners, slaves and child-bearers for some damn man, some ignorant brute ... I can imagine how a woman who had had seven children in six years ... might want her husband impotent for a while.'[76]

Bradley creates a sense of transgressive freedom in Sara's appropriation of the broomstick, actually referring to it as 'a great phallic organ between my hands'. The reference to 'thrust' is equally subversive, replacing the expected legs with hands, suggesting sexual control and dominance. Echoing Margaret Murray's language of subversion, the witch comes to own and control the phallus, using it purely 'to welcome and comfort', for female pleasure. Flying too marks a subversive departure from the restrictive boundaries of place and property, of fact and fantasy, of truth and

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[73] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 76
[74] Dworkin, p. 43
[75] Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 54
[76] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 63

fiction. So *Witch Hill*'s project seems to echo and intensify the radical feminism of its era. The witch is, once more, a separatist female force, a primeval power that can return at any time, in any generation, to unleash its insurrection. Both Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* and *Witch Hill* construct the witch as a transgressive, fragmentary and powerful female body that recalls the power of the pagan age to challenge remaining patriarchal constructions and repressions.

Witches as Romantic Heroines

> Witches, of course, could ... fly on broomsticks, and often did. Before going to the Sabbath, they anointed their bodies with a mixture of belladonna and aconite, which caused delirium, hallucination and gave the sensation of flying.[77]

Bradley echoes Dworkin's analysis entirely in *Witch Hill*, in her narrative of drug-taking and hallucination. But the deliberate 'anointing' and pleasurable 'delirium' that Dworkin describes implies the witch's control. Bradley's version is more complex. Sara takes the belladonna unwittingly, and is poisoned. Despite recalling the ideas, transgressions and 'orgasmic freedoms' of Dworkin, Cixous and Daly, and appropriating subversive feminist images such as the mirror and the Great Mother, there is little female rebellion in Sara's experience of drugs and of the Sabbath:

> The words sprung out into meaningless gibberish, and I heard myself crying out words that made no sense. I heard the shrill cries of the jackdaw, syllables like nonsense, echoing and reverberating. A strange form bent over me where I lay still motionless. He leaned over, gripped me briefly and entered

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[77] Dworkin, p.219

me, penetrating deeply and roughly. I gasped and cried out, but someone

behind me was holding my hands. It was very fast and all over in a few

seconds; he reeled away from me and another dark form took his place.

It seemed that this was repeated endlessly in the next few days or hours – or

minutes? – a   heavy male form would loom above me, all eyes and huge

erection; then would come the harsh thrust, without tenderness, between my

legs, the rough mindless movement, the explosion ... I lay in a dark daze of

horror, swaying in mindless terror and pain ... but then, against my will, what

was happening down there in the darkness began to reach me, to rouse me, and

I began to respond ... until the lust of the witch expended itself. [78]

The location of a gang rape in a text that, on one level at least, is formula romance, is

shocking. Hidden behind the violation is more than merely the witch's (or woman's)

physical terror of 'hurt and humiliation, [but] a fear of psychic disintegration, or an

essential dismemberment, a fear of loss ... of the self which is not confined to the

victim alone'.[79] Although some psychologists see the rape fantasy as a positive

articulation of female desire – passivity as an active choice, as suggested by 'the lust

of the witch' – its appropriation here seems appalling.[80] Although it is impossible to

tell whether this scene was female sexual fantasy or violent, criminal reality, the

violence and 'bruising' and 'holding [her] hands', along with male 'thrust[ing]' and

female 'weak[ness]' indicate a force that women are powerless to prevent. The

heroine's body is re-appropriated into a patriarchal script. The violent attack of the

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[78] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 107
[79] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Virago, 1998), p. 20
[80] Mariana Valvere, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1987), p.196

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sabbat reflects dominant ideologies of masculine rights even as the heroine's supposed 'pleasure' subverts them.

Indeed, the gendered subjectivity of readers may inform those relations. Readers may be interpreting what they will come to believe is true about male-female relationships; a form of ideological manipulation amplified in a text that apparently embraces radical feminism. Elaine Scarry sees 'the infliction of pain as an attempt by the torturer to project or inscribe perceptions onto the seemingly inert body of the tortured'.[81] Fittingly, the threateningly sexual body of the witch becomes substantiated; her painful reaction to being 'penetrated', is normal, and her body becomes 'powerless' because it expresses the pain of 'a dark daze of horror, swaying in mindless terror'. The violated body of the witch re-acquires the certainty and the ability to be 'known' by patriarchy that was dispersed by its rebellious fragmentation and by the multiplicity of the pagan goddess.

The image of the tortured, violated witch at a time of supposed female rebellion is once more substantiated and controlled because male characters and readers see her hurt. Violence toward the heroine, whether in terms of mutilation or violation, subordinates her body to masculine authority. Patriarchal perceptions are inscribed onto the nameless heroine, so that she becomes the perpetrator of social corruption, the 'wicked witch' who deserves the punishment she incurs. The male attack demystifies the threat of chaos and excess that the sexualised body portends, thus inscribing it as intelligible, social, male-ordered text. Violence, rape and 'romance'

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[81] Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, pp 22-3

become textual weapons for the assertion and perpetuation of phallic power. So while

elements of the novel promote female sexual liberation and subversion, the overriding

action of the narrative suppresses the potent elements. The witch may be allowed to

have sexual control over her broomstick, but she is always made submissive to the

men of the text. There is an implicit tension between subversive elements presented

and the dominant textual closure of the romance novel, which ignores the rebellious

legacy of witchcraft and re-asserts masculine certainties. While writers such as

Dworkin, Daly and Cixous posit the witch as a powerful 'other' of the victimized

woman, Bradley's textual strategy reforms the dualism, making both women equally

powerless. Representations of the witch begin to become more problematic.

The rape of the witch, reversing the phallic control and matriarchal authority invoked

by her pagan ancestry and by women writers for over one hundred years, subjugates

her body to male control. In an age of radical feminism, the witch's power is reduced.

Violation rewrites her dangerous body, reflecting the total personal annihilation still

experienced by victims and perpetuated by patriarchal authority. But the sense of

submission is intensified by the genre of *Witch Hill*. In the midst of hallucinations,

lesbian and gang rape, it is easy to overlook the fact that the dominant textual strategy

of Bradley's novel is that of formula romance. Her narrative follows the conventional

format of passive heroine and active hero who meet, fall in love, experience problems

from outside forces, resolve them, marry and are consigned to the obligatory 'happily

ever after'. The witch was a familiar trope of sixteenth and seventeenth century

romance narratives, but predominantly as a facilitator of love, desire and fertility;

creating the witch as the passive heroine places her in a unique position, forcing her

into the realm of Snow White, rather than the Wicked Queen, the victimised female

rather than the rebellious Other, controlled rather than controlling.[82]

The mode that Hollibaugh sees as a 'radical hope through passion and pleasure' turns a tale of shocking violation into one of legitimate and conventional repression.[83] The analysis of sexual 'pleasure' offered by formula romance serves to normalise and legitimise a whole panoply of subordinate social relations, which as Modleski suggests, only 'induces or intensifies' women's problems. [84]Judge David Wild, in the summing up of a rape trial in 1986, told his court: 'women who say no do not always mean no. It is not just a question of saying no. It is a question of how she says it, how she shows it and makes it clear. If she doesn't want it, she only has to keep her legs shut and there would be marks of force.' [85] The sex scene that takes place between Sara the Witch and Brian Standish at the close of the novel is in direct contrast to the female erotic pleasure and lack of 'gentleness' that once articulated female liberation.

While witchcraft once enabled the existence of female desire and sexuality outside the repressive structures of family and marriage, making the witch a wife brings that desire back under control:

> His mouth met mine, tongue probing in a long kiss, then he raised himself on
> two hands and looked down at me, smiling and amused.

> 'Don't be in a hurry, love. We've got all night. Let's make it last.'

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[82] Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 359
[83] Amber Hollibaugh, 'Desire for the Future: Radical Hope in Passion and Pleasure' in Stevie Jackson and Sue Scott (eds), *Feminism and Sexuality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 70
[84] Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, p.67
[85] Ibid

His mouth moved sensuously over my naked body, kissing my breasts, my

belly, my thighs, the creases of my knees. He picked up my feet, nibbled

briefly at each toe in turn. When he finally came into me, it was with infinite

gentleness, moving for a long time, slowly, imperceptibly, with long pauses

and lengthy kisses, until I moaned with need and growing hunger. We

moved together more and more closely, exploding with a climax at almost the

same instant ...[86]

Sex dramatically alters the power balance between men and women; the true role of

the witch - and, therefore, all women - is reinforced: 'I don't know anything'.[87]

Although Belsey argues that desire deconstructs Cartesian opposition, the female

mind and body here unite, willingly declaring the woman a blank-paged receptor to be

written on by the hero.[88] The autonomous witch of the first two hundred pages

submits to the passive romance heroine in the final three, and can only articulate

passive verbs of emotion, such as 'surprised ... relieved'. The language of sex creates

a social subordination and personal powerlessness; patriarchal ideologies of female

behaviour become part of the language of arousal. It is the woman who 'shivers' and

'trembles'. By the time of penetration, symbolised by '...' and '-', she cannot

appropriate the language of masculine signification and order, so that '...[to] answer,

she kisse[s] him'.[89]

But this total subordination goes beyond the formula romance trope of female

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[86] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 202
[87] Ibid
[88] Belsey, *Desire*, p.36
[89] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 202

weakness and male strength; the language of foreplay is consciously replaced by the language of parental protection. Texts such *The Mists of Avalon* create the witch as a dominant mother figure, a Magna Dea and progenitor. But here, it is the witch who becomes the child. The hero undresses her 'carefully' and 'wrap[s] the coverlet around her', which, along with adverbs such as 'tenderly', transforms the heroine into child and the hero into 'unreconstructed patriarch'.[90] The adoration of the all-powerful male, which in a society of equal opportunities can only be invoked through rape and violation, reflects the adoration of the father by the small child. The primal dyad of mother and child, witch and woman is banished. In its place, the witch's adoration is based on the father as all-powerful, before disillusionment and the struggle for autonomy set in, and indicates a strong infantile fantasy at work.[91] Patriarchal authority is re-affirmed with a reference to the 'pre-ordained moment', which acknowledges the presence of a higher, masculine force.

Although representations of the witch in the era of second-wave feminism do manage to subvert some misogynist conventions, sex re-orders its chaos. The splinters of the formula romance, shattered by the potential for female rebellion, are rejoined. Romance, sex and patriarchy are revealed to be mutually enhancing. Radway emphasises the importance of the happy-ever-after ending. [92]To experience the same sense of 'completion', the reader must construct for herself the hero as patriarch and father. Yet generating the woman as child is more problematic. This inevitable transition actually functions to absolve the heroine of any sexual responsibility.

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[90] Ellman, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, p. 53
[91] Ibid
[92] Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 60

'See[ing] white dots of light' recalls tales of near death experiences, lights in tunnels and the angelic.[93] The witch mother, whose flesh is corrupt by definition, and the lascivious whore who devours men, 'dies' during intercourse. Her seduction kills her. Sex with the hero creates a sense of rebirth, bestowing upon the heroine a new-born innocence. And by the end of the novel, the autonomous, aggressive witch resembles the Victorian Angel in the House. The unrestrained voracity of the polluting, pagan body is brought under control, and the witch is permitted only the passive eroticism of the object of male desire, and imprisoned in marriage and domesticity. While the heroine's baptism into a world of the Goddess seems to give her control, the more subtle textual strategy and the overriding presence of the phallic 'Horned One' return the wayward woman to patriarchal control. In the end, sex reaffirms ideas of romance and ideologies of romantic fiction. The moment of climax, union and flashing lights restores masculine power and authority for a society that had proclaimed the death of gender inequality.

Although *Witch Hill*, on one hand, opened up subversive possibilities for transcendence and transgression, the ultimate consequence of Bradley's narrative is to kill the witch. The text's conclusion, spoken of course in the patriarchal voice of medical and police authority, explains away the town's supernatural events as imaginary; the witch cult is revealed as a drug-induced orgy, where visions of goddesses, 'Horned Ones', broomsticks and flying are hallucinatory symptoms rather than literal or even metaphorical liberationist fantasy. Matthew Hale, the Great Priestess's leader of the coven, is killed by the hero (in self defence, of course) and the

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[93] Bradley, *Witch Hill*, p. 203

police arrest the members of the cult. In a remarkable case of theoretical déja-vu, Sara Latimer's witchcraft is clarified in terms of 'shock and reaction…[to] the traumatic events [she] went through' following the death of her parents. Once more, witchcraft becomes nothing more than an exemplary disease of the imagination.

In *The Mists of Avalon*, Marion Zimmer Bradley evoked (albeit temporarily) the power of the pagan goddess at the heart of feminist critical texts of the age, perpetuating a notion of female authority and autonomy that would, in coming decades permeate and revolutionise all aspects of women's lives. By the time of *Witch Hill*, the power is mute and once more, the witch must die. As earlier suggested, Mary Daly attributed the power of the witch to the definition of her as *eccentric*, on the margins of a society that she never fully inhabits. Bringing the female self inside the social circle and giving her equal political and legal rights dilutes the power of the witch as female other. Although the feminist utopian subversion of the World Mother is hinted at here, it can never, as I shall argue in relation to cultural texts of the 1990s, again be fully realised :

> Brian told me, over a hasty breakfast, what had happened.
>
> 'I received a message from you,' he said. 'It was full of apologies for the other day' - he looked away. 'You said that Matthew had hypnotised you and made you do it. Was that true?'
>
> 'Yes,' I said firmly. I knew now that I had begun to renounce any thought of the coven when I met Brian, that – Aunt Sara? – was gone forever. *A witch cannot love.*
>
> *I love Brian.*

Therefore I am not a witch. [94]

[94] Bradley, p. 253

Chapter 6:

From Salem to Sunnydale and Back Again: Witchcraft and Popular Culture in the 1990s

We pursue objects which sustain our fantasies, but the origins of FANTASY

... are unknown and can only ever by encountered as a boundary beyond

which nothing can be said.[1]

> - Ellie Ragland Sullivan, 'Death Drive (Lacan)'

Into each generation, a Slayer is born. One Girl, in all the world, a Chosen

One. One female born with the strength and skill to hunt vampires, to stop the

spread of their evil.[2]

> - Nancy Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Popular culture is the politics of the twenty-first century.[3]

> - *Scream 3*

Witches, Vampires and Post-Feminism

The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* franchise first began in 1995, with the release of the

film that later spawned a successful television series, ranges of science fiction and

teenage novels, and a spin-off television series, *Angel*. Its successes extend beyond the

commercial, however; *Buffy* has been widely regarded as one of the iconic texts in the

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[1] Ellie Ragland Sullivan, 'Death Drive (Lacan)' in Elizabeth Wright (ed.), *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 58
[2] Nancy Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Welcome to the Hellmouth* (New York: Bantam, 1994), p.i
[3] Gale Weathers (dir), *Scream III* (Columbia Pictures: 2000)

academic study of popular culture which gained prominence in the same period.

Whilst Cultural Studies has rightfully acknowledged the significance of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in terms of postmodernism and post-feminism, literary academics have universally ignored the texts themselves, created by Nancy Holder. And yet, their unique location, between media, in merging film, television series and literature, and between genres - science fiction, the gothic and teenage fiction - seems significant. Furthermore, in terms of their construction of witchcraft, the books themselves go beyond the stereotypes present in the television series.

The dominance of the vampire implicit in the title would seem to exclude the witch. But the imagery of vampires that pervades the *Buffy* texts is not derived from European vampiric folklore. Rather, it is a blend of borrowed literary (essentially post-Stoker and post-Rice) conceptions of the vampire, and, to a much greater extent, American and Western European ideas about witchcraft and Satan, especially as they were imagined from the late medieval period through the Inquisition. From a functionalist perspective, both witchcraft and vampirism have related social functions; the complementary distribution of the two seems to correspond to a greater or lesser degree to the distribution of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.[4] It was in Catholic countries where witches and heretics were subjected to the terrors of the Inquisition. And it was during the Inquisition that another class of 'slayers' came to be known, the *benandanti*, who were good witches, reputed to be able to leave their bodies during sleep, in an altered state of consciousness, and go off to fight their evil

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[4] Rhonda B. Wilcox and David Livery, *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Lanham: Rowan and Middlefield, 2001), p. 319

counterparts at witches' covens and sabbats.[5] These witches, or 'slayers', were

marked: they were born, according to the testimony of the trials in which they were

accused of consorting with demons, with cauls, which are amniotic membranes,

enveloping the skull at birth; Buffy, as this chapter's epigraph indicates, is marked as

'the chosen one' from birth. So the character of Buffy, apparently sent to destroy all

forms of evil antagonism within society, borrows much both from Eastern European

concerns with the vampire and Western European fears of the witch.

Although Buffy performs the role of a good witch, she never rides a broomstick nor

wears a pointy black hat. In the tradition of the female victim of the horror and fan-fic

genre, Buffy, in both the television series (where she is played by actress, Sarah

Michelle Gellar) and in the books, is beautiful. With long blonde hair, a thin, petite

frame and blemish-free complexion, she opposes conventional identification with the

witch and conforms to male ideals of femininity. In order to interpret popular cultural

texts such as *Buffy* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, we need to understand their

political and ideological background. Sarah Curtis-Fawley, feminist activist and

writer of the late 1990s has commented on the social interpretation of Buffy; that girls

who struggle to embody these ideals risk ruining their self-esteem and health:

'Replacing Barbie with Buffy is clearly not the victory that feminism hoped for.'[6] In

their book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*, Jennifer

Baumgardner and Amy Richards define the third wave as 'the women who were

[5] Carlo Ginsburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 17
[6] Sarah Curtis-Fawley, cited in Elise Kac Belford, *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000), p. 24

reared in the wake of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s'.[7] These women were born after 1960 and came of age in the eighties and nineties; their experiences were formed by similar social conditions at approximately the same point in their lives and they hold a common interpretive framework shaped by their historical circumstances. Post-feminist ideologies and politics become particularly relevant in the study of witches in popular cultural texts, precisely because they inform relations between women and witches. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* are cultural products of late twentieth-century society, distanced from the radical feminism of earlier decades. Such a reduction in the need for subversion locates the witch problematically.

Like the second wave before them, third wave feminists are a political generation defined by common exposure to the pressure of shared problems. As Barbara Findlen, who was among the first to explore the third wave, states in the introduction to her anthology *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*:

> We have been shaped by the events and circumstances of our times: AIDS, the erosion of reproductive rights ... the backlash against women, the skyrocketing divorce rate, the movement towards multiculturalism and greater global awareness, the emergence of the lesbian and gay rights movement, a greater overall awareness of sexuality, and the feminist movement itself.[8]

Late twentieth-century feminist theorists Baumgardner and Richards contend that the third wave's goals derive from analysing how these issues affect their personal lives,

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[7] Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002), p. 76

[8] Barbara Findlen, *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (New York: Pandora, 2002), p. 56

and that these issues are taken on by the third wave in addition to continuing work on

the issues identified by the second wave, such as domestic abuse or economic

equality.[9] Although third wave feminists are often seen as apolitical by their mothers'

generation, the authors argue that women of the third wave are in fact leading very

feminist lives, but their definition of what it means to be a feminist has changed.

The third wave of feminism is often thought to have been initiated by the Anita Hill-

Clarence Thomas hearings in 1991 when, as Naomi Wolf, the third wave's version of

Gloria Steinem in terms of her looks and mass media appeal, explains, the

'genderquake' began.[10] In July, 1991, President George Bush nominated Clarence

Thomas, a conservative African-American appeals court judge, to the Supreme Court.

Many African-American and Civil Rights organizations opposed the appointment of

Thomas on the grounds of his conservative political beliefs. Women's groups were

equally concerned about the possibility that Thomas would rule against women's

reproductive rights, specifically the right to legal abortion. When Senate confirmation

hearings began, Anita Hill, a law professor at the University of Oklahoma, came

forward with accusations that Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her. Hill

charged that Thomas harassed her with inappropriate discussion of sexual acts and

pornographic films after she rebuffed his advances. A media frenzy quickly arose

around Hill's allegations and Thomas's denials, but the Senate voted fifty-two to forty-

eight to confirm Clarence Thomas as associate justice of the Supreme Court.

While Wolf's analysis refers specifically to events in America, the reverberations of

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[9] Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, p. 67
[10] Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions* (London: Chatto and Windus), p. 203

this 'quake' were felt worldwide. Increased satellite television, the beginnings of the internet and the gradual 'Americanisation' of British television ensured that radical events in the United States were soon 'world events'. Wolf refers to the

> abrupt shift in the balance of power between US women and men initiated by
> the Supreme Court confirmation hearings and the unprecedented feminist
> political action they brought about ... something critical to the sustenance of
> patriarchy died in the confrontation and something new was born.[11]

Wolf argues that the two years following the court hearings were rocked by unprecedented struggles over gender issues, including the William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson rape trials. In 1992, more women ran for office and came forward with sexual harassment charges against men running for office. Deborah Siegel, a feminist who has written extensively about the third wave, also sees this time as fundamental to its development, noting that the Clarence Thomas hearings, the Rodney King beating, and the passage of anti-abortion legislation in some states resulted in a political coming of age and a 'remarkable resurgence of grassroots student activism, young feminist conferences, and a host of new or newly revitalized social action organizations and networks led largely by young women'.[12]

The aftershocks were felt equally on the other side of the Atlantic. The 1990s might well be remembered as the decade of Girl Culture and, in Great Britain particularly, of Girl Power. New phrases began sounding in the air and new images surfacing in our media, moving popular culture in a decidedly more youthful and feminine direction.

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[11] Ibid p. 209
[12] Deborah Siegel, *Young Feminists Take on the Family* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 303

In 1994, Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* helped put the issue of teen girls on the national cultural agenda. Indicting our 'media-saturated culture' for 'poisoning' our girls, the book sold 1.6 million copies.[13] In music, phrases such as 'Girl Power', first articulated by the underground 'Riot Grrls', moved into the mainstream with the international if short-lived phenomenon of the Spice Girls, adored by very young girls (if reviled by almost everyone else). 'By sheer bulk,' according to one studio executive, 'young girls are driving cultural tastes now. They're amazing consumers'.[14] This may or may not represent an advance in terms of girls' actual social power, but it does indicate that girls are being listened to by cultural producers who are taking them and their tastes very seriously. That hasn't necessarily been the case, however, for people with far more compelling personal and political stakes in understanding young women and what drives them: that is, their mothers, their teachers, and feminist thinkers in general. And while more academic feminists are beginning to follow British scholar Angela McRobbie's lead in examining the relation between feminism and youth cultures, these investigations (in special issues of *Hypatia* and *Signs*) have more often focused on alternative, independent and subcultural venues, such as Riot Grrls, rather than mainstream popular culture. Like Mary Pipher, educated and liberal-minded adults from widely differing backgrounds have more often felt a deep unease about the connections between girls and popular culture, especially youth-oriented genre films and TV.

The chief criticism of third wave feminism and feminists comes from members of the

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[13] Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (London: Ballyntyne, 1994), p. 36

[14] Harvey Weinraub, cited in Vicki Coppock, *The Illusions of Post Feminism* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1995), p. 184

second wave, the women who initiated many of the gains enjoyed by today's generation of women and men. People in their teens and twenties, the daughters and sons of the second wave, have grown up taking equality for granted. 'The legacy of feminism for me,' says Findler, 'was a sense of entitlement ... we are the first generation for whom feminism has been entwined in the fabric of our lives.'[15] Findler and Baumgardner and Richards argue that many young women have integrated the values of feminism into their lives, even if they do not choose to call themselves feminists, and that this is in effect a sign that feminism has succeeded in permeating the social discourse:

> This is an important barometer of the impact of feminism since feminism is a movement for social change, not an organization doing a membership drive.[16]

The criticism that second wave feminists often reserve for third wave feminists is that the third wave is too ambitious, too unfocused, not appreciative enough of the small changes that take years to effect, and not a united movement for change. Findler challenges this judgment, saying that the second wave's unity is more mythical than real since every woman's experience is different. What may appear to be division within the third wave is actually an honest appreciation and admission of each woman's different experiences, and how these affect her role in feminism.

Schrof supports this idea: 'Where their mothers were sometimes accused of being separatists, third wavers are avowed integrationists. Rather than carving out a limited agenda, third wavers want feminism to be an all-encompassing way of life'.[17] And in

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[15] Barbara Findler, *Listen Up*, p. 80
[16] Ibid
[17] Joannie Schrof, *The Gender Machine* (Houston: University of Texas Press, 2000), p.70

so doing, third wavers are including men in the movement:

> Second wave feminism focused rather exclusively on the needs of women ... it's time to acknowledge our connection to men - we are more similar than we are different.[18]

Baumgardner and Richards claim that second wave tactics do not speak to the 'media-savvy, culturally driven generation' of the third wave.[19] Third wave feminists may not be emphasising the naming of experiences, but they are struggling to define their femaleness in a world where the naming is often done by the media and pop culture, where the choice for young women is, once more the angel/ witch dichotomy, or in contemporary phraseology, to be either a babe or a bitch. Third wave activism builds on the second wave by focusing on the relationship of texts to one another and to the world. The third wave is returning to pop culture, 'the medium through which feminism captured the popular imagination - and thus political clout - in the late 1960s and early 1970s'.[20] The difference may lie in the fact that third wave feminists are now more directly influential in cultural reproduction as writers, producers and directors than second wave feminists were. As well, the third wave does not distinguish between the political and cultural in its analyses and creations in the way that the second wave sometimes did.

Returning to the popular culture that inspired Margaret Walker's Wicked Witch of the West, the witch becomes located equally in a world of pop and children's culture. But in an age when equality is largely 'taken for granted' and most Western women are

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[18] Ibid
[19] Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, p. 122
[20] Ibid

full participants in the society that once incarcerated them, representations of the witch move toward the establishment of an insignificant, mild-mannered witchcraft, more suited to the amusement of children than to the radicalisation of a generation.[21] It is not surprising that in this period, women writers choose to locate her in texts as innocuous and fanciful as Nancy Krulik's *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996); Jill Murphy's *The Worst Witch* series (1984 - 2000); Jenny Ashton's *Love Potions for Girls* (1997) and *How to Make Him Love You; Everyday Uses for Witchcraft* (1998). Despite her legacy of subversion that persists on occasion, the witch, even in women's writing becomes weak and purposeless.

In Joanne Harris's *Holy Fools*, published in 1999, the witch is linked inextricably to the social evil of the plague:

> Then I heard a cry: a high-pitched ululation of grief or terror, a single voice raising above them like a clarion, '*La Peste! La Peste!*'

> I struggled to hear, to distinguish words in the unfamiliar dialect. Whatever it was, it ran through the crowd like summer fire. Fights broke out as people tried to escape; others climbed the walls of the buildings lining the street – some even jumped from the sides of the bridge in their eagerness to flee. I stood up to see what was happening, but I had become separated from the other caravans ... Faces loomed at me out of the multitude. One caught my eye, and I was astonished at the hatred there. It was a young girl, her round

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[21] Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, *Feminism in Popular Culture* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), p. 12

face distorted with loathing. 'Witch!'[22]

Whilst the crowd's fear implies fear of the witch, the reaction of the apparent

necromancer to the crowd's onslaught is that of a terrified child, caught in chaos and

separated from the parent symbolised by the masculine LeMerle. Furthermore, the

terror inspired has nothing to do with the witch, but with the fear of illness. She

becomes the victim, a rabbit caught in a trap.

But the reduction of her role goes further. In Margaret Drabble's *The Witch of Exmoor*

(1994), Frieda Haxby, the 'self-declared witch of Exmoor' holds a mad-hatter's tea

party for her concerned family, serving just water and menthol cigarettes.[23] The

position of the witch within contemporary society is firmly established as that of the

comic horror who frightens no-one:

> Frieda Haxby holds court. She may or may not think she is Queen Christina,
>
> but she certainly thinks she is Queen of the Mausoleum. She sits less formally
>
> than her guests, her legs crossed beneath some kind of longish grey garment
>
> embroidered with black which hides her now shapeless body. Her hair is
>
> concealed, like Gogo's, by a scarf and in honour of the occasion she wears her
>
> Baltic amber ceremonial cross.[24]

Witchcraft becomes something of a party game, to be adopted like a costume, deriving

from the eccentric, dementia-ridden fancies of an a old crone so far removed from the

realities of contemporary society that she has no power or ability to influence it.

Whilst the witch once thrived on her marginal status, now she is silenced, victimised

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[22] Joanne Harris, *Holy Fools* (London: Doubleday, 1999), p. 261
[23] Margaret Drabble, *The Witch of Exmoor* (London: Sceptre, 1994), p. 4
[24] Ibid p.16

and almost forgotten.

'I Wish I Could Bite You': *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

So, then, to the literature of pop-culture and fan fiction, where the feminists of the

third wave have found varying degrees of sympathy and solidarity, sometimes within

the same texts. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* representation of the witch is highly

ambivalent and so are its feminist politics. As this chapter has already established,

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is an undisclosed witch, the heir not simply to the folkloric

tradition of 'seers' and 'chosen one[s]' of South Eastern Europe, but also to the

feminist appropriation of popular culture in the late twentieth century. She represents

the post-modern; as McLellan argues, 'the perfect embodiment of the slick,

democratising values which would be undercut by any admission of what had been

displaced to make way for post-feminism'.[25] Her socially inferior status is frequently

associated with those who are chosen to restore social order by means of violent

transgression. This chapter will look in detail at the texts, all written by women, that

the *Buffy* television series has spawned, which borrow heavily from the original tale

and appropriate it for the fan fiction readership.

Nancy Holder's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Blood and Fog*, first published during the

second series of the television series in 1997, is typical of the genre. Buffy's very

existence, and most importantly, the positioning of the witch as the heroine of the tale

offers potential for subversion; Hourihan's 'hero tale' would appear to have been

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[25] Bruce McClellan, *By Whose Authority? Buffy and the Legitimation of the Slayer* (New York: Rowan and Middleton, 2002), p. 98

displaced.[26] The 'butt-kicking' witch seems, in her very existence, to overthrow the fiercely misogynist boundaries of the hero tale. What we witness in the course of both the television and fictional series is the journey of the witch towards self and sexual fulfilment, often at the expense of the men in her way. The very assertion of this sexuality within a fantasy text would not only refigure what is traditionally considered to be 'suitable' material for children's reading, but would also re-write Locke's definition of the pure child, which is central to much of the criticism of children's literature as a genre. Peter Hunt argues that the sex is always left out of children's literature.[27] Indeed, the series of *Buffy* novels appear to belong to both children's and adults' fantasy categories, being indiscriminately catalogued between the two on library shelves. The television series is aired at 6pm on the BBC, and is described in television guides as 'family viewing'.

What is made more evident in the books than in the television series is an acknowledgement and acceptance of a female sexuality and desire that belongs to the witch, which is both polymorphous and powerful. But the conflation of the witch, the vampire and the sexually defiant heroine becomes more complex and problematic than many critics are prepared to acknowledge:

> When she saw Spike in front of the door, her heart skipped a beat ... she took a moment to look at him, really look at him.
>
> *He's evil.*
>
> *I want him.*
>
> She stared at his fingers, his hands. The flesh on them was dead, and yet they

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[26] Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 36
[27] Peter Hunt, *Children's Literature* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1997), p. 10

were the only things in this world that made her feel alive ... his cold breath

on the back of her neck. 'God, I wish I could bite you,' she murmured. She

tingled everywhere.

I wish I could kill you... Do you have any idea how much I loathe you? How

much I loathe myself for being with you?[28]

The self-loathing explicit in Buffy's aside jars against the subversive heritage of the

witch articulated by many of the texts considered in this thesis. Indeed, the passive

'tingling' assertion replicates regressive romance texts such as Bradley's *Witch Hill.*

Yet 'He's evil. I want him,' is more than the 'rape' fantasy, which for many critics, is

the only possible assertion of female desire in a patriarchal context (passivity as an

active choice). In addition to evading categorisation as a romantic heroine, Buffy is

also more dominant than a typical gothic heroine; she exerts power in a variety of

forms over the several manifestations of evil offered by the texts. Similarly, her

attraction to and affinity with the vampire, Spike, does not turn her into the voracious

femme fatale typically associated with Dracula and his victims. The strength of the

witch enables the woman to articulate a female desire that has previously been denied

her. It is also one that is also witnessed and can be replicated by young female

readers. In addition, the witch's control and confidence in the act of sex reverses the

conventions of female passivity and weakness typified by the gothic vampire text and

also by conventional representations of romance as witnessed in Marion Zimmer

Bradley's *Witch Hill.* The dichotomies of virginal victim made amorous, as illustrated

in Blyton's Mollie's 'blushing', are also thrown away.

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[28] Nancy Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Blood and Fog* (New York: Bantam, 1996), p. 20

In twentieth-century terms, both Buffy and the phallically-named vampire, Spike,

become part of a larger subculture, which Ken Gelder sees as incorporating 'punk,

witch and Goth fashion as masquerades', and involves the defiance of conventional

gender roles enforced by dress codes and role-play.[29] This opposes its earlier,

nineteenth-century manifestations in the cultural superstition that 'woman's blood lust

came from her need to replace lost menstrual blood.'[30] Buffy's declaration, 'I want to

kill you', not only anticipates and intensifies her supremacy as the hero(ine) of the

text, who will ultimately triumph over the vampires, but also helps to undo her self-

loathing. Furthermore, her desire to 'kill' refers indirectly to Cixous's linkage of death

and the power of the fantastic.[31] The witch comes to initiate a process of 'non-

signification' and introduces a landscape of fantastic spaces and places where death

occurs, and beyond which the patriarchal rules, structures and orders that force women

into hysteria, madness and silence cannot operate. The 'Hell Mouth' to which Buffy

refers can be seen as the blood-stained, womb-like pit out of which all evil emerges; it

is the place from which both vampiric and slayer life comes, and to which both must

return.[32]

The association between this 'Hellmouth' and female sexuality is not new. In addition

to what Kristeva reads as women's innate connection with the process of abjection,

further ideological paranoia surrounds cultural readings of their mouths, lips and

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[29] Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 17

[30] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (London and New York: Virago, 1988), p. 200

[31] L. Exton (ed.), *The Cixous Reader* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 79

[32] Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, p.32

teeth.[33] From the *vagina dentata* through to Irigaray's labial metaphor, patriarchal

culture is obsessed with the dangers which lie in women's orality. According to Klaus

Theweleit, engulfment in the woman's body is a fear at the root of destructive

fantasies and actions: 'the mouth appears as a source of nauseating evil.'[34] When, in

the course of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Blood and Fog*, Buffy is dragged back from

apparent death in the Hellmouth, she experiences Theweleit's 'nauseating evil' as 'a

place where I was happy. My mother was there.'[35] And, in contrast with the death of

the witch in the womb-like oven in Sexton's 'Hansel and Gretel', the witch does not

die inside. The womb-like space promises death and castration instead for the text's

male evil: Angel, the lover who betrays Buffy after sleeping with her, together with

another vampire, Darius, who snatches bodies from graves, is sucked into oblivion.

Indeed, Nina Auerbach insists that 'while Vampires were supposed to menace women

... to me, at least, they promised protection against a destiny of girdles, spiked heels

and approval.'[36] So whilst Holder's text is not entirely convincing in terms of its

feminist politics, subversive elements still persist. Her addition of the witch to her

reversion of a gothic text complicates analyses of Buffy's feminism, but on the whole,

the witch returns to challenge patriarchy.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the book, goes some way towards establishing female

authority in a post-feminist culture in which, as Anne Bilson suggests, the range of

female stereotypes available for young readers is somewhat limited: 'What, no Book

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[33] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 20
[34] Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History.* trans. Stephen Conway, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 25
[35] Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, p. 22
[36] Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 13

Worm Spice?'[37] By 'digging' through the layers of the Buffy myth, it has been

possible to establish the feminism that has largely been intrinsic to the witch in both

her long and tortuous history and in the texts considered in this thesis. However, my

analysis of Buffy as witch depends solely on a knowledge of her history, a knowledge

that is never overtly referred to in the television series or in the texts themselves. On

many occasions, the characterisation of Buffy as a witch is problematised; as a

'slayer', she is set against the demonism of the witch; however, more often, the

dominant image of witchcraft is represented in the character of Willow, Buffy's

school friend, who learns her craft from library books and the internet. So the 'slick,

democratising' and post-feminist values that Buffy embodies ultimately only serve to

bring her into conflict with the witch. What becomes apparent upon more close

reading of the Buffy novels is the extent to which the witch figure, on one hand

suggesting a feminist subversion, becomes, on the other, the enemy on which

contemporary feminism and its butt-kicking heroine must always turn its back.

Witchcraft can only bring about subversion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* if we consider

Buffy herself to be a witch. And although there are strong elements and derivatives of

witchcraft in the text's portrayal of Buffy, she is never explicitly named a witch.

Willow, who is referred to as 'Witch', never subverts authority in the same

revolutionary manner, and in fact, representations of her are imbued with frightening

cultural ideologies of race, sexuality and religion that do little more than return the

witch to the savage/ hysteric location of two centuries earlier.

The role of Willow the witch is to assist Buffy with knowledge, which she initially

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[37] Anne Bilson, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (London: BFI, 1995), p. 31

does with inspired computer hacking. Willow becomes interested in magic through the high school computer teacher who turns out to be a technopagan and a gypsy, combining magic and science in one package, but ultimately succumbing to the conflict between ancient and modern, science and magic. In the final episodes of the series, she goes mad and threatens to murder her friends. In an introductory scene of Holder's second *Buffy* text, entitled *Hush* (1997), the character of Willow Rosenberg is sitting with a group of young women gathered in the lounge of their college dormitory. She struggles to maintain concentration as one of the women leads the rest in a guided meditation vaguely focusing on feminine energy. The leader then promptly breaks the meditation and begins discussing bake sales and newsletters.

This is the Wiccan group of UC-Sunnydale, the fictional college that is the setting for the fourth season of the popular television show and the sixth series of teenage novels. Though mentioned in previous episodes and books, this is the only presentation of a witchcraft society and its members. Sunnydale's young Wiccans toss around all the buzz words associated with the contemporary feminist spirituality movement: empowerment, energy, blessing. Yet when Willow proposes they do actual magical work, like conjuring or casting spells, she is mocked, and accused of both perpetuating negative stereotypes and 'sucking energy' from the group. Afterwards, Willow relates her experiences to Buffy:

> 'So not stellar, huh?'

> Willow replied, 'Talk. All talk. Blah Blah Gaia. Blah Blah Moon…menstrual life force power thingy. You know, after a coupla sessions I was hoping we could get into something real but …'

'But no actual witches in your witch group?'

'No. Bunch of wanna-blessed-bes. You know, nowadays every girl with a

henna tattoo and a spice rack thinks she's a sister of the Dark Ones.'[38]

Joss Whedon, the creator of the television series, suggests that *Buffy the Vampire*

Slayer has unintentionally become a part of a new culture: popular occultism and

marketable new age spirituality.[39] Through the characters of Willow and Buffy,

witchcraft functions as an individuation process for the teenage self, constructing

Wicca and witchcraft not as an inherited magical and empowering ability, but as a part

of a larger discursive field in popular media in which Wicca is presented as trendy and

fun for young people.

A significant part of Whedon's critique involves subverting popular phraseology.

Buffy and Willow's dialogue highlights the unique use of language characteristic of

the show, dubbed 'Slayer-Speak' by *Entertainment Weekly*. In the dictionary section of

an entire issue devoted to the program Whedon contends, 'Kids can turn a phrase ...

They can turn it into something scary'.[40] Rhonda Wilcox, in her article 'There Will

Never Be a Very Special Episode of Buffy,' categorizes several techniques employed

by *Buffy*'s witches.[41] They change word order and form, transform adverbs into

adjectives, and adjectives into nouns, deftly utilise metaphor and metonym, and insert

pop culture references where appropriate. In this particular instance, Willow takes the

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[38] Nancy Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Hush* (New York: Bantam, 1997), p. 20
[39] Joss Whedon, cited in Rhonda B. Wilcox, *Fighting the Forces*, p. 171
[40] Ibid p. 172
[41] Ibid p.200

pejorative 'wanna-be' and combines it with 'blessed be,' the standard greeting, response

and catch-phrase of the neo-pagan movement, probably culled from the instructional

literature on witchcraft in the 1960's and 1970's, itself a theft from freemasonry, and

put into use in Wiccan practice and ritual. Though Holder's appropriation of the term

is not unique, its significant placement in the dialogue disparagingly points to those

who want to claim the name but not the acts associated with witchcraft.

Similarly, Willow the Witch is also the series' and texts' only homosexual,

discovering homoerotic tendencies in her friendship with another witch, Tara. Both

the programmes and the novels significantly avoid using the word lesbian and simply

present it as what Buffy calls 'an unconventional relationship.'[42] This is extremely

pertinent to a discussion of queer sexuality, as it directly reflects key elements of

lesbian representation in both mainstream and queer discourse in the years

surrounding the Millennium. Gay Seidman makes a highly cogent and appropriate

statement regarding the manner in which lesbianism is presented in films of the late

1990s, and this is just as true of television and of the *Buffy* novels:

> [A]s polluting representations are less tolerated, another strategy is prominent:
>
> the homosexuality of women is, if not denied, then depicted as not stable or
>
> fundamental. The lesbian is imagined as a transitional status – an immature
>
> phase or a case of gender maladjustment.[43]

Moreover, in the programme , 'lesbian' could be seen as the shadowy, unspoken other

of 'witch'. Both words remain charged with cultural expectations and fears, just as the

two groups are often associated with each other in areas of feminist spirituality.

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[42] Nancy Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, p. 140

[43] Gay Seidman, *Female Homosexuality* (San Francisco: University of Berkley Press, 2000), p. 93

Witch or Wicca?

Indeed, much of the politics surrounding Wicca seem to parallel the gay and lesbian movement, even down to Wiccans borrowing its language, including the performative act of 'coming out of the broom closet'. Helen Berger makes the comparison most aptly:

> Both communities [witch and gay/lesbian] are defined by their participants' position outside the mainstream, sharing a life world, and participating in some aspect of politics. [44]

In addition, the use of the closet trope by both homosexuals and witches speaks to the fear of negative repercussions of their revelation. These communities offer visibility for their members through festivals, gatherings, and rituals. Also, the community provides 'modelling' for its younger members, which involves teaching ways to interpret life experiences. Finally, Berger borrows the term 'life world' from Alfred Schutz (1964) to describe a community based not on geography but on experiences, concerns, and world-view. She concludes:

> Both the Neo-Pagan and homosexual communities have permeable boundaries. People may be considered members who do not have face-to-face interactions and who, in fact, do not know one another. Both communities involve people who are dissimilar from one another in many of their beliefs and practices. [45]

To take the comparison a step further, the word 'witch' has some of the strange power

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[44] Helen Berger, *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 168

[45] Ibid p. 230

that 'queer' has, as a derogatory term reclaimed as an epithet of power by those who have adopted it. The Wiccan activist Starhawk, one of the most prominent writers on the subject, tells us 'The word witch should rub us the wrong way'.[46] Indeed, during the witchcraze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, muttering the word 'witch' in the right place could gain for the accuser the lands and possessions of the accused, and it could obviously mean certain torture and death for the unfortunate victim. Thus, a certain sort of dangerous performativity occurs; once more, naming a witch has widespread consequences.

In Judith Butler's discussion of the term 'homosexual' in relation to military policy, she explains how the utterance of the word is mistakenly seen as producing the act:

> In effect, a desirous intention is attributed to the statement *or* the statement is itself invested with *contagious* power of the magical word, whereby to hear the utterance is to 'contract' the sexuality to which it refers.[47]

Invoking both Frazer's law of contagion and Freud's application of it in *Totem and Taboo*, Butler claims that the term takes on a certain magical power working beyond rational constraints: 'The utterance appears both to communicate and transfer that homosexuality (becomes itself the vehicle for a displacement onto the addressee) according to a metonymic rush, which is, by definition, beyond conscious control'.[48] She further avers that the performative act of coming out itself can be 'intended as a contagious example, that is supposed to set a precedent and incite a series of similarly

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[46] Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Sex, Magic and Politics* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), p. 40
[47] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: The Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 139
[48] Ibid

structured acts in public discourse'.[49] Applying these discursive principles back to witchcraft, one can see how naming oneself 'witch' confuses the name with the act, that talking about, writing about, and institutional recognition of, witchcraft, 'is not exactly the same as the desire of which it speaks'.[50] Thus, the 'witches' in Willow's Wiccan group become caught up in witchcraft as a discursive production rather than as a set of ritualised acts. Finally, in Holder's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Gingerbread* (1998), based on a time-travelling to the Salem massacres, one can see the contagion principle in full swing, since we are shown how the word 'witch' historically contributes to communal madness, through its use both in the magically contagious sense, and in the sense that guilt by association leads to further accusations and a larger sense of evil conspiracy. So the witch and her craft become not potent, pagan otherworld symbols, but rather part of the dominant discourse of society as a pastime, a fancy, with little signifying power.

However, Willow Rosenberg remains one of the most interesting representations of witchcraft in popular culture and mass media texts, because she does not start out as a witch at all. Willow is introduced as 'the stereotypical girl nerd', able to tutor any student in any subject, but particularly good with computers.[51] She is also explicitly identified as Jewish, celebrating Hanukkah rather than Christmas and worried what will happen to her if her father finds out that she has a cross nailed next to her window to repel vampires. Of course, she also starts out heterosexual. The reference to the witch as Jew seems significant; the Holocaust has, as discussed in Chapters One and

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[49] Ibid pp 140-141
[50] Ibid p. 142
[51] Nancy Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Blood and Fog*, p. 10

Three, been used as a (wholly inadequate) metaphor for the murders of the witch trials, linking both communities. Between the second and fourth centuries, the Christian church created the fantasy of the Jews as a brotherhood of evil in order to strengthen its position in the competition between Church and Synagogue for converts in the Hellenistic world. Some eight centuries later, the Roman Catholic church developed these fantasies into a demonology, claiming the Jews were employed by the Devil to undermine Christianity and collectively rewarded with mastery of black magic.[52] From the twelfth century, Jews were perceived as a conspiracy of sorcerers who possessed limitless powers of evil and were seeking to destroy Christendom on Satan's orders. When the Antichrist came, he would be a Jew. In medieval times, before the idea of the witch became associated with apostasy, so that the witch had to be a Christian who had renounced Christ, Jews were often used as witch figures; blamed, for example, for introducing the plague into Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century.

Regine Rosenthal's analysis of the image of 'the Wandering Jew' in fiction and its transfer from Europe to the US is illuminating. She notes that, 'by the nineteenth century, the figure of the Wandering Jew is not only widely addressed in European poetry and fiction but has become an integral part of popular culture and literature in America.'[53] The representation of Willow the Witch as Jewish becomes more complicated, in so far as it links her, culturally, to the vampire. Bram Stoker's vampires are Eastern, with 'high, aquiline noses'.[54] Auerbach notes: 'Although the

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[52] Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (London: Pimlico, 1993), p 95
[53] Regine Rosenthal, *The Wandering Jew* (Frankfurt: Goethe University Press, 1998), p. 61
[54] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 34

vampire in a Victorian novel might exercise a magnetic attraction or even inspire sympathy, the implied author of such a novel always took it for granted that vampirism as such was evil. [. . .] In novels published in the United States since 1970, on the other hand, the vampire often appears as an attractive figure precisely *because* he or she is a vampire.'[55] She concludes therefore that 'this shift in fictional characterisation reflects a change in cultural attitudes toward the outsider, the alien other.'[56] As such, representations of the witch become merged with the vampiric, conflating both as exotic, unknown and, therefore, necessarily threatening.

It is hardly possible, though, to analyse the image of 'the alien other' by making clear-cut distinctions between attraction and repulsion: a dominant culture will invariably represent and refer to its constructed 'other' in ambivalent ways, simultaneously exoticising, idealising and degrading both the witch and the vampire. It is interesting to note that Auerbach's analysis here leaves a time-gap; vampire literature appears to leap directly from the nineteenth century to the 1970s. Clearly, this time-gap coincides with a crucial period in the history of the European construction of otherness. Nineteenth-century images overlapped with, and were an integral part of, racism and anti-Semitism in its most murderous form in Europe up to 1945. Even today, racialised representations of Jews and 'foreigners' or refugees sometimes evoke more or less open associations with vampirism.

So the literary and folk image of the nineteenth-century vampire in Britain was, as H. L. Malchow, has shown, strongly connected to the racialised construction of 'the

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[55] Auerbach, *Our Vampires*, p. 50
[56] Ibid

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Jew.[57] This construction was directed, at that time, particularly against Jewish

immigrants from Eastern Europe. Jews in Europe were portrayed as 'the other within'

who nonetheless always belonged to the 'other out there' and 'the cannibal'.[58] These

'Others' were primarily connected through allegedly consuming blood. Like the image

of the vampire at that time, Malchow writes, 'the Jew' can take a variety of forms. He

can be both eternal threat and eternal victim, Judas and the Wandering Jew,

Ahasuerus, capitalist and sweated proletarian, masculine roué and femininized

homosexual, white and black.'[59] Willow the Witch seems to embody most of these

categories.

There is a subtle parallelism throughout between Willow and the vampire Spike that

begins here (recapitulating the relationship between vampires and witches as 'exciting

Others' in eighteenth-century Hungary). Willow represses her emotions to an

unhealthy degree; Spike starts out as the Monster from the Id, unable to restrain

himself. Neither has any tolerance for boredom. As Willow takes her first step toward

releasing her emotion through magic, which will ultimately lead to her attempting to

destroy the world, Spike takes his first step toward saving the world by proposing an

alliance with Buffy to thwart Angelus (the demonic version of the hero, Angel). While

Spike eventually seeks a soul and attempts to become more man than monster,

Willow, in an alternate universe, is a vampire, and of all the people Spike threatens

through the course of the texts, Willow is the only one he seems to seriously consider

siring as a vampire.

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[57] H. L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Los Angeles: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 159
[58] Ibid
[59] Ibid

Throughout the course of the series, Willow becomes an increasingly powerful witch, but the downside of her power is that her magic is invariably affected by her emotion. Originally, Willow is shy and her emotions make her extremely anxious. She proclaims in Holder's *Reckless*, 'I'm very seldom naughty'.[60] However she has a long history of spells going awry. But as it progresses, Willow's dependence on magic becomes a somewhat awkward metaphor for drug addiction, and after her partner, Tara, is accidentally shot, Willow goes on a rampage and attempts to destroy the world, almost beating Buffy in a fight, until the father symbol, Giles, returns from England filled with the powerful magic of a Devon coven. When she finally saps this magic from him, from being completely incapable of feeling empathy with others, she becomes overwhelmed by her connection to the emotions of the entire human race. This means, however, that she feels the pain of the entire human race, in addition to her own suffering over the death of Tara. She decides to put everyone out of their misery, and is only stopped by her friend Xander's steadfast love for her.

The witch, in this case, has no magical blood in her veins or power of her own. Her ability seems to lie in channelling energy through herself and in having the intelligence to understand the principles that shape that energy. In the end, the witch returns to the hopeless hysterical female, driven mad in her weak female mind and saved by the comforting provisions of a patriarchy that the texts have undermined in every other instance. The marginalized figure that Willow the Nerd, Jew and Lesbian embodies is no longer that of the disenfranchised female; there is no post-feminist

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[60] Nancy Holder, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Reckless* (New York: Bantam, 1999), p. 30

inclusion in operation. Rather than opening up potential multiple meanings and significations that would seem congruous with post-modern society, the conflation of the witch, the vampire, the Jew and the lesbian creates a demonic hysteric with no subversive potential: the lonely figure of the malevolent witch.

Witch to Wicca?: *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*

Representations of witchcraft are problematic, tenuous or limiting in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* would seem to make things simpler. For a start, the protagonist and her family are openly named as witches. Like Buffy, the film of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996) spawned not just a multi-generational and highly successful television series of some eight seasons, but also a catalogue of spin-off novels aimed at children and teenage girls. Many critics see the brand of confident humour and female autonomy as characteristic of a post-feminist era that takes for granted hard-won female emancipation, but Nancy Krulik's presentation of the witch in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch: What a Doll!* (1996), in particular, seems difficult to applaud as liberating. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that the range of criticism responding to the television series and film is limited, while criticism of the texts themselves is entirely absent.

Rather than inheriting the subversive legacy of her pagan forebears, Sabrina's magic is descended from her paternal family, which, along with her surname, 'Spell*man*', implies a patriarchal heritage and authority. Her magic is merely a solution that enables her to wear the right clothes, be popular in school, attract male attention and resolve teenage angst and drama:

'I think these witch costumes are kinda cool. All dark and scary – isn't that

what Halloween's all about?'

'Witches aren't all-,' Sabrina began. Then she stopped herself and sighed.
There was no way she could explain to Roxie that witches weren't all like the
costumes in the catalog – not without revealing her secret, anyway. And this
secret was a whopper.

Sabrina Spellman was a witch.

Which was how Sabrina knew that witches were pretty much like anyone else.
Some were ugly; some were beautiful. Some were nice; and some were evil.
Sabrina personally had never seen any witch wearing a ratty black dress and a
pointy hat, or riding around on a broomstick. In fact, many of the witches
Sabrina knew preferred haute-couture and flew across the sky on state-of-the
art vacuum cleaners.[61]

Sabrina, as a witch, does possess some control and domination. In the novel referred

to above, she conjures a 'perfect boyfriend doll' to replace the inadequate stereotypes

that surround her, an ironic word-play on 'doll' as an image of ideal femininity . In

several episodes from the television series, she is able to seize control of her

boyfriend, Harvey, so that she takes over his thoughts and actions. But the

representations of witches produced by *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* are influenced not

just by the books and the television series. Evidence of this can be found in the fact

that all of the *Sabrina* book covers feature a photograph of Melissa Joan Hart, the

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[61] Nancy Krulik, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch: What a Doll!* (New York: Bantam, 1996), p. 12

actress who portrays her in the television series. There is even a juvenile magazine

dedicated to the witch. The increased media interest in fantasy in the late twentieth

century repositions the genre in light of changing cultural meanings.

Although Sheryl Vint credits Sabrina and Buffy with 'undo[ing] the helpless female

stereotypes of my youth – the girls who got the hero but never got to be the hero',

another image of her circulates on the covers of the texts, in the fanzines and on

websites: a sexualised, objectified Sabrina, most prevalent in the photographs that

accompany magazine articles.[62] This Sabrina still has access to the power of

subversion, but it is only attainable in the absent text of the novel. The present image

and discernible meaning are always subject to a process of patriarchal objectification

and to the penetrative male gaze; their function is not to subvert patriarchal power,

but to conform to cultural expectations regarding femininity. Whereas the dark

implications of *Buffy* hinted at rebellion, the pink, sugary world of Sabrina means that

such potential is far more difficult to access.

This limited potential problematises actual female roles in the dominant culture, and

also the ideologies produced for young girls as readers of the texts and magazines.

The circulation of images of Sabrina/ Melissa Joan Hart in what John Fiske would call

'secondary texts' is, therefore, crucial, to our reading of late twentieth-century

fantasy.[63] The key issue is the relationship between the images of feminism in the

novels, television series and magazine articles, in terms of their construction of female

identity and the problem of conflating the character Sabrina with the actor. Fiske's

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[62] Sheryl Vint, *Pushing the Envelope* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p.4
[63] John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 59

understanding of popular culture as a space of 'producerly' readings lies at the heart of this conflict.[64] Producerly readings are constructed by consumers of popular culture based on their own experience; they are meanings that allow the reader to impose his or her sense of the text, rather than be helpless before its ideological manipulation. Texts that exist alongside magazine articles, television interviews and websites are particularly open to the construction of producerly meanings. Meanings created by secondary texts are forced into a dialectic relationship with the primary text, in this case, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch: What a Doll!*: 'the meanings are read back into the books themselves, just as efficiently as the books determine those of the secondary texts.'[65]

This dialectical relationship between primary and secondary texts complicates and undermines representations of Sabrina and of female sexuality. Secondary texts – I am particularly interested in magazine features - devote considerable space to the lives and opinions of the actors who play the characters in the television drama, and in this case, feature on the covers of novels; these real life biographies are nearly always mobilized to make fictional characters seem more real. The sexualized reading of Sabrina/ Melissa Joan Hart in magazines directed at male fans undoes the incipient feminist message created by the primary text. The penetrability of late twentieth-century fantasy by this sort of 'producerly' reading becomes a liability. In these secondary sources, Sabrina's power as witch and any sort of subversion of patriarchal foundations are separated from her appearance as sex object. The revolution of gender stereotypes in the primary text is ignored by readings of objectified, controlled women

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[64] Ibid, p. 60
[65] Ibid, p. 73

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in the secondary texts. While *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, provides, on most occasions, a subtle feminist message ('Harvey thought what I told him to'), and rejects the construction of female worth based upon sexual attraction and appearance, secondary texts, on the other hand, provide a less immediately accessible and more contradictory message.[66] This is due, in part, to their direction towards specific segments of *Sabrina's* heterogeneous fan groups.

Based on her fame as Sabrina, Melissa Joan Hart has appeared in magazines conflated with Sabrina as role model. In an article in *Cosmo Girl* magazine, Hart, who is described by the journalist as 'an angelic, wholesome role model', is pictured, accompanied by an article that discusses both her career and the success of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* series.[67] In this photograph (fig. 1), Hart appears in a casual vest and trousers, smiling demurely to the reader in a manner that suggests the 'girlish' friendships connoted by the magazine's title. The image of femininity offered is neither strong nor powerful, but instead, childish, innocent and virtuous, contrasting strongly with current representations of witchcraft. Her fair hair is softly curled, framing her face in a halo-like effect; the dark unknown of witchcraft is removed. Articles such as this emphasise the parallels between Hart and Sabrina, noting that both are working teenagers who have had to shoulder adult responsibility at an early age and that both have been raised by women alone. In such 'girl' magazine contexts, both narrative and visual images offer a reading of Hart that emphasizes the positive qualities she embodies as Sabrina. The fact that she can or should function as a role

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[66] Nancy Krulik, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch: Mind Reader* (New York: Bantam, 1999), p. 20
[67] Sarah S. Evans, 'Practical Magic: Melissa Joan Hart and Sabrina', *Cosmo Girl*, (August, 1999), pp. 50-57

Fig. 1

Cosmo Girl (August, 1999)

model is explicitly stressed by the *Cosmo Girl* article. Hart herself comments that the

character Sabrina offers her an image of strength that helps her respond with optimism

to the challenges that she faces in her own life.

In articles that target girls, then, the feminist agenda that influences the construction of

Sabrina as character also influences the construction of Melissa Joan Hart as media

personality. But when the image of Sabrina / Melissa Joan Hart is moved to contexts

in which the explicit addressees are not young women, other ideologies dominate.

Joss Whedon, the creator of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series, argues:

> If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of the
>
> situation without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting
>
> down and selling them feminism.[68]

However, in secondary texts directed at young men, this comfort with 'a girl who takes

charge' cannot be sustained.

The *Movieline* version of the *Sabrina* story (fig. 2) provides a text at odds with its

visual image. The text - an edited version of an article that originally appeared in the

May 2000 issue of *Rolling Stone* - focuses on the television series and a vision of

Sabrina's meaning, rather than on Hart the actress. The reading of the television series

constructed by this text emphasises the ways that *Sabrina* challenges stereotypes of

female sexuality, arguing that 'the characters have sex with consequences, but are not

defined by that alone. They also have friendships with consequences, school with

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[68] Joss Whedon, cited in Rhonda B. Wilcox, *Fighting the Forces*, p. 40

consequences, popularity with consequences'.[69] Juxtaposed, however, are the visual

images (fig. 2). Hart faces the camera, head tilted down but heavily mascara-ed eyes

raised to meet the viewer's gaze. Her expression is an insolent pout and her lips are

dyed a deep red; her hair falls straight to her shoulders, its style tousled. This highly

sexualized picture of Sabrina/ Hart - breasts partially exposed and looking at the

camera with a bowed head - opposes the feminist subversion of Sabrina as character

and *Sabrina* as a fantasy text. This is an image of the actor, not the character, but both

are made subject to the male consuming gaze, even though it is the character that

provides the occasion for the accompanying article.

The conflation that is typical of secondary texts in the late twentieth-century suggests

that that this sexualized image is the most dominant and memorable image of Sabrina

the witch. The secondary texts produce their hegemonic or dominant reading through

the visual image, rather than through the written article. My sense of this hierarchy is

strengthened by the fact that the same written text from *Rolling Stone* is reproduced in

Movieline, but the photographs are new. Clearly, the article functions as a context for

photographing and displaying the image of Melissa Joan Hart. When the article

originally appeared in *Rolling Stone*, the text was accompanied by photographs that

displayed Hart clad in tight black leather (fig.3).[70] One hand braced on a door-frame,

and the other on a her naked thigh, her breasts jut toward the viewer; her eyes meet the

viewer's gaze, but she neither smiles nor pouts. This photographic scene was used to

make the article on Hart fit into the theme of the issue, 'girls and cars and rock'n'roll.'

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[69] Steven Seider, 'Melissa and Magic', *Movieline* (September, 2004) p. 33
[70] John R. Mithers, 'Witchcraft: Girls, Cars and Rock'n'Roll', *Rolling Stone*(June, 2004), pp 63 - 66

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Fig. 2 *Movie line* (September, 2004)

Fig. 3 *Rolling Stone* (May, 2004)

The secondary texts appear to take what they can use from the primary, fantasy text and re-contextualize it to serve their own needs and desires. This can be seen most clearly in *Maxim*'s cover: 'Sabrina: Your Favourite Witch Without a Stitch' (fig. 4). In magazines targeted at men, the desire to show both Hart and, in particular, the 'sweet and innocent' Sabrina character, as objects for sexual consumption forms the dominant meaning of the text.

Although late-twentieth century fantasy does permit the existence of utopian images and identities, which are, as Armitt argues, 'riskier, more problematic and more overtly challenging', the submission of the sexually dominant heroine to a male gaze and power in both primary and secondary texts enforces a return to the patriarchal stereotypes of a much earlier era.[71] The function is always to undo the ideologically feminist action of the primary text. Fiske has argued that 'a novel becomes a text at the moment of reading, that is, when its interaction with one of its many audiences activates some of the meanings / pleasures that it is capable of provoking. So one book can stimulate the production of many texts, according to the social conditions of its reception.'[72] Both *Buffy the Vampire* Slayer and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* demand critical study precisely because their films, television series and novels permit the existence of multiple readings and meanings. But in terms of the witch, those readings become increasingly problematic. As women concrete their position as participating members of society, the witch occupies an increasingly limited role. The fact that Buffy is a witch is never openly acknowledged, and the witches that do exist are either peripheral or products of racial, sexual and religious prejudices. Similarly,

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[71] Lucie Armit, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 190
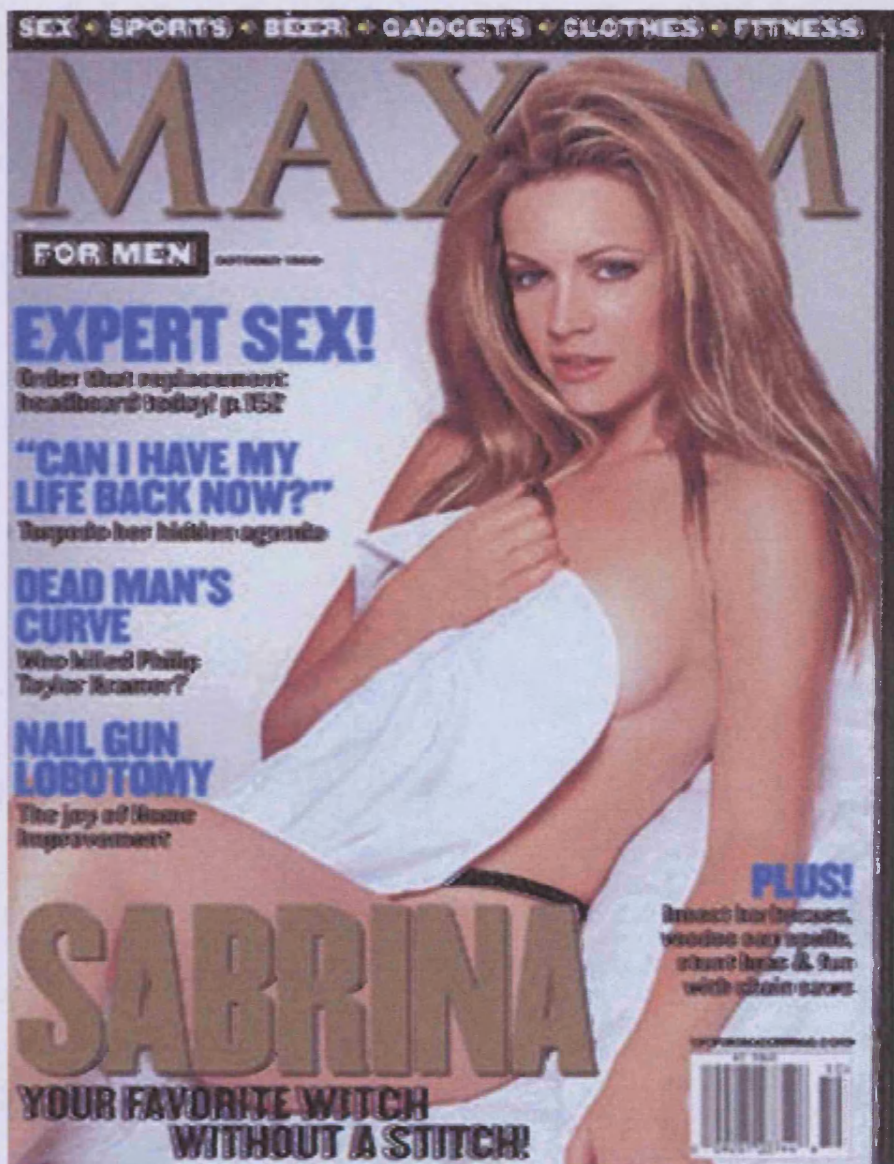[72] John Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, p. 26

Fig. 4 *Maxim* (September, 2005)

in *Sabrina*, the centrality of witchcraft seems to be liberational, but the secondary texts always seem to reduce the possibility of multiple and complex readings. Melissa Joan Hart and Sabrina the Teenage Witch, like Sarah Michelle Gellar and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, must merge necessarily in the course of the postmodern, media culture that produces such fantasy fiction; the result is a dominated heroine, whose primary purpose is not 'the banishment of evil and the restoration of social, moral order', but male sexual gratification. In her article, 'Making Hope Practical Rather than Despair Convincing: Feminist Post-structuralism, Gender Reform and Educational Change', Jane Kenway argues that the most hopeful thing we can teach young women is not 'girl power', but that there is a politics of gender, that it is not a natural arrangement but a cultural construction made by people and open to change.[73] Children's fantasy fiction, however, perpetuates a society that prioritises the female body over the mind and in which female identity is always submissive to the forces of patriarchal authority.

'Flesh is Heretic': Eavan Boland and the Witches of 'High Culture'

Yet this association is not exclusive to popular cultural texts. Even canonical, literary representations of the witch of the late twentieth century remain surprisingly problematic. Margaret Atwood's 'Half-Hanged Mary'(1995), Adrienne Rich's 'Family Romance' (1975) and Phoebe Heskith's 'Prayer for the Sun' (1996) all express violence levelled against witches' and women's bodies that, although rebelling to varying extents, sets the witch and the woman against each other. Atwood writes:

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[73] Jane Kenway, 'Making Hope Practical Rather than Despair Convincing', in Debrah Seigel (ed), *Young Feminists*, p. 33

I was hanged for living alone

for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin,

tattered skirts, few buttons,

a weedy farm in my own name,

and a surefire cure for warts;

Oh yes, and breasts,

and a sweet pear hidden in my body.

Whenever there's talk of demons

these come in handy.[74]

Eavan Boland's 'Anorexic', published in 1995, conflates the witch, pain and

masochism to re-inscribe the female body.[75] Whereas the popular cultural

representations created women and witches as objects for male consumption, Boland's

poetry objectifies and then actively destroys the female body. Although published over

forty years after the texts of Hughes, Blyton and Plath, 'Anorexic' bears comparison

also with these works, because it replicates the same sense of destruction and injustice

implicit in their language, but can never access any sort of subversion. The liberation

associated with the era of Boland's writing counts for nothing, because, this time, it is

not science or the state who are the persecutors of the witch. For Boland, it is the

woman herself, inflicting upon her own body the violence of ideologies that produce

her self-disgust.

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[74] Margaret Atwood, 'Half-Hanged Mary', Morning in the Burned House (New York: Virago, 2000), p. 67
[75] Eavan Boland, 'Anorexic' An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967-1987 (London and New York: Norton, 2000), p. 12

There are clear connections between the sense of 'excess' of flesh brought about by pain, and representations of womanhood. Both *Buffy and Sabrina* created women and witches with bodies that conformed to society's expectations. Boland goes beyond this, creating self-disgust and revulsion. The image of women's bodies as monstrous has a long history in Christian and medical discourses in which women's supposed excess of flesh must be controlled and confined within the domestic space. The sense of excess can also be traced in women's own experiences of their body, and is epitomised in the anorexic women trying to 'cut out' their excess flesh:

> Flesh is heretic.
>
> My body is a witch.
>
> I am burning it.
>
>
> Yes I am torching
>
> her curves and paps and wiles.
>
> They scorch in my self denials.
>
>
> How she meshed my head
>
> in the half-truths
>
> of her fevers till I renounced
>
> milk and honey
>
> and the taste of lunch.
>
>
> I vomited
>
> her hungers.
>
> Now the bitch is burning...

past pain

keeping his heart

such company

as will make me forget

in a small space

the fall

into forked dark,

into python needs

heaving to hips and breasts

and lips and heat

and sweat and fat and greed.

The list of body parts, 'skin and bone', 'hips and breasts', 'lips', 'fat', immediately

deconstructs the female body, creating a fragmentary sense of self that is 'past pain',

beyond representation. The deliberately repetitive use of 'and', in the final stanza,

particularly, expresses a grossness of form, and an absolute disgust its excess.

However, rather than being inflicted by external forces, the threat of re-inscription

comes from within the self. The witch becomes an image of female disgust and self

loathing that attempts to conform to the expectations and demands of an image-

obsessed culture.

Boland's separation of the woman and her body becomes significant, in that it

suggests not an emptying out of the self, but a division of the woman into the mind (male controlled) and into the body (controlled by the witch). It is the woman's ambivalence towards the witch – 'Now the bitch is burning' that seems surprising in light of the witch's vast history of female liberation. The witch seems to represent the body in pain, raving against the extreme inscription of anorexia, by crying out for 'milk and honey/ and the taste of lunch.' In contrast are patriarchal ideologies and voices. Her desire to be 'Thin as a rib' re-creates the biblical notion of women as being created from Adam's spare rib; the movement towards extreme thinness, 'past pain' is seen as 'holy'. Furthermore, the explanation of 'sinless' as being 'foodless' suggests that the infliction of pain upon the female body is central to Christianity and patriarchal authority. It is the woman, in this case, who perpetuates this violence. The witch is still permitted some subversion – hers is the desire for female healing that is silenced and 'caged' within the text, but for the first time, the woman and the witch are divided, placed in opposition. And this must surely annihilate her power.

At the close of the twentieth century, women occupied more high-profile, highly-paid and highly-specialist occupations within society than ever before. A century that permitted political emancipation, contraception and abortion, that created new laws against rape, sexual harassment and discrimination, and that gave visibility to sexual and racial minority groups, ends with thoroughly disappointing representations of the witch. Where women gain status, the witch loses it, and in the texts considered in this chapter, it can never been regained. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does create a 'witch' who has been hailed as a feminist icon, but along with *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, that icon only conforms to masculine definitions of acceptable femininity. The image of the witch as 'the blonde, beautiful Barbie-doll' is perpetuated by primary and

secondary texts until no other possible readings can emerge. But this reduction is not

exclusive to popular culture. Eavan Boland's 'Anorexic' presents women who do

patriarchy's 'dirty work', by violating and destroying themselves. The witch may

voice a feminist rebellion, but that voice is, once more, silenced and oppressed. While

the witch will always possess a residual subversiveness, it has become severely

limited in contemporary representations.

Conclusion: 'Happily Ever After?': Harry Potter and the Grotesque Utopia

All witches are very conscious of stories. They can *feel* stories, in the same way that a bather in a little pool can feel the unexpected trout. Knowing how stories work is almost all the battle. For example, when an obvious innocent sits down with three experienced card sharpers and says 'How do you play this game, then?', someone is about to be shaken down until their teeth fall out.

- Terry Pratchett [1]

A major difference between witches and psychotherapists is that witches see the mental health of women as having important political consequences.

- Naomi Goldenberg [2]

So how did we get from the radical yet incarcerated asylum patient in the second half of the nineteenth century to the comic horror or objectified pin-up of the late twentieth century? This literary trajectory is awkward to account for, though the related journey of witchcraft to Wicca, from subversion of Christianity to co-existence beside it is easier to trace. Part of the explanation is that science replaced witchcraft as the explanation not only for how the world works, but also for misfortune. Epidemics are no longer blamed on malevolent witches but on mutated viruses. Studies prove that

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[1] Terry Pratchett, *Discworld: Witches Abroad* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 67
[2] Naomi Goldenberg, 'Feminism and Psychiatry,' in Betsey Beaven (ed), *The Political Palate* (New York: Pandora, 1980), p. 191

infertility is caused by smoking cigarettes, wearing tight underwear, excessive bicycle riding or postponing childbearing to pursue a career. And science provides clinical treatments to overcome it as well, removing the need for spells, prayers or incantations. Violent storms are blamed on global warming, which in turn is blamed on the excesses of scientific technology. Belief - or even the need for belief - in the witch gradually diminished.

The most significant development considered in this thesis is the re-definition of witchcraft as hysteria, which made the flights of fantasy of her and her victims a medical condition, for which the compulsory 'treatment' was incarceration in hospitals and mental asylums. Initially, the effect of such repression was subversion, a radical challenge to the forces of patriarchy that attempted to contain women, which the witch's presence always initiated. However, in the decades that followed, women escaped such containment, whether at the hands of the state or their own families, gaining greater prominence and autonomy in society. The First World War and the Enfranchisement Acts, both in Great Britain and the United States, gave women both political visibility and meaningful employment, initiating a period of feminist advance that included the developments of first-wave, second-wave, and third-wave feminism, dramatically altering gender relations across the Western world. At the beginning of this thesis, in the texts of Victorian period, witches and women form an alliance of subversion, a rebellion against the limits and violations imposed upon them. However, by the 1990s, women are active in the society from which they had previously been excluded; the requisite for subversion has largely disappeared, and by the time of Eavan Boland's writing, the witch and the woman actually turn on and destroy each other.

Whilst the need for the witch herself disappeared, the religion of witchcraft - Wicca, as it came to be known - gained in prominence. The work of folklorists such as Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardner was responsible for establishing Wicca as a recognised alternative to mainstream religion. But, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, Murray's research as been almost universally discredited; Gardner's writing, however, despite having no historical foundation before 1920, has come to define Wicca, its practices and beliefs, ultimately contributing to the repeal of Witchcraft Laws in Britain in 1951. The organised and inherently patriarchal religion of witchcraft, as defined by Gardner, could now co-exist alongside Christian doctrines, offering no threat to its existence. The witch's power, in contrast, had always been derived from her location as opposition to Christianity, forming part of a fantasy rejection of it. Once again, this subversive potential became no longer necessary, particularly as the authority of Christianity declined.

Yet in literature by women, the witch's presence always indicates subversive resonances. The 'witchcraft' that pervades Emily Dickinson's writing and her identity creates social, sexual, linguistic and symbolic subversion, establishing an 'acolyte' of female magic that merges the witch and the female writer, who, together, not only disorder society but threaten its very foundations. Sylvia Townsend Warner's representations of witches and 'odd' women form part of a 'lesbian continuum', excluding male experience, which is continued by the fairy tale witches of Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas. Marion Zimmer Bradley's Morgaine appropriates the male Arthurian myths in exclusively female terms, whilst the character of Buffy Summers, in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* undoes restrictive gothic tropes and female stereotypes. The witch, in texts that span continents, genres, form and the high-popular culture

divide, is always a locus for rebellion, always threatens patriarchy. But, as this thesis has argued, that rebellion has varying degrees of success.

Overall, it is possible to say that representations of the witch become increasingly singular, limited and conventional as the period of study progresses. Any sense of power or control seems dependent on the marginal status of both the witch and the woman; both begin on the outskirts of outside of society, despite patriarchy's violent attempts to name and know both via science and psychology. The progresses of Wicca and feminism serve to bring both 'in' from the outside, and this seems to reduce the witch's power. In the poems of Emily Dickinson and Mary Coleridge, as in Gaskell's *Lois the Witch* (1859), the witch resists the classification and incarceration that society seeks to inflict upon her. She remains unknown and threatening, and, despite Gaskell's attempt to impose a conservative narrative voice, she causes chaos to systems of order and signification.

Edna St Vincent Millay, Margaret Murray and Sylvia Townsend Warner all draw on contemporary concepts of female sexuality to intensify the witch's challenge, associating her with sexually depraved acts, orgies, massive phalluses and lesbianism. Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1927) codifies her subversion even further, suggesting links between female sexuality, the witch and the racial Other, an association that becomes fraught when considered in light of decolonisation and the aftermath of the First World War. But the beginning of a downward movement can already be identified; Lolly's witchcraft is removed from ordinary British society to the safety of the imaginary Great Mop. Similarly, Dorothy Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Enid Blyton and later, Anne Sexton, draw on images of witch burning and broken female bodies to replicate

the historical injustices perpetrated against women, but this sort of classification

seems to identify witches solely as victims, rather than rebels. Enid Blyton's Witch

Snippit from *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (1937) is a surprising and notable

exception, one more challenge to closed-down representations and silenced bodies.

But the utopian feminist fragmentation she creates remains just that: utopian.

More exceptions emerge with the consideration of feminist retelling of fairy tales in

the 1960s. The action of retelling tales with a patriarchal heritage from a female point

of view is, in itself, an act of defiance, but the addition of the witch extends it. Olga

Broumas confuses the Snow White/Wicked Queen dichotomy to promote an

exclusively female bonding, which hints at the beginning of a lesbian continuum. The

conflation of the lesbian relationship with the mother-daughter bond, both in

Broumas's and Sexton's poetry, suggests the prioritising of a female bonding that

cannot be characterised in in the patriarchal terms of a fairy tale, or by social

authoritarian language as incest. Poetry, perhaps more than any other form or genre,

permits the woman writer to access a sort of feminist magic - a witchcraft - that is not

merely a recognition of injustice, but a challenge for which the witch is the medium.

Marion Zimmer Bradley embodies this challenge in *Mists of Avalon* (1977), creating a

multiplicitious, matriarchal witch and authority figure in the character of Morgaine.

But any authority is diluted by Bradley's representation of witches in *Witch Hill*

(1988), which creates male witches as rapists and paedophiles and female witches as

the helpless heroines of formula romance. Sara Latimer needs to be 'saved' from

witchcraft by the love of the hero.

The hypothesis of this thesis is largely confirmed by the depressing conclusion of the

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late twentieth-century witch. Subversion is replaced by submission, as the witches of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* conform entirely to masculine expectations and ideals of acceptable femininity. Whilst the political and social gains of feminism have revolutionised women's roles, by bringing them into society, the witch's journey runs counter. She ends as a comic horror, a figure of fancy, of childhood, representing the bugaboos that society has long outgrown.

But to conclude there would be to ignore the discords, the exceptions and the challenges, which, although more coded, still persist. In January, 2002, Great Britain officially became part of the *Harry Potter* franchise. The British Tourist Board re-launched the nation under the slogan, 'Harry Potter: Discover the Magic of Britain'.[3] The re-branding of the United Kingdom as a land that embraces witchcraft and wizardry has been followed closely by the entry of words that form part of a language of witchcraft, such as 'muggle' and 'quidditch' into the *OED*. They are not defined, however, as belonging to the fantastical, literary phenomenon that characterises Rowling's writing; rather they have become the actual nouns for naming the thing. 'Muggle' is, in common English usage, the word for a non-magic person. As the language of witchcraft merges with the language of dominant society, the fantasy of the witch becomes an integral part of the Real. Whilst the gradual integration of the witch into the dominant discourse of society would seem to be progressive, the commercialisation of the witch implicit in the *Harry Potter* series appropriates the witch and wizard as tangible assets of capitalist society. In anticipation of the release of the fifth book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, in July

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[3] Andrew Blake, *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter* (New York: Verso, 2002), p.99

2003, daily newspapers featured articles such as 'How Harry Changed Our Lives', 'Harry Potter and the Quest for World Domination' and 'Why We All Love Harry'. All testify to the text's significance in terms of national consciousness and culture; Todorov's potent Imaginary is assimilated into British culture's dominant discourse. Most significantly, in the context of newspapers that discuss witches and figures as though they are fact, rather than fiction, that sense of the fantastic, or imaginary, is assimilated into the Real. The greatest post-modern irony of all is the extent to which the *Harry Potter* series has come to construct the society of its own production.

This irony is, however, made more complex and more interesting when we consider it in relation to the premise of this thesis, namely the subversive potential of witch. The unique set of literary circumstances surrounding the production and perpetuation of Potter ideologies problematise, to an even greater extent than *Buffy*'s commercialism, the very nature of fantasy fiction in a post-modern, media-driven society. The challenge such fiction offers to conventional order systems must surely be compromised. Fantasy's status as opposition to the Real is crucial to its - and of course, the witch's - subversive legacy: Jackson argues that it can exist 'alongside the Real', in parallel, but the two, it appears, must never meet.[4] It is precisely the location of fantasy in the Other World of Wonderland, Neverland, Narnia and 'Once upon a time...', in what Roger Schlobin describes as 'the never was, is or can be', that permits its threatening rebellion and allows a dissolution of the common order, which is experienced as oppressive and insufficient.[5]

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[4] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Art of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 50
[5] Roger Schlobin, *On Fantasy* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 2000), p. 293

The media's positioning of Rowling's text firmly within the Real, then, seems to take away its power. This certainly seems to be the case in respect of the feminist politics of the *Harry Potter* texts. The reduction of fantasy's subversive power, as a result of its loss of liminality, appears to be responsible for the attack upon the hallowed halls of Hogwarts School by numerous feminist critics. Gail Grynbaum sees its systems as both 'regressive and patriarchal', while Nicholas Tucker finds Rowling's revision of the school story genre as 'conservative, restrictive and wholly disappointing'.[6] Once the Other contained within literary fantasy becomes the Same, its multiple, polymorphous meanings are reduced to one single, dominant reading by society's primary – and therefore, patriarchal – discourse. In the case of *Harry Potter*, as indeed of every text considered in this thesis, that discourse is both repressive and restrictive.

The main tendency of children's literature is to accommodate the young reader to the cultural and social hegemony of the time, and therefore, to define desirable value systems. Whereas adult narratives initiate a process of recognition, children's fiction presupposes, if not a 'blank-paged receptor', then at least one more vulnerable to ideological manipulation. Harry Potter's fictional realm of magic and wizardry confirms the conventional assumption that men do and should run the world. Fittingly, the range of female characters, witches and stereotypes offered throughout the *Harry Potter* books lacks the seditious challenge of earlier fantasy writing. McGonagall, Hogwarts' female deputy head, is exactly that, always forced to follow and submit to Dumbledore's greater authority. When we are first introduced to the school in *Harry*

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[6] Gail Grynbaum, 'Harry Potter's Girl Trouble', in Millicent Lenz (ed), *Contemporary Children's Literature* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 19; Nicholas Tucker, 'The Rise and Rise of Harry Potter', *Children's Literature in Education*, 4 (9th Dec, 1999), 76

Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (1997), she is notably absent from the 'High Table', at which Dumbledore, God-anthropomorph and Freud's 'exalted father', holds court among the other male teachers.[7] The female members of staff are either incompetent (as is the case with Professor Trelawney, who is unable to discern a real psychic premonition from a fake; and Professor Hooch, who leaves the pupils alone during their first broomstick lesson, resulting in Neville's accident), or, as in the case of Madame Pomfrey the nurse, forced into traditionally 'safe' occupations for women. Neither do the students – who should embody post-feminist emancipation and autonomy – fare any better. Ginny Weasley's weakness is continually emphasised. On numerous occasions, she runs from the room blushing and screaming; her weak female body easily permits the penetration of Tom Riddle's evil in *The Chamber of Secrets*. Indeed, the only possible character to receive any feminist praise is Hermione Granger, Harry's female foil. But even she, the first class scholar ('they haven't invented a spell that our Hermione can't do!'), forms part of restricted, patriarchal textual ideology.[8] At the sight of the troll at the beginning of *Philosopher's Stone*, the text that formulates characterisations that are maintained and strengthened throughout the series, she sinks to the floor in fright, waiting to be rescued by her male counterparts. In *Chamber of Secrets*, she accidentally transforms herself into a cat. Although she solves the crime before the boys do, she is petrified before she can reveal the perpetrator. Her stony, silenced body ironically replicates that of her namesake, Shakespeare's passive female victim in *The Winter's Tale*. Time and again, her reason and learning are proved to be inadequate in the face of the hero's bravery

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[7] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 104
[8] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 233

and defiance. Furthermore, Malfoy's insult to her, 'mud-blood', meaning dirty blood, returns feminist fantasy to the rhetoric of Victorian misogyny, of polluted blood, and corrupt female bodies, which require the patriarchal control and revision that the witch's body inspired over a century before.[9]

Indeed, the range of stereotypes on offer to the juvenile reader can be summed up by the patrons of the Leaky Cauldron: 'Venerable' wizards and philosophers, 'wild' warlocks and 'raucous' dwarfs are placed in opposition to 'funny little witches' and a hag ordering a plate of raw liver.[10] Yet one female character, introduced at the height of *Harry Potter*'s ideological power, cultural centrality and submersion in the Real, offers a 'heterogeneous, strange, polychromatic, ragged, conflicting' body politic that eschews patriarchal propagation, and confuses concepts of late twentieth-century fantasy fiction.[11] Professor Umbridge, the witch / bitch figure of *The Order of the Phoenix*, 'cardiganed, fluffy and pink' but also demonic and larger than life, inspires fear and dread in the traditionalist and patriarchal halls of Hogwarts school.[12] It is the presence of this woman, Harry's only female nemesis, which challenges not only, as Hourihan suggests, 'the mettle, strength and bravery of the hero', but also, I would add, the mettle, strength and bravery of the hero tale he represents. Umbridge the witch reintroduces the feminist debate to children's literature:[13]

> [Umbridge] seemed to be talking herself into something. She was shifting her
>
> weight nervously from foot to foot, staring at Harry, beating her wand against

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[9] Ibid p. 77
[10] Ibid p. 356
[11] Lucie Armitt, *Theorising the Fantastic* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 184
[12] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 250
[13] Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 12

her empty palm and breathing heavily ... She pointed her wand at different parts

of Harry's body, apparently trying to decide where would hurt most. [14]

The unjust and malevolent authority figure is the nightmare of western culture, which

we carry with us from a young age, when those around us seemed dictating, unjust

giants, and ourselves, little dwarves. Fittingly, Umbridge's punishment, 'where it

would hurt most', is unlawful and beyond her designated authority.

Leslie Fiedler argues in relation to the Jack the Giant Killer tale that however old the

reader becomes, the point of his or her identification is never the giant; rather, 'we

return to 'the little jacks' that always exist inside ourselves.'[15] However, Fiedler's use

of 'little jacks' suggests that this point of identification is always also that of the little

boy, signifying that the fantasy giant must become a textual version of the immense

and brooding father. However, the horror of Umbridge, the fluffy demon, the

terrifying Gorgon, is not that of the father – or even his converse, the mother. Her

threat to the hero and the dominant order of the text is, like all of the witches

considered in this thesis, entirely sexual. Her violent menace creates more than a

Gorgon: rather an empowering, utopian possibility of female dominance that is

legendary and thus fabulous:

> She moved over to her desk, sat down and bent over a stack of parchment that
>
> looked like essays for marking. Harry raised the sharp black quill, then realized
>
> what was missing.
>
> 'You haven't given me any ink', he said.

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[14] Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix,* p. 251
[15] Leslie Fiedler, 'Jack the Giant Killer' in Sheila Egoff, Gordon Stubbs et al., *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 241

'Oh you won't need ink,' said Professor Umbridge, with the merest suggestion

of a laugh in her voice.

Harry places the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: I must not tell lies.

He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the back of Harry's right

hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel – yet even as he stared

at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been

slightly redder than before, but quite smooth.

Harry looked round at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toad-like

mouth stretched in a smile.

'Yes?'

'Nothing,' said Harry quietly.

...Again and again, Harry wrote the words on the parchment in what he soon

came to realize was not ink, but his own blood.[16]

Fictional texts can be seen as powerful examples of the way in which a culture thinks

about itself; what becomes quickly apparent in the above extract is the problematic

and unsatisfactory way in which contemporary society tries to reconcile itself with

female authority.[17] Harry's 'sharp, black quill', which replicates sonically the violent

action about to occur, via short, sharp syllables and assonance, has, historically, been

the instrument of women's repression and subjugation. As argued in relation to

revolutionary poets such as Emily Dickinson, women's estranged relationship to the

Symbolic order, due to their inability to appropriate that phallic pen, is, in this case,

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[16] Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, p. 400

[17] Natasha Walter, for example, in a notable instance of historical amnesia, felt able to acclaim Margaret Thatcher as the 'great unsung heroine of British feminism'. *Women, Property, and the Letters of the Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 9. Other commentators were less willing to overlook 'Thatcher's overt hostility to feminism and her lack of support for women in general.' Patricia Murray, *Margaret Thatcher* (London: W. H. Allen, 1990), p. 15

overturned and used against the hero. The subjection of Harry to the rape act, symbolised by the 'cutting' and 'bleeding' of his virgin skin, is particularly shocking; this is intensified by the scene's juxtaposition with the sub-plot of Harry's own sexual awakening. But it does more than simply parody the hell-fire tales of violent retribution that characterize earlier children's literature. The phallic implement, brought under the control of not just a woman, but also a witch, 'writes' on the hero's body, subjugating him to the female sexual pleasure encoded in Umbridge's 'wide, toad-like ... smile'. This seems almost a direct echo of the witch's 'riding' of the Miner as described by Margaret Murray over ninety years before. As a teacher, counsellor and supposed protector of the children in her care, her sadism is even more pronounced. Nevertheless, Rowling's vision does reverse the conventions of female sexual weakness and passivity hinted at in the 'feminist' *Buffy* tales. The demonic laugh, which bears echoes of so many mad, bad anti-heroines referred to in this study, such as the Wicked Queen or even Cixous's 'laughing' Medusa, is horrific, recalling the cacophonic cackle of evil witches from the centuries of fairy tales embedded in our consciousnesses. She reconstitutes a perpetual evil which undermines and overrides moral and social (and, therefore, traditional religious) authority with potent paganism. This thesis has already discussed the ways in which Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* described witchcraft as a subversive fertility cult, in which the High Priestess copulates with a massive phallus. But Rowling's priestess is less prone to phallic worship. Her appropriation of the pen – the phallus – challenges everything. For Lacan, and the history of Western culture, the phallus is central to all processes of meaning and signification; subjecting the phallus pin to a supernatural, female power has the same effect, threatening the very existence of those systems of order and communication. Professor Umbridge, in refusing to submit to the usual hero-worship

directed at Harry, returns the witch to the anti-establishment, carnival realm of subversive literature. She embodies a combination of pure evil and feminist utopia and as such, is a crucial asset to contemporary feminism.

Embedded deeply in Rowling's representation of Umbridge and her hijacking of the *Harry Potter* series are the deep, subversive longings of the grotesque utopia that she embodies. Her presence is so subversive that it comes to undermine not just the patriarchal and misogynist hierarchies implicit in the text, but also the theoretical perspective of fantasy fiction. *Harry Potter* combines the Real of its blatant commercialism and social construction with a feminist utopian longing lurking just beneath its surface. But the division affirmed in the course of fantasy theory between the Imaginary, in which the subversive potential of the fantastic traditionally resides, and the Real of patriarchal society becomes narrowed in the course of *The Order of the Phoenix*, bringing the two traditionally opposing elements perilously close together. Feminist critics will surely argue that Dumbledore's return to Hogwarts and his rescue of Umbridge from the centaurs in the forest diminishes her potential power. Indeed, as in many of the texts studied, such as Gaskell's *Lois the Witch* and Blyton's *The Adventures of the Wishing Chair*, narrative closure does function to reinforce dominant social mores. At the same time, it provides a troubling and unnerving glimpse of female authority and rule. Her banishment from Hogwarts at the end of the novel, 'chased ... gleefully from the premises' and being 'whack[ed] alternately with a walking stick and a sock-full of chalk' is inevitable because, like Mary Coleridge's exclusion from Fairyland, the threat that she poses is so great.[18] The doleful image of

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[18] Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, p. 412

her limping away from the school implies both the threat implicit in her subversion and also, like the historical legacy of the witch, the dangerous possibility of her return. The grotesque and violent feminist challenge that she initiates is, indeed, a far more real and present threat than the text's largely absent male evil, symbolised by the omnipotence of He-Who-Cannot-Be-Named. Umbridge is the voice of feminist 'anger, rage and rebellion', the avenger of years of female oppression and violation, who usurps (albeit only temporarily) the rule of Dumbledore and the misogynist hierarchy that he controls.[19] Female violence and sadism are rarely found to this extent in children's literature; Umbridge seems more typical of the feminism of Angela Carter or Anne Sexton. Her invention allows Rowling to counter much of the anti-feminist criticism that her earlier novels have attracted. Umbridge, rather than any of her typical female characters, provides Rowling with a new, riskier voice in the world of twentieth century children's fantasy. Indeed, this utopian thought has even greater significance. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is the fastest selling book ever, and will surely, in time, become one of the biggest sellers. The ideological manipulation implicit in such a massive readership will surely extend the feminism of the witch to a wider audience than ever before.

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[19] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 30

Appendix 1:

Witch, Writer or Both?: Author Biographies

Enid Blyton

Enid Mary Blyton (1897 – 1968) was a prolific British children's author, noted particularly for numerous series of books based on recurring characters and designed for different age groups. She has become one of the most popular children's authors of all time, with her books selling more than six hundred million copies worldwide. More than two hundred million copies of the twenty-four Noddy books have been sold worldwide; other particularly popular series include *The Famous Five* (consisting of twenty-one novels, 1942 – 1963, based on four child detectives and their dog) and *Secret Seven* books (consisting of fifteen novels, 1949 – 1963, based on the adventures of seven children who solve various mysteries), *The Wishing Chair* series (1937 - 1950) and *The Magic Faraway Tree* series (1939 - 1951).

Her work comprises mainly children's adventure stories, and some fantasy, occasionally involving magic. Her books were - and still are - enormously popular in Britain, India, New Zealand and Australia, as well as being read in other countries worldwide, and being translated into nearly ninety languages. Modern reprints of some books have had changes made, such as the replacement of golliwogs with teddy bears, in response to contemporary attitudes on racial stereotypes. This has itself drawn criticism from those who view it as tampering with an important piece of the history of children's literature. Critics have focused particularly on a single story, *The Little Black Doll*, which could be interpreted as racist (the doll wanted to be pink).

Eavan Boland

Eavan Boland (1944 -) was born in Dublin. Her father, Frederick Boland, was a career diplomat and her mother was the post-expressionist painter, Frances Kelly. She was educated in London and New York as well as in Dublin, graduating from Trinity College with first class honours in English Literature. Boland's first book of poetry was *New Territory*, published in Dublin in 1967. This was followed by *The War Horse* (1975), *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *Night Feed* (1982), which established her reputation as a writer on the ordinary lives of women and on the difficulties faced by women poets in a male-dominated literary world.

Boland's other publications include: *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967-1987* (1996), *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980-1990* (1990), and a prose memoir, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995). Her collection *In a Time of Violence* (1994) received a Lannan Award and was short-listed for the T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize. She is co-editor of *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*. Boland has taught at a number of universities, including Trinity College, Dublin and is currently Bella Mabury and Eloise Mabury Knapp Professor in the Humanities and Director of Creative Writing at Stanford University.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

Marion Eleanor Zimmer Bradley (1930 – 1999) was a prolific American author of largely feminist fantasy novels such as *The Mists of Avalon*. Bradley was the editor of the long-running *Sword and Sorceress* anthology series, which encouraged submissions of fantasy stories featuring original and non-traditional heroines from

young and upcoming authors. She created the planet of *Darkover* as a setting for her own series, writing a large number of texts as a solo author and later collaborating with other authors to produce anthologies, for which, once again she encouraged story submissions from unpublished authors.

Bradley's first novel-length work was *Falcons of Narabedla*, published in 1957. Also, writing early in her career as Morgan Ives, Miriam Gardner, John Dexter and Lee Chapman, she produced several works outside the speculative fiction genre, including some gay and lesbian novels; *I Am a Lesbian*, published in 1962, was considered pornographic at the time of its publication. The feminist re-telling of Arthurian myth, *Mists of Avalon*, made the *New York Times* best seller list, while *The Firebrand* (1987) gave a narrative voice to the women of the Trojan War. *The Forest House* (1993) and *Lady of Avalon* (1997) are prequels to *Mists of Avalon*. In 2000, Bradley was awarded posthumously the World Fantasy Award for lifetime achievement. In addition to her novels, Bradley edited many magazines, including *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, which she started in 1988.

Olga Broumas

Lesbian poet and translator Olga Broumas (1949 -) is the author of seven books of poetry, collected in *RAVE: 1975-1999*, and four books of translations of the Greek Nobel Laureate poet, Odysseas Elytis. She is noted for writing openly erotic poems that combine ancient Greek myths and echoes with late twentieth-century idiom and ideology. Born in Syros, Greece, Broumas moved to the United States as a young woman, and attended the University of Pennsylvania in 1970 and the University of Oregon in 1973.

Broumas's first work published in North America was *Caritas* (1976), an unbound collection of five broadsides declaring one woman's love for another. In 1976, the poet and literary critic, Stanley Kunitz, chose her second volume, *Beginning with O,* as the seventy-second winner of the Yale Younger Poets Prize. This volume clearly identifies Broumas with the development of lesbian culture in the twentieth century, drawing on fairy tales and stereotypical images of female repression to challenge attitudes to female sexuality. Collections of poetry such as *Soie Sauvage* (1979), *Pastoral Jazz* (1983), *Black Holes, Black Stockings* (1985) and *Sappho's Gymnasium* (1994) followed. Broumas is currently Poet-in-Residence and Director of Creative Writing at Brandeis University.

Mary Coleridge

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge (1861 – 1907) was a British novelist, poet, and essayist. The great great niece of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the great niece of Sara Coleridge, the author of *Phantasmion,* Coleridge wrote poetry under the pseudonym 'Anodos', meaning wanderer. She remained single and lived with her family for her whole life, dedicating herself to her work. Along with other Victorian women poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Coleridge committed herself to a rigorous process of self-education, learning Greek, Latin, literature and history. Influenced by Tolstoy's religious humanism, she taught grammar and literature to working class women, first at her own home, and from 1895, at the Working Women's College in London.

In 1893, Coleridge published the first of five novels, *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus,* to wide critical acclaim. Her most famous work, *The King with Two Faces* (1897),

was followed by *The Shadow on the Wall* (1904) and *The Lady on the Drawing Room Floor* (1906). However, it is her lyric poems for which she has received the greatest attention, although hundreds remained unpublished during her lifetime. She has also published two collections of essays, *Non Sequitur* (1900) and *Gathered Leaves* (published posthumously in 1910).

Emily Dickinson

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830 – 1886) was an American lyric poet, and an obsessively private writer - only seven of her eight hundred or so poems were published during her lifetime. Dickinson withdrew from social contact at the age of twenty-three and devoted herself in secret to writing. She was educated at Amherst Academy (1834 - 1847) and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (1847 - 1848). She began writing poetry soon after, and from 1858, she assembled many of her poems in packets of 'fascicles', which she bound herself with needle and thread. After Dickinson's death in 1886, her sister Lavinia published her poems. She co-edited three volumes from 1891 to 1896.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, the poet's niece, transcribed and published more poems, and in 1945, *Bolts Of Melody* essentially completed the task of bringing Dickinson's poems to the public. The publication of Thomas H. Johnson's 1955 edition of Emily Dickinson's poems finally gave readers a complete and accurate text. Dickinson's works have had considerable influence on modern poetry. Her frequent use of dashes, sporadic capitalization of nouns, off-rhymes, broken metre and unconventional metaphors have contributed to her reputation as one of the most innovative poets of nineteenth-century American

literature. Later feminist critics have challenged the popular conception of the poet as a reclusive, eccentric figure, and underlined her intellectual and artistic sophistication.

Elizabeth Gaskell

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810 – 1865), often referred to simply as Mrs. Gaskell, ranks today as one of the most highly regarded British novelists of the Victorian era. In 1832 she married William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister, and settled in the industrial city of Manchester, moving in circles which included religious dissenters and social reformers such as William and Mary Howitt. Mrs. Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, was published anonymously in 1848 and told the story of a working-class family in which the father, John Barton, lapses into bitter class hatred and carries out a retaliatory murder at the behest of his trade union. Its timely appearance in the revolutionary year of 1848 brought the novel immediate success, winning the praise of Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle.

Dickens invited her to contribute to his magazine, *Household Words*, where her next major work, *Cranford*, appeared in 1853. Her work brought her many friends, including Charlotte Brontë. When Charlotte died in 1855, her father, Patrick Brontë, asked Gaskell to write her biography. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) was written with admiration and covered a huge quantity of firsthand material with great narrative skill. Among her later works, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), dealing with the impact of the Napoleonic Wars upon simple people, is notable. Her last and longest work, *Wives and Daughters* (1864 - 1866), concerned the interlocking fortunes of two or three country families and is widely considered her finest work. She died before it was

finished.

Nancy Holder

No information currently available.

Dorothy Hughes

Dorothy Belle Hughes (1904 — 1993) was a American crime and mystery writer and critic. Born Dorothy Flanagan in Kansas City, Missouri, she studied journalism before commencing a literary career that included fourteen novels. Hughes's first published book, *Dark Certainty* (1931), was a collection of poems. It received an award from the Yale Series of Younger Poets. In 1940, her first novel, *The So Blue Marble*, appeared. Her best-known works include *Ride the Pink Horse* (1946) and *In a Lonely Place* (1947), perhaps Hughes's greatest novel. For her criticism, Hughes won a 1950 Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America.

Three of Hughes's books were successfully made into films: *The Fallen Sparrow*, starring John Garfied; *Ride the Pink Horse*, directed by Robert Montgomery; and *In a Lonely Place*, directed by Nicholas Ray. From 1940 to 1979 she reviewed mysteries for the *Albuquerque Tribune, Los Angeles Times, New York Herald-Tribune* and other newspapers. In 1978 Hughes was named a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America. She won her second Edgar Allan Poe award for her critical biography, *Erle Stanley Gardner: The Case of the Real Perry Mason.*

Nancy Krulik

No information currently available.

Edna St Vincent Millay

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892 – 1950) was a lyric poet and playwright, and the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Born in Rockland, Maine, she graduated from Vassar in 1912, published *Renascence and Other Poems* (1917), and took the lead in her own play *The Princess Marries the Page*. Meanwhile she earned her living with pseudonymous magazine sketches published under the name Nancy Boyd, collected in *Distressing Dialogues* (1924). With the frank and cynical love poetry of *A Few Figs From Thistles* in 1920, and *Second April* in 1921, Edna St. Vincent Millay was hailed as the voice of her generation and the embodiment of the New Woman.

After two years in Europe as a correspondent for *Vanity Fair*, she joined a writer's crusade to stay the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927; she commemorated their end in five poems, 'Justice Denied in Massachusett', 'Hangman's Oak', 'The Anguish', 'To Those Without Pity' and 'Wine from These Grapes' (collected in *The Buck in the Snow* in 1928). After more volumes of lyrics came a joint translation (with George Dillon) of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* in 1936; *Conversation at Midnight*, a dramatic verse colloquy showing her increasing political awareness, in 1937; and *Huntsman, What Quarry?* in 1939. The following year, she published *Make Bright the Arrows: 1940 Notebook*, which consisted of 'poems for a world at war'. Thomas Hardy once said that America had two great attractions: the skyscraper and the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Margaret Murray

Margaret Alice Murray (1863-1963) was a prominent British anthropologist and Egyptologist. She was also a pioneer campaigner for women's rights. Margaret Murray accompanied the renowned Egyptologist, Sir William Flinders Petrie, on several archaeological excavations in Egypt and Palestine during the late 1890s. She was well known in academic circles for scholarly contributions to Egyptology and the study of folklore, particularly for her theory of a pan-European, pre-Christian pagan religion that revolved around the Horned God. Her ideas are acknowledged to have significantly influenced the emergence of Wicca. However, Margaret Murray's reputation as a witchcraft scholar was criticised by most historians because of her tendency to subjectively interpret or otherwise manipulate evidence to conform to the theory.

Murray's best-known and most controversial text, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, was published in 1921, succeeded by *God of the Witches* in 1933 and *The Divine King in England* in 1954. She was consequently named Assistant Professor of Egyptology at the University College of London in 1924, a post she held until her retirement in 1935. In 1926, she became a fellow of Britain's Royal Anthropological Institute. Murray became President of the Folklore Society in 1953. Ten years later, having reached 100 years of age, Margaret Murray published her final work, an autobiography entitled *My First Hundred Years* (1963).

Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath (1932 – 1963) was an American poet, novelist, short story writer, and

essayist. Most famous as a poet, Plath is also known for *The Bell Jar*, her semi-autobiographical novel detailing her struggle with clinical depression. Plath and Anne Sexton are credited with advancing the genre of confessional poetry that Robert Lowell and W. D. Snodgrass initiated. Since her suicide, Sylvia Plath has risen to iconic status and is considered to be one of the best poets of her generation. She kept a diary from the age of eleven until her suicide in February 1963. Her adult diaries were first published in 1980 as *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, and in 2000, Anchor Books published *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, hailed as a 'genuine literary event' by Joyce Carol Oates.

In 1982, Plath became the first poet to win a Pulitzer Prize posthumously (for *The Collected Poems*). While critics initially responded favourably to Plath's first book, *The Colossus*, it has also been described as conventional, and lacking the drama of her later works. The poems in *Ariel* mark a departure from her earlier work into a more confessional area of poetry. The impact of *Ariel* was dramatic, with its frank descriptions of mental illness in pseudo-autobiographical poems such as 'Daddy'. *Crossing the Water* (1971) and *Winter Trees* (1972) followed, together with a collection of letters to her mother and several stories for children.

J. K. Rowling

Joanne Rowling, O.B.E. (1965-) is an English fiction writer who won international fame as the author of the *Harry Potter* fantasy series, which has won multiple awards, and sold over three hundred million copies worldwide. In February 2004, *Forbes* magazine estimated her fortune at £576 million (just over US$1 billion), making her the first person ever to become a $US billionaire by writing books. In June 1997,

Bloomsbury published *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* with an initial print run of only 1000 copies, 500 of which were distributed to libraries. Five months later it won its first award, a Nestlé Smarties Book Prize. In February, the novel won the prestigious British Book Award for Children's Book of the Year, and, later the Children's Book Award. In December, 1999, the third Harry Potter novel, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, won the Smarties Prize, making Rowling the first person to win the award three times running. In January, 2000, *Prisoner of Azkaban* won the inaugural Whitbread Children's Book of the Year award.

To date, six of the seven volumes of the Harry Potter series, one for each of Harry's school years, have already been published and all have broken sales records. The last three volumes in the series have all been the fastest-selling books in history, grossing more in their opening twenty-four hours than blockbuster films. Book Six of her series earned The Guinness World Records Award for being the fastest-selling book ever. In June 2006, Rowling was named 'the greatest living British writer' by The Book Magazine. Rowling topped the poll, receiving nearly three times as many votes as second-place author, fantasy writer Terry Pratchett.

Anne Sexton

Anne Sexton (1928 – 1974), an American poet and playwright, was born in Newton, Massachusetts. She was raised in comfortable middle-class circumstances in Weston, Massachusetts, but was never at ease with the life prescribed for her. Her father was an alcoholic, and her mother's literary aspirations had been frustrated by family life. Sexton's biographer, Diane Middlebrook, recounts possible sexual abuse by Anne's

parents during her childhood; at the very least, Anne felt that her parents were hostile to her and feared that they might abandon her. Several attempts at suicide led to intermittent institutionalisation. During these years, Sexton's therapist encouraged her to write. In 1957 Sexton joined several Boston writing groups, and she came to know such writers as Maxine Kumin, Robert Lowell, George Starbuck, and Sylvia Plath. Her poetry became central to her life, and she mastered formal techniques that gained her wide attention.

In 1960 *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* was published to good reviews. Such poems as 'You, Doctor Martin', 'The Bells' and 'The Double Image' were often anthologised; not only was her poetry technically excellent, but it was meaningful to the mid-century readers who lived daily with similar kinds of fear and angst. In 1967, Sexton won the Pulitzer Prize for her third poetry collection, *Live or Die*, helping open the door not only for female poets, but for female issues. Sexton wrote about menstruation, abortion, masturbation and adultery before such issues were even topics for discussion, helping redefine the boundaries of poetry. Volumes such as *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), *Love Poems* (1969) and a feminist revision of fairy tales, *Transformations* (1971) followed. The title for her eighth collection of poetry, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1973), came from her meeting with a Roman Catholic priest who told her: 'God is in your typewriter'.

Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893 - 1978)

Sylvia Townsend Warner was a highly individual writer of novels, short stories and

poems. She contributed short stories to the *New Yorker* for more than forty years, translated Proust's *Contre Saint-Beuve* into English, and wrote a biography of the novelist T. H. White and a guide to Somerset. Warner was born at Harrow on the Hill, where her father was a house-master at Harrow School. An apparently happy and comfortable upbringing is described vividly in the largely autobiographical volumes *Scenes From Childhood* (1981) and *A Spirit Rises* (1962) . Her first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1927), was an instant success on both sides of the Atlantic. In America, it was the first ever selection of the newly-formed Book of the Month Club.

Before the publication of *Lolly Willowes*, the name of Sylvia Townsend Warner was unknown to the literary world apart from a slim volume of verse, *The Espalier*, issued the previous year; but by the time her second novel, *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, appeared in 1927, she had won the recognition of a large, discerning group of readers both in Britain and in the United States, and was being hailed as a writer of rare promise and individuality, with a special gift for 'making the ordinary seem extraordinary'. Subsequent publications include *The True Heart* (1929); political novels, *Summer Will Show* (1936) and *After The Death of Don Juan* (1938); a collection of short stories, *The Salutation* (1932); and the collection of poems, *Time* (1928).

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