Space(s) of the Fantastic

This book provides a series of new addresses to the enduring problem of how to categorize the Fantastic. The approach taken is through the lens of spatiality; the Fantastic gives us new worlds, although of course these are refractions of worlds already in being. In place of 'real' spaces (whatever they might be), the Fantastic gives us imaginary spaces, although within those spaces historical and cultural conflicts are played out, albeit in forms that stretch our understanding of everyday location, and our usual interpretations of cause and effect. Many authors are addressed here, from a variety of different geographical and national traditions, thus demonstrating how the Fantastic – as a mode, a genre, a way of thinking, imagining and writing – continually traverses borders and boundaries. We hope to move the ongoing debate about the Fantastic forward in a scholarly as well as an engaging way.

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Contents

Introduction

Space and Fantastic

David Punter and C. Bruna Mancini

Of Margins, Transgressions, Abnormalities

What is the Fantastic? This is the main question this book tries to answer. Specifically, is it possible to define it using contemporary Literary Geography Studies? Is it conceivable to circumscribe such a magmatic, fluid, fleeing argument once and for all? As the Fantastic is what transgresses the normality of the so-called real, and goes beyond the known and everyday events of our lives, can it really be a norm, bounded, and defined? And, in particular, can the real itself be a site of the Fantastic, if we take into account uncanny and eccentric perspectives/narrations centred on the darker, more frightful and shifty spaces and places of our everyday existences? In fact, crossing the borders between the real and the unreal is in some ways easier than we expect. It outlines an uncertain, dangerous path from our living world to an occult, an unknown universe. Such a liminal and fleeing movement from our reassuring places to the spaces of the unusual and the unfamiliar/ *das Unheimlich*, with the subjects almost unaware of having passed the threshold between the two, produces a limit-situation that can transform itself into a hallucinating phantasmagoria, similar to the visions of an outsider. That unsure path, full of forks, drops, and coves, is where the Fantastic most haunts and attracts us.

The language of the Fantastic can evoke, exorcise, seize the fears, the uncertainties, the contradictions that usually appear in moments of crisis. In fact, the Fantastic offsets the linear or jagged chronotope of everyday life thus leading towards what is uncertain and undetermined. The Fantastic uses a language impregnated with snares, *trompe l'oeil*, ambiguities, allusions, abnormal comparisons, sudden mutations, and overturnings. It is the very language that focuses on the evocative power of the words and on the strength of the imagination both of authors and readers. In " *La paura, atto e spazio dell'interdetto. Il fantastico tra sacro e profano* "/"Fear, deed and space of the forbidden. The fantastic between sacred and profane", Romolo Runcini writes that:

> [T]he fantastic plays with the fear for the different, the other from oneself, and, even if it ambiguously alludes to the supernatural plane (the unreal), it keeps its fabling discourse to the terrestrial setting (the real), insinuating a descent to the underworld or a fall into the abysses of the language that suspends any judgment about the described event in order to charm the reader into a labyrinth of infinite choices without any safety route.
>
> (p. 107, my translation)

The pleasure of the text permits the pleasure of fear, of transgression, of the uncanny to go ahead. The subversion of the ordinary world order pushes the reader of the Fantastic towards a difficult, ambivalent, dangerous itinerary that emphasizes the ambiguities of the real and makes us prey to our own imagination by breaking through the horizon towards which we are all plunging.

Following in Hegel's footsteps, Runcini identifies a fluid, hidden, elusive zone of human consciousness in which the subject is no more the master of her/himself, and yet preserves a shadow of the Ego, the Ego's double. Hegel's viewpoint is that horror comes from the most paradoxical and illogical part of the human soul (the one that a century later would be called the unconscious) unable to control the real. Fear – which is the instinctive and emotional reaction to the impact of alterity, of the unknown, of a dominating phenomenon we cannot decode – can destabilize the subjective and collective identity that is strictly linked to everyday reality. Fantastic is the writing of inner reality, rich in impulses and chaos. It is the language of freedom and transgression, ambiguity and charm, under the spell of a fear aroused by any existential and/or collective crisis. Fantastic writing insinuates itself into the magmatic fault between body and soul, conscious and unconscious, real and unreal, and acquires a dynamism that moves away from the so-called real. As a matter of fact, in these marginal and extreme regions some extraordinary, uncanny, and monstrous characters appear as figures of freedom: the witch, the ghost, the (un)dead, the lunatic, the hybrid, the mad scientist, demons and doubles, and so on and so forth. In the essay " *La linea del mostro* "/"The Line of the Monster", Toni Negri writes that every time power declares that history has ended and nature experiences an ultimate order, so that only those who adapt to measure, who obey and believe, can truly be happy, monsters necessarily appear in order to disavow any normality, obedience, and belief. The monster is an adventuring knight that beckons us towards the most dangerous places, frees us from dogmatism, and incites us to create new worlds. Monsters are philosophical heroes, powers of creativity/creation; they represent the return of the repressed, the threshold of metamorphosis, the ultimate testimony of our capability to transform the world. The angel who could save us from the inadequacies of our everyday life has to be monstrous in order to be recognized. In his monstrous body all our fears and anxieties unite, even those desires and ambitions that our societies have repressed from our lives. He represents the scarring of all the wounds that the 'dark side' inflicts on the order of reality.

1
Magissatopia

The Place of the Witch

David Punter

It is tempting to begin this chapter with a history of the witch; or of the witches, because plurality is often of the essence of the witch; or of witchcraft. But it also impossible, because there is, in a sense, no such history. What there is instead is a narrative compounded of patriarchal accusation; female abjection; the stifling of attempts at rebellious power; returns and recrudescences of 'natural magic'; lives lived and lost in Gothic shadows – and other matters, many of which can be defined as tests of the limits of justice and power and intrinsically linked to place, as typically in the Salem witch trials of 1692–3 (see Macfarlane 1970; Hutton 1999).

There is no escaping the length of the shadow which these trials – although they were typical of many – have cast over history. It is not only that, as far as can be told, a large number of women – and a few men – were put to death on flimsy evidence, or rather no evidence at all; the trials underscore the unreliability of the whole nature of 'evidence' as conceived in Western jurisprudence. That the trials stand as a prime, and haunting, example of communal injustice has only been underlined and magnified by the enduring fame of Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*, which demonstrates how society's dealings with supposed witches can be taken as an emblem of that same society's dealings with any outlawed group – so that the witch comes to be a figure for the abused, the relegated, the physically marginal.

This then is both the strength and the weakness of the witch: strength in that the haunting voice which comes back from the margins, from the shadows, appears to hold an ancient wisdom which we ignore at our peril; weakness in that the weapons by means of which witchcraft may appear to wish to preserve its power, its sources of knowledge, are continually demonstrated to be ineffectual, incapable of resisting authority, an authority vested in the State from at least the seventeenth century onwards but also vested in our reading selves as we transmute ourselves into the witchfinder-general, that savage and weak-kneed parody of a military man whose only success consists of further abjecting those already, by virtue of poverty, gender, and age, excluded from social space.

So: there are no witches, the space of the witch is empty; they are the creation of an over-burdened, frightened patriarchal imagination. Is this so? It might alternatively be that the witch comes to remind us of much of what post-structuralism claims, that we are frequently in the presence not of firmly maintained binaries but rather of the undecidable. We might even say that the 'question of the witch' is not a question susceptible of a

permanent answer (if indeed there are any such questions) but rather has to do with transience, becoming, halting, temporary, liminal states: what might it be like, not to *be* a witch, but rather to experience a moment of 'witch-becoming', being able to think and feel with the intelligence and the senses of a witch?[1] Or is this something of which, actually, we all have experience, except that it must pass under the sign of repression, be unacknowledged in the daylight world? (see Warner 2014; Auerbach 1995).

My first text in the space of the witch is Jeanette Winterson's *The Daylight Gate* (2012). As well as being one of Winterson's most accomplished texts, it is also one of her shortest, and written in a terse, clipped, clear style. It responds to the true documents, whatever that might mean, of the notorious Lancaster witch trial of 1612 (also, of course, the topic of William Harrison Ainsworth's much earlier novel, *The Lancashire Witches*),[2] and by Winterson's own account it attempts to address several questions: principal among them is how it came to be the case that a wealthy independent woman, Alice Nutter, was arraigned and found guilty alongside many other women who were clearly destitute, without hope, and quite possibly mentally unwell (Winterson 2012: viii–ix).

The answer Winterson constructs is entirely plausible; but the wider issues which the novel throws up are not so easily addressed. It might be, for example, that some of those accused as witches might, when driven to the wall by persecution and without any prospect of just outcome, have found themselves driven to the only hope still available, namely that there might really be unconscious, unseen, supernatural powers that might come to rescue them *in extremis* and thus allow the space of the witch to come fully into being, as a recourse, as a shelter.

But what is especially fascinating about *The Daylight Gate* is the quality of doubt, of undecidability, which hovers over the entire text. At the very last, when Alice Nutter is about to be hanged, she is, in a sense, saved: she dies, certainly, but by what might appear to be her own design, through the agency of her pet falcon:

> The bird dropped through the air, wheeled, swooped, landed straight on Alice's arm. The crowd was screaming. No one dared approach her.
>
> Alice stared into the crowd for a second. Her hair was white. She was much changed. But in the crowd there was a face she recognised who recognised her. She smiled her old smile. She looked young again.
>
> She stretched back her neck, exposing the long line of her throat. The falcon flapped his wings to keep himself steady as he dug his feet into her collarbone to make a perch. His head dived forwards in one swift movement. He severed her jugular vein.
>
> (221–2)

This falcon has been an object of fear for some time; is it a witch's familiar rather than a real bird, and whatever it is, is it appropriate that a woman, albeit a rich and distinguished one, should so trespass on male territory, on an established space of power, as to keep and train a falcon?

Behind this lie further questions: "Her hair was white. … She looked young again" – throughout the novel there has been a hovering question as to where Alice Nutter's apparent sources of eternal youth come from – in earlier life, we are told, she had consorted with those great Elizabethan magical demons beloved of the Gothicists, the alchemist Dr John Dee and his associate Edward Kelley, and Kelley, we are told, had been her lover. But these questions, as is so often the case in the literature of the witch, are left unanswered. An

example perhaps of that old Gothic trope, the 'unexplained supernatural'.

In moving on to my second text, Celia Rees's *Witch Child* (2000), I want to begin to attend to the peculiar connection between recent witch literature and the adolescent, especially, of course, the adolescent girl – there is a whole subgenre here, I have read some of it, and in many cases I wish I had not bothered (but then, obviously, I am not the target audience). But Rees's book has a distinct power, and conjures a witch-space, a *magissatopia*, of its own. It is again set in the seventeenth century, between England and America, as Mary tries to establish her identity against a background of puritan witch-hunting. She is a witch – she tells us so herself in the very first lines, "I am Mary. I am a witch" (11) – but is she? She has been brought up by her grandmother, and such an upbringing is, time and time again, the mark of the witch: her grandmother's name is not 'Nutter', but it does happen to be 'Nuttall' – but surely this must be, must it not, a mere coincidence. In any case, her grandmother is put to death as a witch, but Mary shows only slight signs of witchery: an affinity with native Americans, who see something in her not apparent to herself; and an ability to help in traumatic times of birthing.

This cannot save her. In scenes directly reminiscent of *The Crucible*, she is testified against by a group of hysterical young women, and only barely escapes with her life, which raises huge questions about readerly position. Are we to side with Mary, outcast, outlaw – and of course outlawry is the subtext of so many recent vampire tales, from Anne Rice to Poppy Z. Brite and the apparently endless Stephenie Meyer – or with the other young women, whose main concerns are with the 'normal' transition through the space of adolescence to adulthood, the attraction of boys, the expulsion of all 'othered' intimations of power? Mary is, or becomes, a herbalist: she seeks and finds knowledge of natural remedies, but to others this is a further sign of her suspect consanguinity with the native Americans, those who inhabit their own soil, evidence of a certain attraction to the places of the barbaric, and it is this evidence that condemns, places her – literally at times – in a neo-Gothic physical realm beyond the pale of civilization.

Yet we might say that these witch-signs are in fact the insignia of imagination, an imagination that must be rigorously repressed, as the puritan elders in the novel practise this same rigorous repression on themselves. The witch, then – that element of the self that we may refer to as the 'witch-self' – figures as the search for something beyond the established topography of culture, something both transcendent and transgressive; and it cannot be harboured within safe boundaries, it must be expelled. The witch as scapegoat: perhaps because she is too close to sacred female space, she represents a sanctuary which has no place within the modern. And so at the end, Mary says,

> I have taken refuge in Rebekah's borning room. Rebekah is near her time, very near. Martha says they will not dare to enter here. Sarah has brought me what I asked her for: food, boy's clothing, a blanket. I take the moccasins and the little leather pouch from my box and put it round my neck. My few precious things. All I have to show for my life so far lived. All I have to take with me to the wilderness. I must take my chances there. If I stay here, I hang for sure.
>
> (227–8)

It is in those modern classics of the supernatural, Terry Pratchett and J. K. Rowling, that we can find further versions of some of these ideas. Some of Pratchett's early work – I am thinking here particularly of *Wyrd Sisters* (1980) and *Witches Abroad* (1991) – deals

extensively in the opposition between the wisdom of the wizard, incorporated in the spaces of Unseen University, and the learning of the witch, dis-corporated across places and histories. What the wizards possess is a kind of access to antiquity and tradition, but this has become hidebound, symbolized in an all too apt parody of the institution of 'higher learning', and in the even more hilarious and pointed figure of the Librarian, who has been transformed by some always previous, always ill-described act of magic into an orang-utan.

The witches in these books, however, represent another world, another *topos*, altogether. Reminiscent throughout of the three witches of *Macbeth*, they also represent three ages, stages and representations of witchcraft.[3] Granny Weatherwax, feared by villagers, aloof in her dealings with others, infinitely knowledgeable not only about herbal remedies but also, through her very own 'science' of 'headology', about human nature, is the witch as wise woman, terrifying and respected in equal measure. Nanny Ogg is a different kind of witch: lubricious, full of sexual innuendo and given to over-eating and over-drinking, she signifies a different kind of female solidarity, the solidarity of childbirth, solicitude over errant husbands, the ability to rise above the vicissitudes of women's lives into a realm of Chaucerian ribaldry and jollity.[4] She is a one-woman hen party. And the third witch, the regrettably misnamed Magrat, is a parody of the maiden, all Glastonbury bells, beads and candles, hopelessly otherworldly as far as the older witches are concerned yet representing in some sense a more 'modern' witchcraft tradition.

As to Rowling, I have only space here to mention one crucial scene, which occurs in the final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, where a final battle for power is played out between two versions of the witch.[5] What we might call the 'domestic', communal version is represented by Molly Weasley, wife to an abstracted and foolish (though lovable) husband, mother to seven (yes, of course, seven) boys, preoccupied with feeding her family and their friends, able to perform magic but apparently too busy most of the time with the mundane to bother with such frivolities. The other version of the witch is encapsulated in Bellatrix Lestrange – the witch as murderous, vengeful; angry with a psychotic fury that appears to know no bounds.[6] On the one hand the village wise woman, healer, supplier of goods both physical and spiritual, on the other the witch as source of fear, caster of curses, devastator of livestock. The witch can bless, and the witch can curse; it comes, of course, as no surprise who wins the battle (cf., for example, Sallis 2000).

In Neil Gaiman's rather more erudite *Stardust* (1998), we come across places of the witch and witchcraft in abundance; and in particular, there is again a group of three witches. They are nameless and old, and the plot is based around their search for rejuvenation. There are lone witches in literature – the Wicked Witch of the West, for example (Baum 1900) – and there are male witches – think of Tolkien's shadowy but tantalizing Witch-King of Angmar. But on the whole witches are female and multiple, and thus fit precisely into the category Jung defined as 'anima' (see Hillman 1979). But more than that; they can fit at times, especially in their pagan triplicity, with ancient representations of the terrifying, eating, castrating, threateningly fertile female: the Norns, the Furies, the harpies, the Graeae, the Gorgons – perhaps the list would be longer but for the overwhelming force of monolithic Greek and other patriarchies and their enduring power of displacement (see, for example, Graves 1948).

The force of the witch in *Stardust* derives from antiquity, but also from the weakness always inherent in the search for immortality. The witch-queen, eldest of the three sisters, sets out to replenish her sorority's supply of youth, but her story intersects with others:

principally with a tale about succession – which of seven (yes, seven) brothers is to become the anointed ruler of the realm of Stormhold – and with a different tale of a young man, Tristran, who is charged by his beloved with finding for her a 'fallen star'. This fallen star, however, when Tristran finds it, turns out in fact to be a beautiful if rather alarming young woman, and the true inheritor of Stormhold is herself revealed as a woman, in fact as Tristran's mother.

This extended fable of the witch thus becomes another account of the three ages of woman – maiden, mother, crone – as it also becomes a story about liminal spaces, *magissatopias*, in particular those two countries which lie on either side of the 'wall' – on the one side the world of the everyday, the rather drab environs of village life, on the other the 'realms of faerie'. Yvaine, the fallen star, cannot return across the wall, because she would be transformed into the lump of rock which is all that is left, in the 'real' world, of 'star' material.

What, however, of the witch? Well, the motif of the witch in the novel bifurcates: on the one hand there is the witch-queen, possessed of enormous power (although insufficient to save herself and her sisters from ageing); on the other there is the figure known sometimes as Madame Semele and sometimes as Ditchwater Sal (her name varies precisely according to her *topos*, her location) who represents what we might by now call the 'everyday' form of witchcraft, a 'traveller' figure, complete with caravan, charms and spells, who reminds the reader above all of the gypsy. That gypsies and witches have always had a legendary affinity is perhaps a point that needs no reminder, especially in terms of their common history of abjection and exile from any space that might be considered to be their own; but what is significant in *Stardust* is the struggle between these two forms of the witch – the figure of power and the probable charlatan or chancer.

I want to turn now to a novel which is probably far more strange to the reader than the ones I have already discussed, David Lindsay's *The Witch*. If Lindsay is known at all, it is probably because of a book called *Voyage to Arcturus*, published in 1920, which is sometimes thought of as science fiction, although in truth it is a fantasy novel set in a remarkable profusion of strange places, heterotopias. He also published a book called *The Haunted Woman*, and both are characterized by two things: first, an extraordinarily powerful imagination; second, a writing style of such clogged and frequently ungrammatical density as to defy description. He was, one critic has remarked, the greatest writer in English to be unable to write English.

The Witch, you may or may not be pleased to hear, is even worse. The edition in which I have read it – it was not published during Lindsay's lifetime – was published in 1976, and the editor coyly remarks that he has tidied up the style here and there – to, I would say, little or no effect – though who can say? However: to the place of the witch. The first thing to say is that there is, in *The Witch*, no witch. Or rather, there may be: but as our hero is led by clues (which are to the reader incomprehensible) to pursue her, she continually retreats. As readers we even frequently doubt the status of the only brief glimpse of her to be found in the entire book, which is very near the beginning.

You will by now not be surprised to hear that what entrances me about this book – for I am entranced by it – is the spatial undecidability of the witch. She cannot be contained by boundaries; the evidence of her presence, or of her passing, is continually erased; it is unclear whether she takes a single form or many. She may merely be a figure for an only

half-understood desire on the part of our hero; alternatively, or as well, she may be a figure for death, as the unattainable and constantly retreating female so frequently is in the ghost stories of, for example, Algernon Blackwood.

She casts no spells, we might say; yet the entire texture of the book is testament to an enveloping spell; and this spell takes a specific form, which is music. As again with Blackwood, in, say, *The Human Chord*, verbal language is insufficient; it could be argued that Lindsay's bizarre style is more willed than most critics have thought, and that it is designed specifically to repel meaning and demonstrate the feebleness of language when it comes to grasping higher truth (although in fairness, if that is the case, then one might ask why write at all?).

At any event, the witch in *The Witch* (if you see what I mean) is not there; she is a hole, a tear in the fabric of the everyday, a place that is not a place, a witch without witchcraft but with the power to form worlds, to relegate our customary view of events and history, as Gothic so often does, to a childish fantasy compared with the truer world which she represents and inhabits. I have to move on, after my brief mystical phase, to another excellent book which is not well enough known, *Witch Wood*, which is by John Buchan, a prolific popular writer, as you will know, but capable of a great deal more than that. And here, to an extent, we return to our witch-roots in the seventeenth century. That, of course, is simply what I am taking as my base for this chapter; the first witch in Western literary history is probably the biblical Witch of Endor, but because the word 'witch' was in this case supplied by the authorized version of the Bible, and this was commissioned by James I, otherwise famous for his terror of witchcraft, work on demonology and function as his very own witchfinder-general, one could argue that this takes us full circle – while underlining the significance of the fact that *Witch Wood* is, hardly surprisingly given that Buchan was himself a Scot, set in the specifically witch-haunted landscapes of Scotland.

It follows more or less directly in the tradition laid down so effectively by James Hogg in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, in that it deals in a rigid, high-minded but ultimately deeply oppressive form of Calvinist religion. To this it opposes, however, not the devil himself, as Hogg does in the form of Gil-Martin, but the apparently demonological practices of a group of villagers. The reality-status of these practices is left for the most part unclear; but the opposition itself is clear enough – between organized, institutionalized religion and the problematic survival of folk memories, the dances in the woods, the Dionysian rites that still survive in the dark places.

It is a book about haunting, about witchcraft, and about shape-changing. It is perhaps the shape-changing which I want to emphasize, for this strikes to the very heart of the legendry of the witch. For the witch, crucially, is not herself and can therefore be pinned down to no locality; she is the site of transformations. I have already mentioned the trope of witch's familiar, and it would take but a small step to see in this relation between the familiar and the unfamiliar the outlines of Freud's famous definition of the uncanny. Now you see her, now you don't. On the one hand, she is a 'familiar' element or aspect of community life, to be appealed to on matters requiring supernatural intervention, from individual health to the plague, from childbirth to the repelling of invaders; on the other, she is the utterly unfamiliar because she refuses to stay in one place, she refuses patriarchal categorization. Wherever the reasonable place, the space that can be categorized, might be, the witch is elsewhere: out of sight on the far shores of the fantastic.

The point is put particularly clearly in Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello*, which is centred on an idea of the 'worship of the Great Mother'. Whether Athena, also known as Sherine, the central figure, is actually part of this worship is a question forever deferred, since the entire book comprises different voices, different experiences of Athena, which never quite come together as a composite picture – spatially we might think of it as a form of cubist writing, perhaps. At any rate, one of these voices – a male one – tries to account for the phenomenon, which, he says, is 'hardly a new one':

> Whenever a religion tightens its rules, a significant number of people break away and go in search of more freedom in their search for spiritual contact. This happened during the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church did little more than impose taxes and build splendid monasteries and convents; the phenomenon known as 'witchcraft' was a reaction to this, and even though it was suppressed because of its revolutionary nature, it left behind it roots and traditions that have managed to survive over centuries.

Now, I don't want it to be supposed that I subscribe to Coelho's simplistic views on history, so clearly exemplified in *The Alchemist*, and after all on the following page he asserts that there is no female presence in Taoism despite the thousands of year in which Dao has welcomed and ordained female clerics, but this paragraph does serve, at least, to summarize one of the main lines of thought on the multiple locations of witchcraft.

Coelho summaries another one when he has another of his male characters – who are constantly, we notice, engaged in 'writing the woman' – say "I've always been convinced that women have a supernatural ability to know what's going on in a man's soul. They're all witches". This dismissive comment is, of course, par for the course: if a man can see into a woman's soul, then he has a gift – whether it be of magic, or love, or psychological acumen; if a woman can see into a man's soul, she is in 'the wrong place' – she is a witch.

But the so-called witch in *The Witch of Portobello*, although – or perhaps because – she is only seen through the eyes of others, is a character of interest. This is partly because she is an adopted child: born in Romania – yes, of course, to gypsies – then adopted into a Lebanese Christian family, from which she flees to London, then to Dubai – and so on. What this spatial rootlessness gives her is a need to 'fill in the gaps': this is most literally presented when she is learning Arabic calligraphy, and her teacher tells her that although her writing, her presentation of soul in letters, is improving remarkably, she has yet to give life and vividness to the gaps between letters and words. There is a gap in her past; and alongside the highly modern resonances here, we may also set historical and legendry uncertainty about the birth of witches, associated as this is with the intervention of the demonic, an unnatural transgression between realms.

It is probably as well to read these undecidabilities about the origin of witches as a characteristic reversion to the age-old uncertainty, resolved only by DNA testing, about paternity (when did you really last see your father?); and here we might think also, if there were space, about religious notions of immaculate conception – but I must move on, albeit in the light of some of these reflections, to my final text, Helen Oyeyemi's *White Is for Witching*. This is probably unique among the books I have mentioned in that in it we find ourselves frequently looking out through the eyes of the witch, whose name is Miranda.

But, of course, as in so many other cases it is not clear whether Miranda is a witch; it may be, for example, that the house in which she lives, the space she ambiguously occupies, is the real source of agency here. It is haunted by spirits from the past, in particular by the

spirit of Miranda's great-grandmother, who shares (I put that in the present tense because in this house nobody is ever dead) the same eating disorder as Miranda – 'pica', a medical condition that leads to the consumption of chalk, pebbles, coal, anything which is non-nutritious. And indeed, we even see through the eyes – or windows – of the house at some points in the story.

Miranda's difficulties are also due to race, and they are due to what we might also refer to as body dysmorphic disorder; the witching referred to in the title and throughout the book might have nothing to do with Miranda's agency, or even that of the haunted house, but might instead be the effect of the impossibility of living within one's own skin:

> She tensed, and I cracked her open like a bad nut with a glutinous shell. She split, and cleanly, from head to toe. There was another girl inside her, the girl from the photograph, all long straight hair and pretty pearlescence. This other girl wailed, "No, no, why did you do this? Put me back in". She gathered the halves of her shed skin and tried to fit them back together across herself.

What is the desire *of* the witch – not the desire which society implants on her suffering body, not the desire imputed to her through societal fear of the supernatural, but the desire *she* feels? The witch, it appears here, feeds on the unnatural; she consumes food which is not made for man. The witch can transform her own body, so that she becomes her own unfamiliar familiar. The witch has power over her associates (as does Miranda, in a fleeting, ephemeral kind of way). But the witch is also a victim. She is a victim of her own physical uncertainties; she is a victim of her outcast status, here emblematized principally in terms of race (Oyeyemi's black British self is somewhere here inside Miranda); she is a victim, in the end, of the baleful fate that awaits witches – probably dead, perhaps only confined behind an unbreakable wall which will not allow her to escape and return to a quotidian, living world, a place which will have nothing to do with witches, as it wishes nothing to do with the gendered or racialized other. It is, obviously, no accident that *White Is for Witching* is set in Dover.

I wish there were time here to refer to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which bears obvious comparison, but I am afraid there is not. Neither is there time to refer to Oyeyemi's Nigerian cultural ancestor, Amos Tutuola, with his tales of witchcraft in the Nigerian bush.[7] But just one or two closing remarks.

First, there are connections between witchcraft and the Gothic, and I worry that perhaps I have not made it sufficiently clear that the topology of witchcraft and the more conventional locations of the Gothic are intimately linked. They are, in two ways: first because there are plenty of witches, although some are known by another name, in the original Gothic – the figure of Matilda in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* is the first to come to mind. But second, and more importantly, Gothic has always been a place to tell alternative histories, to find different, unfamiliar accounts of the world, and the witch, as liminal, alternative figure, is an apt location or metaphor for this alternative, unfamiliar view of the world where spaces of the fantastic continually loom and interlock.

I would want to add that there is no answer to the question of the witch, in part because the witch is a figure of transmutation and resurgence. Although it is true, as I have said, that there were male witches put to death during the terrible times of the trials, the vast majority were women, and most historians concur in seeing the phenomenon – hysterical, if you will, although the very term contains within itself an unfathomable gendered irony –

as to do with anxiety about female knowledge and the ways in which this needed to be regarded as supernatural, which is, after all, but a short step from unnatural. It might therefore be that it is, forever, the 'season of the witch', in so many senses: because the witch is always 'in season', in the sense of being available to be hunted; because the witch has her own 'seasons' in the sense of periodic returns and recessions, as women's bodies do; because the witch will always recur, as the seasons do – although to pursue that path would take us into so many other cultures (and most recorded cultures have witches or some such phenomenon, some actuality of haunting, blessing, cursing: Chinese and Japanese fox fairies are just the first instance to come to mind).

'The witch is dead' – how comforting a thought that would be. Yet perhaps not: perhaps the idea of the witch is itself a succour of the deprived, the stricken, the powerless. But I cannot end without engaging with the most recent manifestations of so-called witchcraft in Britain, namely the accusations of witch practices levelled against small children by, among others, populations in the United Kingdom. What are we to make of this?

One must be brief. Accusations of witchcraft are made – always, and without exception – against the weak, the vulnerable, the confused. They are also, often, the outcome of an instability in religious certainty. But this returns us to what we might see as the main issue, which is about the witch's propensity to cast spells, to curse: perhaps the witch stands in for a wider wish to utter curses, to condemn – but we as ordinary citizens do not seem to have this power, and so will the witch arrive to redeem us from our impotence (which of course, to return momentarily to an earlier point, may be a form of adolescence); but then, of course, we will simultaneously need to continue to reject, to abject, to scapegoat the witch – witches, as unacknowledged parts of ourselves – in order to turn away from fears whose source may lie deeply in unresolved conflicts – about gender, about race, about power, about maturation – within our own customary, familiar acceptances. The witch needs a space of her own; but this space, while sometimes a place of succour or respite, is more usually a location of confinement, to do more with assurances of our own (temporary) safety than with her own.

Notes

1. The notion of 'witch-becoming' might refer us to the numerous examples of non-human becoming mentioned in Deleuze and Guattari (1987).
2. Cf., of course, William Harrison Ainsworth, *The Lancashire Witches* (1849).
3. Perhaps the world's most ancient witch, the Witch of Endor, appears in the Bible, in Samuel I, 28.
4. See Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', in *The Canterbury Tales* (C14th).
5. See my *Rapture: Literature, Addiction, Secrecy* (Eastbourne, 2009).
6. The crucial duel between Molly Weasley and Beatrix Lestrange occurs in the last book of the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).
7. See Amos Tutuola, e.g., *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1946) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954).

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Index

Page numbers in italic indicate a figure on the corresponding page. Page numbers followed by 'n' indicate notes.