

# TXT MAGAZINE



MAGIC OF THE BOOK

# Magic of the Book

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**TXT**  
MAGAZINE

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# Letter from the Editor



**W**E HERE AT Leiden University's MA Book and Digital Media Studies are a special breed. In an increasingly volatile world, we choose not to chase careers based on pay or status. Instead, we take refuge in the comfort of the medium we hold so dearly. Many of us get questions when we tell others what we study, questions along the lines of 'But what can you do when you're done?'. The answer is quite simple: there is something about books that draws us in and does not let go.

Indeed, if there is one thing that unites us, it is a deep fascination with the book. But it is not just us. For centuries, books have exhibited a certain alluring spark that distinguishes them from regular objects. On a personal level, they are at once artefacts of love, guiding stars, teachers, family, the right friend at the right time, and so much more. Meanwhile, as Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and journalist Barbara W. Tuchman wrote in 1980: 'Books are [also] the carriers of civilization. Without books, history is silent, literature dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill.' Individuals cannot do without books, and neither can human society.

But what about books makes them special? This 11th issue of TXT seeks to explore the 'Magic of the Book'. No less than nineteen authors took those four words and interpreted them each in their own way. Owing much to their incredible creativity, what you now have in front of you is a diverse publication with articles and creative pieces ranging from literary to technical, and from East Asian to European.

The editorial board aimed to produce an enlightening magazine. But most of all we would like for you, like our contributors, to have fun with it. We let everyone relatively free to pursue the 'Magic of the Book' however they wanted, tapping into their own passions and styles and sense of self-expression; and now that they are done, we hope you engage with their material in a similar relaxed spirit. The team thoroughly enjoyed working on TXT 11, and so, finally: from the bottom of our hearts, thank you very much for reading!

Stijn Bekker  
Editor-in-Chief



*‘Although many book collectors of the past spoke of their collecting in terms of love, hunting, and madness, they certainly also spoke of it in terms of magic.’*



# The Magic of Book-Collecting

Carlijn Tetteroo



Carlijn Tetteroo is finishing the MA Book and Digital Media studies programme at Leiden University and works in the Athenaeumbibliotheek, Deventer – the oldest city library of the Netherlands. In her spare time, she likes to collect antique books.

**A**BIRTHDAY MESSAGE from the previous century scribbled in an attractive copy of Dickens, a dusty Shakespeare volume with an advertisement for an age-old performance of Hamlet stuck between the wafer-thin pages, an antique fair in a grand old church heaped with treasure – these are but some of the highlights since I started collecting antique books that have convinced me that book-collecting is magical. What is so magical about old books that makes book collectors set out to collect them, often without any intention of reading?<sup>1</sup> I wish to explore the magic of book-collecting by considering how book-collectors have discussed this activity in terms of magic. I will use distant reading methods to investigate popular discourses of book-collecting, along with a magical discourse, in a corpus of broad nineteenth-century English-language publications on book-collecting. I will conclude by providing a case study of a magical book collection that links Victorian Britain to our modern day. But first, I will briefly introduce the history of book-collecting and its associated discourses.

## *History of Book-Collecting*

There have been noteworthy book collectors from ancient times up to the present day.<sup>2</sup> In Britain, it was only in the centuries after the invention of the printing press that book-collecting became a feasible pastime for individuals, as it became attainable to own multiple books.<sup>3</sup> While creating personal libraries was still largely exclusive to the aristocracy or the very rich during the Renaissance,

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1 Melanie Bigold, 'Women's Book Collecting in the Eighteenth Century: The Libraries of the Countess of Hertford and the Duchess of Northumberland', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 45 (2021), pp. 139–150, (p. 143); David Allan, 'Book-Collecting and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 45 (2015), pp. 74–92, (pp. 76–80); Philip Connel, 'Bibliomania: Book Collecting, Cultural Politics, and the Rise of Literary Heritage in Romantic Britain', *Representations*, 71 (2000), pp. 24–47, (p. 27). The fact that the book collector's main focus is not always the reading of the collected books has often been a cause of criticism.

2 Annette Campbell-White, *Beyond Market Value: A Memoir of Book Collecting and the World of Venture Capital* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), p. xi.

3 Campbell-White, *Beyond Market Value*, p. xii; Connel, 'Bibliomania', p. 34.

the number of book collectors and personal libraries within the home increased in Britain in the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the true era of book-collecting in Britain was the eighteenth century, in which immense numbers of people were collecting books, from rich aristocrats building domestic libraries en masse, to individuals from most other social classes.<sup>5</sup> Aside from acquiring newly printed books, made possible due to a huge growth in book production, there was also an upsurge in interest in collecting old books, causing the prices for these rare books to skyrocket in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> This created a financial bubble, oftentimes compared to the seventeenth-century Dutch tulip mania, which inevitably burst in the 1820s/30s.<sup>7</sup> The nineteenth century nevertheless saw continued possibilities for people of all levels of income to collect books, and book-collecting as a hobby gained greater visibility.<sup>8</sup> The 1890s furthermore saw a 'Golden Age' for rare book-collecting by American buyers on the British market, which ended with the Wall Street crash of 1929.<sup>9</sup> These significant phases of British book-collecting history have defined book-collecting and collectors in various ways. I shall now consider the most popular discourses of these times.

### *Maniacs, Lovers and Hunters of Books*

The first influential discourse I will discuss is that of madness, the so-called bibliomania. The term was first recorded in the personal diary of antiquarian Thomas Hearne in 1734, was well-known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and became less frequent from the twentieth century onwards.<sup>10</sup> The term bibliomania defined book-collecting as an obsessive disorder, and was used both as satire by self-confessed 'bibliomaniacs' and as critique of the extreme forms of book-collecting during the financial bubble.<sup>11</sup> An instrumental figure in shaping this discourse was book collector Thomas Frognall Dibdin, who wrote *Bibliomania: or Book Madness*. The satirical work, which first appeared in 1809, dealt with bibliomania and its mortality rate, and inspired many written responses.<sup>12</sup>

The discourse of book madness was often compared and contrasted with another popular discourse, namely that of book love.<sup>13</sup> The term 'bibliophile' was first recorded in Dibdin's later publication *The*

4 Annika Bautz and James Gregory, 'Introduction', in *Libraries, Books, and Collectors of Texts, 1600–1900* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–7, (p. 3); James Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania and the Collection of Books in the Eighteenth Century', *Library & Information History*, 29 (2013), pp. 196–209 (pp. 198–201).

5 Allan, 'Book-Collecting and Literature', pp. 74–78; Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania', p. 198; Connel, 'Bibliomania', pp. 24–25.

6 Bautz and Gregory, 'Introduction', p. 3; Shayne Husbands, 'Satire and the Bibliomania in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', in *Libraries, Books, and Collectors of Texts*, ed. by Annika Bautz and James Gregory, pp. 197–210, (p. 197); Allan, 'Book-Collecting and Literature', p. 78; Connel, 'Bibliomania', pp. 25–27.

7 James Gregory, 'The "Fancy for Fine Printing": Collecting Whittaker's Golden *Magna Carta*', in *Libraries, Books, and Collectors of Texts*, ed. by Annika Bautz and James Gregory, pp. 211–230, (p. 223); Husbands, 'Satire and the Bibliomania', p. 209; Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania', p. 197.

8 Heidi Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses: Gender and Cultures of Antiquarian Book Collecting in Britain, c. 1880–1900', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19 (2014), pp. 346–64, (p. 349); David McKitterick, 'Second-Hand and Old Books', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. by David McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 635–673, (p. 644).

9 Kate Ozment, *The Hroswitha Club and the Impact of Women Book Collectors*, Elements in Publishing and Book Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 61; Danielle Magnussen and Laura Cleaver, *The Trade in Rare Books and Manuscripts between Britain and America c. 1890–1929*, Elements in Publishing and Book Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 1, 63, 87.

10 Oxford English Dictionary, 'Bibliomania, noun', <[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bibliomania\\_n?tab=factsheet#21382428](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bibliomania_n?tab=factsheet#21382428)> (17 March, 2024); Gregory, 'Fancy for Fine Printing', p. 212; K. A. Manley, 'Blurred Lines in the History of Domestic Libraries in the Age of Dibdin's *Bibliomania*', in *Libraries, Books, and Collectors of Texts*, ed. by Annika Bautz and James Gregory, pp. 231–245, (p. 234); Allan, 'Book-Collecting and Literature', p. 79; Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', p. 350; Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania', p. 197; Connel, 'Bibliomania', p. 25.

11 Ozment, *The Hroswitha Club*, p. 15; Gregory, 'Fancy for Fine Printing', pp. 211–212; Husbands, 'Satire and the Bibliomania', p. 197; Allan, 'Book-Collecting and Literature', pp. 79–81; Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', p. 350; Connel, 'Bibliomania', pp. 25–34.

12 Husbands, 'Satire and the Bibliomania', p. 201; Manley, 'Blurred Lines', p. 236; Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania', p. 200; McKitterick, 'Second-Hand and Old Books', p. 645; Connel, 'Bibliomania', p. 30. Examples include James Bereford's *Bibliosophia: or Book Wisdom* (1810), or F. Sommer Merryweather's *Bibliomania in the Middle Ages* (1849).

13 Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania', p. 202; Connel, 'Bibliomania', p. 38.

*Library Companion*, and became more frequent in use towards the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> The love of books had a more positive connotation, and was often contrasted to the dysfunctional, compulsive bibliomania, although the term was also claimed by bibliomaniacs themselves, as evident from Dibdin's first coining of it.<sup>15</sup> This love for books could go from symbolic to quite physical, as exemplified by the bibliophile Charles Lamb kissing his copy of Homer.<sup>16</sup>

A second significant discourse contrasted to bibliomania was the book-hunt; the first reference to book-hunters being in 1740.<sup>17</sup> This stereotypically aristocratic 'hunting' for books was already a common theme in the early nineteenth century, but it became even more frequently used in the late nineteenth century, where it characterised risky, competitive, and speculative book-collecting.<sup>18</sup> The term afforded book-collecting a more respectable character than the earlier bibliomania and remained frequent in use during the early twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> The discourse of book-collecting as a hunt was a distinctly male narrative, reflecting the deep-rooted association of rare book collecting with masculinity at the time, which was bolstered by the identity of the 'gentleman' being bound up with that of the book collector.<sup>20</sup> Despite the masculine flavour of the discourse, women were also active book collectors in this time.<sup>21</sup> Sixteenth-century Britain already saw women buying and collecting books, and the long eighteenth century saw a great increase in the development of women's personal libraries.<sup>22</sup> Even though many noteworthy female collectors can be named, such as Frances Wolfreton, it is generally challenging to find records of women's personal libraries because English property law obscured female ownership, which has given rise to the perception that female book collectors were isolated exceptions.<sup>23</sup> Although more opportunities opened up for female collectors in the twentieth century, the male discourse of the book-hunt has persisted into modern times, as have the discourses of bibliomania and bibliophilia.<sup>24</sup>

Several other, less prominent discourses about book-collecting include the narrative of rescuing old books – a popular narrative by American book-collectors in the 'Golden Age' – the connection of book-collecting to status, prestige, and cultural capital, and the language of investment, which book-collecting is both equated and contrasted to.<sup>25</sup> These are interesting discourses to explore further as well, but I wish to focus on the three main narratives of madness, love, and hunting, and explore a narrative that has not featured heavily in the study of book-collecting: do book collectors discuss book-collecting in terms of magic?

### *Book collectors in their own words*

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- 14 Oxford English Dictionary, 'Bibliophile, noun & adjective', <[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bibliophile\\_n?tab=factsheet#21395710](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/bibliophile_n?tab=factsheet#21395710)> (17 March, 2024); Allan, 'Book-Collecting and Literature', p. 79.
- 15 Husbands, 'Satire and the Bibliomania', p. 198; Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania', p. 202; Connel, 'Bibliomania', p. 38.
- 16 Jacques den Haan, *Verzamelen is ook een kunst: onsterfelijkheid in oude boeken* (Amsterdam: N.V. Orbit, 1971).
- 17 Oxford English Dictionary, 'Book Hunter, noun', <[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/book-hunter\\_n?tab=factsheet#16621993100](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/book-hunter_n?tab=factsheet#16621993100)> (17 March 2024); Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', p. 351.
- 18 OED, 'Book Hunter, n.'; Husbands, 'Satire and the Bibliomania', pp. 206-207; Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', p. 349.
- 19 OED, 'Book Hunter, n.'; Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', p. 351; Ozment, *The Hroswitha Club*, pp. 14–20.
- 20 Bautz and Gregory, 'Introduction', p. 3; Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', p. 351. Egginton furthermore explores the criticisms voiced by male book collectors about female book collectors in the late-Victorian period, which 'would not have been articulated so forcefully during this period had women not been taking a determined interest in old books' (p. 349).
- 21 Ozment, *The Hroswitha Club*, p. 16.
- 22 Bigold, 'Women's Book Collecting in the Eighteenth Century', pp. 139-140; Manley, 'Blurred Lines', p. 235.
- 23 Ozment, *The Hroswitha Club*, p. 17; Bigold, 'Women's Book Collecting in the Eighteenth Century', p. 144.
- 24 Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', pp. 363-364; den Haan, *Verzamelen is ook een kunst*, pp. 51, 63; Catharine Savage Brosman, 'Four Modes of Book Collecting', *Sewanee Review*, 120 (2012), pp. 537–545, (p. 537).
- 25 Ozment, *The Hroswitha Club*, pp. 3, 21; Magnussen and Cleaver, *The Trade in Rare Books*, p. 43; Campbell-White, *Beyond Market Value*, p. xiv; Bautz and Gregory, 'Introduction', pp. 2-3; Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', pp. 349, 363; Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania', p. 199; Brosman, 'Four Modes of Book Collecting', p. 539; McKitterick, 'Second-Hand and Old Books', pp. 647-648; den Haan, *Verzamelen is ook een kunst*, pp. 15, 44.

In the period discussed above, book collectors reflected on the practice in a multitude of publications; from manuals full of guidance and advice, to satirical publications by bibliomaniacs, and collectors' personal reminiscences.<sup>26</sup> These works have often been the object of study in discerning the discourses of book-collecting that they contain. I wish to add to this discussion by studying a corpus of these texts with computational methods for textual analysis. Text mining can help researchers with distant reading, i.e. the quantitative analysis of large text collections, and can also be meaningfully applied in close reading of smaller text collections, to uncover aspects of the text invisible to the human eye.<sup>27</sup> I will study my corpus by means of frequency lists, lexicons, and concordancing, which are but some of the many available text mining applications.

The corpus I have composed contains 35 texts dating roughly from the nineteenth century (ranging from 1761 to 1920), and includes titles by, among others, Dibdin, Bereford and Merryweather. The corpus includes books from Project Gutenberg in the subject 'Book Collecting' and bookshelf 'Bibliomania', and other relevant titles from Google Books and the Internet Archive.<sup>28</sup> After cleaning up the texts, the corpus contained approximately two million words.<sup>29</sup> The corpus was first lemmatised, which reduces all inflected forms of words to their root form. In the consequent analysis of the top 50 most frequent words, double words like 'book' and 'books' were excluded by means of lemmatisation, and high-frequency function words like 'the' and 'and' were excluded by means of a stoplist.<sup>30</sup> 'Book' was the most frequent word, along with many other high-frequency book-related terms, namely 'copy', 'library', 'volume', 'work', 'print', 'collection', 'catalogue', 'author', 'paper', 'folio', 'publish', and also the separate word pairs 'first' and 'edition', or 'old' and 'book'. Other words seemingly reflect the activities of the book collector, namely 'find', 'see', 'give', 'know', 'take', 'write', 'come', and the male character of book-collecting narratives so dominant in this time is reflected in the high frequency of the word 'man'. In all, the 50 most frequent words meaningfully revealed the character of the corpus.

To further unveil the narratives of book-collecting in the corpus, I made use of lexicons. This method is a form of semantic tagging that reveals to what extent a text can be characterised as containing a certain theme, by calculating what percentage of words in the corpus correspond to the words in a thematic lexicon. I composed lexicons with the themes of 'hunt', 'love', 'madness' and 'magic'.<sup>31</sup> Figure 1 shows the relative frequencies of all four lexicons in the texts of the lemmatised corpus, arranged by year of first publication. It would appear that 'love' is the most popular discourse, and 'madness' the least, though it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from these results as the 'love' lexicon could simply contain words that are more common, and thus have higher frequencies than the 'madness'

26 Allan, 'Book-Collecting and Literature', p. 84; Husbands, 'Satire and the Bibliomania', p. 198; Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', pp. 347-350; McKitterick, 'Second-Hand and Old Books', p. 644; Raven, 'Debating Bibliomania', p. 197. Publications of personal collectors' catalogues were also common.

27 For the development of the concept of 'distant reading', see Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), and for the application of computational methods for 'close reading' practices, see Martin Paul Eve, *Close Reading with Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

28 Project Gutenberg, 'Books about Book collecting' <<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/subject/261>> (24 March, 2024); Project Gutenberg, 'Books in Bibliomania' <<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/bookshelf/15>> (24 March, 2024).

29 Though this is a sizeable corpus, I do not intend to claim that it is representative of book-collecting in its entirety. Firstly, because I only included published books, and no private correspondences, news articles, or other relevant periodicals, such as the *Bookworm* (est. 1881) and the *Bookman* (est. 1891) mentioned in Egginton, 'Book-hunters and Book-huntresses', p. 351. Secondly, because not all books published in the time have digitised copies available. Thirdly, because the cut-off point in the early twentieth century is relatively arbitrary, as many relevant books were published later, but are still under copyright, including many notable works by female collectors. The corpus does include Elizabeth Robins Pennell's reminiscence on her book-collection, *My Cookery Books* (1901), but otherwise male authors are strongly overrepresented. I would be happy to supply a full list of the titles in the corpus to anyone interested.

30 I am deeply grateful to Dr. Peter Verhaar for the Python code facilitating the analyses in this section. I would be happy to answer any inquiries about the precise methods used.

31 These lexicons contained approximately 80-85 words each relating to their semantic categories, and were composed by making use of sites such as [relatedwords.io](http://relatedwords.io), [relatedwords.org](http://relatedwords.org), [reversedictionary.org](http://reversedictionary.org) and [thesaurus.com](http://thesaurus.com). I would be happy to supply these lexicons to any interested reader.

lexicon. The corpus, furthermore, contained texts of different lengths, which can affect relative frequencies. The texts in the corpus were also not equally distributed over the time period (see Figure 2 for the lexicon frequencies per year).

It is interesting to consider the highest peaks for each lexicon, as these are all distinct. The peak for 'hunt' refers to, perhaps unsurprisingly, Burton's *The Book Hunter* (1862). This date fits with the predetermined popularity of the 'hunt' narrative towards the late nineteenth century. The word 'pursuit' was most frequent, as it could be used both to be 'in pursuit' of books, and to describe book-collecting as a 'pursuit'. The 'love' lexicon peaked a little earlier, with Nodier's *The Book Collector* (1841). In this work, 'bibliophile' was the most frequent word of the lexicon, showing a dramatic increase in use since Dibdin's first coinage in 1824.<sup>32</sup> Further peaks in the early twentieth century reflect the continued popularity of the 'love' discourse. Although the 'madness' discourse was said to become less frequent towards the twentieth century, its peaks are in 1896 and 1904 – with 'bibliomania' as the most frequent term – suggesting that the bibliomania lived on beyond the 1830s.<sup>33</sup> The magical lexicon peaked earliest, in 1809, but remained popular into the twentieth century as well.<sup>34</sup> I will consider the magical lexicon in more depth by viewing the words in context. These concordances were set to the sentence level in the unlemmatised corpus.

The most frequent word from the magical lexicon was 'charm', which was used both to mean 'appeal', as in 'the charm of an old book', as well as a magical charm, such as 'charms against all evil' or 'charm away'.<sup>35</sup> The word 'spell' also had double meanings, occurring both in the sense of 'how to spell a word', and as magical spells in 'spell-bound', 'under the spell' or 'as by a spell'.<sup>36</sup> 'Summon' had only one meaning, but could go along with mundane things like 'the porter', as well as magical things, such as 'spirits'. 'Conjure' was also often used in this regard, both for spirits as well as books: 'Yet, would that I could conjure up, by the waving of my sceptre, the two magnificent and extraordinary volumes of this description'.<sup>37</sup> Aside from these double meanings, the magical lexicon appeared successful in picking up passages that frame book-collecting as magical in various ways.

First, the book itself possesses a 'magical' or 'supernatural' power, causing one to be 'under the spell of books'.<sup>38</sup> This magic of the book is trifold. Firstly, narratives and characters contained in books can exude magic, as they are brought to life by magical authors, and provide for spell-binding reading experiences.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, the physicality of the book is magical. The 'magical art of printing' is seeped into the typography, the title page, and the use of 'bewitching decorations', especially if they are in 'the magic of colour', whereas Morocco leather, gilt stamps, untrimmed edges and snow-white paper encompass 'the magic touch of the great binder'. The book object becomes further entranced with 'the magic of the past' by exhibiting signs of age, such as dust and smudges, and of use, such as notes in the margins left by previous illustrious owners. Thirdly, there lies magic in collecting books – which is 'an

32 The drastic height of the peak was likely affected by the relatively short length of the Nodier piece.

33 These peaks were Field, *Love Affairs of a Bibliomaniac* (1896) and Harper, *Book Lovers Bibliomaniacs and Book Clubs* (1904).

34 1809 included the texts *Bibliomania Epistle to Richard Heber* (1809) by Ferriar, and Dibdin's *Bibliomania* (1809).

35 The word 'charm' to mean 'appeal' still carries magical connotations through its etymology, as it came from the Latin 'carmen' which means 'song, verse, oracular response, incantation'. See: Oxford English Dictionary, 'Charm (n.1), Etymology', <[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/charm\\_n1?tab=etymology#9610481](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/charm_n1?tab=etymology#9610481)>.

36 These two varieties are actually etymologically distinct; whereas the magical 'spell' has been in the language since Old English and has a Germanic origin, the word 'spell' in terms of spelling entered the language around 1400 from French. See: Oxford English Dictionary, 'Spell (v.2), Etymology', <[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spell\\_v2?tab=etymology#21363169](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spell_v2?tab=etymology#21363169)> and OED, 'Spell (n.1), Etymology', <[https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spell\\_n1?tab=etymology#21360869](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spell_n1?tab=etymology#21360869)>.

37 The 'two magnificent and extraordinary volumes' in this excerpt from Dibdin's *Bibliographical Decameron* (1817) refer to two devotional volumes, once belonging to Cardinal Wolsey, that are now held in the libraries of Magdalen and Christ Church Colleges, Oxford.

38 Two particular books, namely Barclay's *Argenis* and Raynal's *Philosophical History of the East and West Indies*, were said to have the magical power of resisting the elements while laying on bookstalls in all seasons.

39 Specific authors whose magic is mentioned include the 'magical pencil of Mr. Turner', the 'master magician, Boccaccio', and the 'magically tinted ... verses of Blake'.

elixir of life' leaving the collector 'spellbound' – and in the resulting collection itself, for 'what magic there is for the book-lover in that word "library"'.<sup>40</sup>

Aside from the magic of the contents, physicality, and collection of books, the book collectors themselves are also magical, as they can be 'a very dragon in this department of book-collecting' and guard their books with 'dragon-like vigilance'. Along with dragons, fairies feature quite prominently in the corpus, both in fairy tales, and as book descriptors, as in the 'fairy-like volume'. Yet, darker magics also abound, such as 'book ghouls' and many 'curses' – of 'over-adornment', of book thieves, and even of book-borrowers – and 'witches'.<sup>40</sup> Witchcraft was also discussed in terms of witch persecutions, and the burning of many 'magical books' by superstitious mediaeval monks.<sup>41</sup> As opposed to this past superstition, it was now considered that 'our pulses are no longer stirred at the mere mention of the word MAGIC', which is also attested in the fact that books on magic, witchcraft, occult, alchemy, and demonology were actively sought after and collected. Thus, not only was the magic in collecting present in the corpus, there was also a collecting of magic.

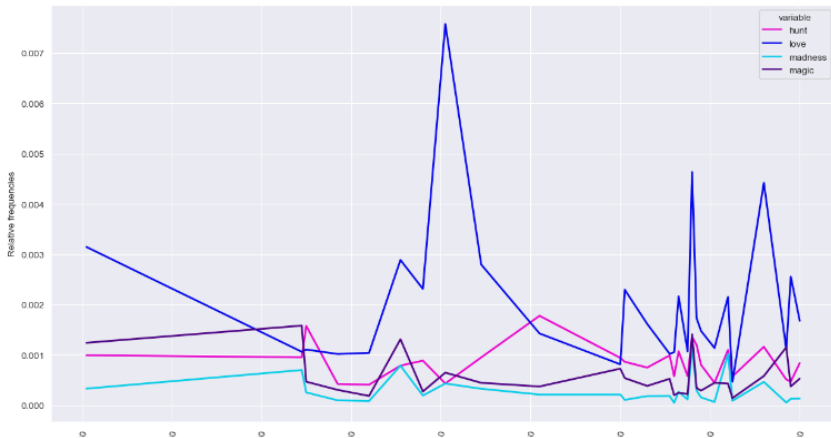


Fig. 1. Relative frequencies of the lexicons in the corpus.

40 For instance, an unfortunate 'wretched maid' is accused of wreaking havoc in the book-collector's sacred room 'with mop and pail and witch's broom'.

41 The corpus mentions many witch persecutions, including the macabre story of the Yorkshire witch Mary Bateman, whose skin was used for the binding of a book after she was hanged for murder. And although superstition was most often represented as harmful for book-collecting, even being taken as the cause of the destruction of the library of Alexandria, Merryweather in his *Bibliomania in the Middle Ages* (1849) claims that the superstitious monks could also be considered 'hearty lovers of books'.

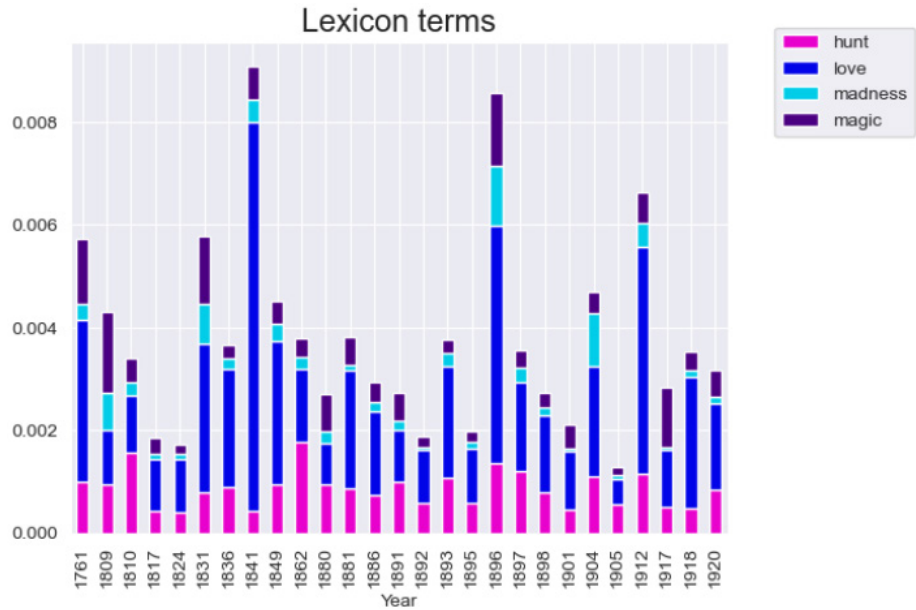


Fig. 2. Relative frequencies of the lexicons for each year.

### *The Magic of Dickens in Deventer*

Finally, I wish to connect the magic of book-collecting in nineteenth-century Britain to the present day, by considering Emmy Strik's collection of Charles Dickens books. Charles Dickens books were already collected with great vigour in his own time; the late nineteenth century saw a great rise in the collecting of canonical contemporary authors.<sup>42</sup> This also prompted a 'first edition mania', in which collectors aimed to collect complete sets of all first editions by a particular author in their original conditions.<sup>43</sup> It is also in the 1880s that there was a rise in specialist guides for collectors of specific authors, including Dickens.<sup>44</sup> One such guide attests to the great popularity of collecting various original editions of Dickens' works, as they are all illustrated beautifully by great masters and contain 'numerous subtle differences' which 'add so much zest and excitement to a collector's pursuit'.<sup>45</sup>

This 'zest and excitement' has carried over into present-day Netherlands, as it is shared by the Dickens collector Emmy Strik. As Strik states, her love for the author started with her father, who

<sup>42</sup> David C. Hanson, 'Sentiment and Materiality in Late Victorian Book Collecting', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43 (2015), pp. 785–820, (p. 785).

<sup>43</sup> Hanson, 'Sentiment and Materiality', pp. 785–791. The vogue for collecting Victorian authors was not limited to the late nineteenth century. As Ozment attests, one of the biggest interests of collectors in the twentieth-century Hroswitha Club was literature by specific authors, in particular nineteenth-century white male authors; see *The Hroswitha Club*, p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> McKittrick, 'Second-Hand and Old Books', p. 656.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Plumtre Johnson, *Hints to Collectors of Original Editions of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London: George Redway, 1885), p. 5. Johnson furthermore states how a specialist guide to the different editions and their peculiarities was necessary to be able to verify the genuineness of Dickens editions, as many forgeries were also produced and sold at the time, which inexperienced collectors could be taken in by; see pp. 6–8.

loved England and Dickens, and his few humble copies inspired her zest for collecting Dickens books.<sup>46</sup> Magic lies not only in Dickens' stories, for which, after all, a single copy of each book would suffice, but the approximately 8,000 Dickens books she managed to collect also attest to the magic of the books themselves. Strik's collection includes several first editions, reflecting the 'first edition mania' of the late nineteenth century, as well as several completed sets of editions. Strik attests to the great pleasure of being able to complete a full set in an edition, which she has done for multiple editions, all with their 'numerous subtle differences'. Her collection can be admired in the Charles Dickens Kabinet, an intimate museum about the author in the historic Walstraat of the Dutch town Deventer. Alongside numerous books, there are also all sorts of 'Dickensiana' on display that she has collected, from statues of Dickens characters, to a table decked in Dickens tableware and gorgeously Victorian costumes, which are housed upstairs.<sup>47</sup>

These costumes are used during the Dickens Festival, which is another way in which the magic of Dickens' books has seeped into the city of Deventer. In 1991, Strik first proposed to hold a 'Dickensian Christmas' with the business owners in the Walstraat.<sup>48</sup> Ever since the great success of the first Dickens festival, it has continued to grow over the years, nowadays attracting some 120,000 visitors.<sup>49</sup> During the festival, the Bergkwartier, a historic area of the city, is magically transformed into a nineteenth-century Dickensian English town in which over 950 characters from Dickens' books come to life.<sup>50</sup> During these two days in December, the streets teem with actors and singers, all dressed in period-appropriate costumes provided and cared for by Strik (in recent years with help of her daughter Liesbeth) to ensure the utmost authenticity in the festival.<sup>51</sup>

The Dickensian magic fits Deventer well, as it has a history as a book town spanning some twelve centuries.<sup>52</sup> The fifteenth century in particular was a heyday in Deventer book history, as various religious institutions copied manuscripts in great multitudes, and the city took up printing early.<sup>53</sup> The first printer, Richard Pafraet, settled in the city in 1477, and by 1500 Deventer had become the most important book-town of the Low Countries.<sup>54</sup> In 1560, Deventer founded the first city library of the country.<sup>55</sup> Although Deventer was superseded in later centuries by the rise of the metropole Amsterdam in printing, it continued its legacy as a book-town, with many important printers being situated there.<sup>56</sup> To this day, the bookish character of the town is still being celebrated through the yearly book fair – the largest in Europe – various literary festivals, attention for young writing talent, and, because of Strik, through the magic of Dickens.<sup>57</sup> Thus, this story illustrates how the magic of book-collecting can seep well past the confines of the bookcase, and can reach a magnitude that has left a permanent mark on the book-town of Deventer.

46 I thank Emmy Strik for her time in speaking to me. See also Steffie Schoemans and Arnold Joost, *Deventer ademt Dickens* (Deventer: Stichting dEVENTer, 2020), p. 7. This intergenerational aspect of collecting is also mirrored in Bigold's piece, who looked at the personal library collections of eighteenth-century English mother and daughter Frances Seymour and Elizabeth Percy.

47 Dickens Festijn Deventer, 'Charles Dickens kabinet' <<https://dickensfestijn.nl/het-charles-dickens-kabinet/>> (24 March, 2024).

48 Schoemans and Joost, *Deventer Ademt Dickens*, p. 8.

49 Ibid.

50 Dickens Festijn Deventer, 'Home' <<https://dickensfestijn.nl/>> (24 March, 2024).

51 See Schoemans and Joost, *Dickens ademt Deventer* for various inspiring stories of people who have participated in the festival over its 30 years of history.

52 Schoemans and Joost, *Deventer ademt Dickens*, p. 148; Suzan Folkerts and Garrelt Verhoeven, 'Voorwoord', in *Deventer Boekenstad: Twaalf eeuwen boekcultuur aan de IJssel* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2018), pp. 6–9, (p. 7).

53 Folkerts and Verhoeven, *Deventer Boekenstad*, p. 8.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 *Deventer Boekenstad*, 'Deventer Boekenstad' <<https://www.deventerboekenstad.nl/>> (24 March, 2024); *Deventer Boekenmarkt*, 'Deventer Boekenmarkt, de grootste van Europa' <<https://www.deventerboekenmarkt.nl/>> (24 March, 2024).

## ***Conclusion***

To conclude, it is safe to say that I was not the first, and I will certainly not be the last, who feels that their book collection breathes magic into their life. Although many book collectors of the past spoke of their collecting in terms of love, hunting, and madness, they certainly also spoke of it in terms of magic. The proportions this magical power can take can range from the physical book itself, to its contents, the act of collecting and the collector, and, as was seen from the case of Deventer and Dickens, can grow to encompass an entire town. Looking to a seemingly continually digitising future, it seems unlikely that the enchantment of book-collecting will soon be lifted. It is, after all, through our physical books that 'the magic of the past' can be carried into the future.

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... Conversation with speculations of the sciences  
A perfect mistress, the vision in which he embodies his  
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be poet, the philosopher, or the lover, could designate  
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*‘By highlighting the strengths and talents of female characters, these stories help to dismantle limiting beliefs about what it means to be a woman in society.’*

...AMING OF THE SHREW

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...plied to Baptista, her father, for leave  
...ughter Katharine, as Petruchio called  
...at having heard of her bashful modesty  
...he had come from Verona to solicit  
...r, though he wished her married, was  
...harine would ill answer this character,  
...t of what manner of gentleness she was  
...usic-master rushed into the room to  
...ntle Katharine, his pupil, had broken  
...e for presuming to find fault with her

# The Power of Books to Change our Understanding of the World and View on Reality, by Reshaping Concepts like Gender through Children’s Literature

Dom Biasi

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Dom Biasi is an alumnus of the Msc Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. He currently works as a campus minister for Canvas Birmingham, supporting university students. In his free time, he enjoys writing fiction and going for hikes.

**T**HE MAGIC OF the book lies in its transformative potential to shape perspectives, challenge norms, and inspire empathy. Stories are often thought of as something in the realm of children. Children’s literature encompasses a wide range of textual forms, including books, short stories, and texts specifically intended for children, young people, and second language learners.<sup>1</sup> Children’s literature has been around since the mid-eighteenth century<sup>2</sup>, and as such, is an essential aspect reflecting culture<sup>3</sup>. In fact, storytelling is one of the most important ways in which cultures share norms, values, history, and attributes with their children. In essence, the magic of the book lies in its ability to transcend boundaries, open minds, and ignite imaginations. Authors, educators, and policymakers have a responsibility to harness this *magic* and ensure that children’s literature reflects the rich diversity of human experience. By embracing inclusivity, challenging stereotypes, and promoting equity, we can harness the transformative power of the book to create a more just, empathetic, and interconnected world for generations to come.

This essay aims to explore the power of the book to change our understanding of the world and view of reality by reshaping concepts such as gender through children’s literature. It will delve into the impact of gender representation in children’s books, the potential benefits of redefining gender

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- 1 Aaron David Mermelstein, ‘Gender Roles in Children’s Literature and Their Influence on Learners’, *MinneTESOL Journal*, 34 (2018), pp. 1–7.
  - 2 Peter Hunt, ‘The World in Pictures’, in *Illustrated Children’s Books*, ed. by Libby Waite, Duncan McCorquodale, and Sophie Hallam (London: Black Dog Press, 2009), pp. 8–26.
  - 3 Teya Cherland, ‘Female Representation in Children’s Literature’, *Ecclectica*, 25 (2006), pp. 284–290.

roles in literature, and the role of authors, illustrators, and publishers in promoting a more inclusive narrative. To do this, I will analyse and conglomerate articles, focusing firstly on how children interact with the concept of gender through books, before turning to issues of representation in children's literature, and finally, looking to the future by asking how we can include more affirming gender representation in children's books, using the transformative potential of children's literature.

In exploring this transformative potential, it is essential to consider the concept of 'restorying'. As we delve into the realm of children's literature and its role in reshaping concepts like gender, understanding the mechanisms of restorying becomes integral to unlocking the full potential of storytelling as a catalyst for change. Restorying encompasses the dynamic process of recycling, recontextualising, and reinterpretation within storytelling. Firstly, recycling entails the repurposing of narrative elements, themes, or motifs from one story to another, often with varying degrees of conscious intentionality. This process of inspiration and homage allows for the infusion of familiar elements into new contexts, fostering connections between texts and inviting readers to explore thematic continuities across disparate narratives. Children's literature therefore helps young people to understand new contexts in their lives. Recontextualising, on the other hand, involves the preservation of core narrative structures while situating them within different cultural, temporal, or stylistic frameworks. This mode emphasises the transformative potential of context, as alterations in setting, tone, or perspective imbue familiar narratives with fresh significance and resonance. This can then allow readers to explore things they may not otherwise experience. Finally, reinterpretation encompasses acts of translation, adaptation, or modernisation that bridge linguistic, temporal, or cultural divides. Whether through linguistic translation or contemporary reimaginings of classic texts, reinterpretation facilitates the ongoing circulation and relevance of stories across diverse audiences and cultural contexts. Together, these modes of restorying highlight the ways in which storytelling continues to evolve and adapt in response to shifting cultural currents and creative impulses.

Through these processes, narratives evolve, adapt, and resonate with readers in new and profound ways. Just as stories shape perspectives and challenge norms, the act of restorying amplifies their impact, offering fresh insights and opportunities for reflection. This article aims to explore not only the representation of gender in children's books, but also how restorying can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable narrative landscape for generations to come.

### *Research and analysis of gender roles in children's literature*

Children's literature has a crucial part in shaping young children's worldviews and developing their identity.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that children's literature, including their interaction with literature, gives children some of their earliest and longest-lasting perceptions of societal concepts, such as race, class and, most importantly for the focus of this article, gender.<sup>5</sup> These learnings about the conceptualisation of society will have a long-lasting impact on the child's future behaviour and worldview, since such understandings will provide the fundament of the child's sense-making and understanding of the world.

4 Sharyl Bender Peterson and Mary Alyce Lach, 'Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books: Their Prevalence and Influence on Cognitive and Affective Development', *Gender and Education*, 2 (1990), pp. 185–197; Pierre Canisus Ruterana, 'Children's Reflections on Gender Equality in Fairy Tales: A Rwanda Case Study', *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4 (2012), pp. 85–101.

5 Timothy J. Frawley, 'Gender Schema and Prejudicial Recall: How Children Misremember, Fabricate, and Distort Gendered Picture Book Information', *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 22 (2008), pp. 291–303.

Many studies have been done on gender roles in children's literature; to evaluate and analyse these findings, and to demonstrate how they can shape children's constructions of gender in early childhood, is part of this article.<sup>6</sup> Historically in this field, one of the most relevant studies<sup>7</sup> showed the underrepresentation of female characters in children's literature. Since books 'reflect reality', as mentioned above, female characters not being included or well-represented can lead to children believing that girls are not important in society. Role models in books present children with possible future images of self-aspirations and goals.<sup>8</sup> This is because children's literature, when crafted with care and intention, possesses a unique ability to ignite imaginations, instil values, and shape the way young minds perceive themselves and others. It serves as a portal to different worlds, offering readers the opportunity to explore diverse experiences, cultures, and identities. Within the pages of a book, children encounter characters who navigate challenges, confront stereotypes, and defy expectations. These stories have the power to spark curiosity, broaden horizons, and foster a sense of connection to the world beyond one's own. Through literature, children can see themselves reflected in protagonists who look, think, and feel like them, validating their experiences and identities.

Additionally, children's literature has the capacity to challenge traditional stereotypes and promote equity by presenting alternative narratives and perspectives through which the reader gains the ability to disrupt ingrained biases and develop critical thinking. The trend of recent years suggests a growing emphasis on the importance of reshaping traditional gender concepts in children's literature to promote inclusivity, diversity, and equality. Despite recently increased attention to equality and diversity as a central aspect of education, children's literature still represents gender in stereotypical ways.<sup>9</sup> Through stories, characters, and narratives, children's literature has the ability to challenge traditional gender norms and redefine societal expectations.

The influence of children's literature extends beyond individual perceptions, however, impacting societal beliefs and values as a whole. By presenting a range of identities and experiences, children's books can help to broaden perspectives and foster empathy towards those who are different from ourselves. This can lead to greater acceptance and understanding within communities, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive society.

Furthermore, the representation of diverse identities in children's books serves as a reflection of evolving cultural attitudes and values. As society progresses towards greater acceptance and recognition of different gender identities, children's literature plays a crucial role in reflecting these changes back to the young readers. By providing a platform for diverse voices and experiences, children's books help to shape not only individual perspectives on reality, but also wider cultural narratives in regard to gender roles and identity.

### *Educators' role and challenges in gender representation*

Educators contribute to ensuring that a diversity of genders is focused on in learning materials for

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6 Janice McCabe et al., 'Gender in Twentieth-Century Children's Books: Patterns of Disparity in Titles and Central Characters', *Gender & Society*, 25 (2011), pp. 197–226.

7 Lenore J. Weitzman et al., 'Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children', *American Journal of Sociology*, 77 (1972), pp. 1125–1150.

8 Mem Fox, 'Men Who Weep, Boys Who Dance: The Gender Agenda between the Lines in Children's Literature', *Language Arts*, 70 (1993), pp. 84–88; Weitzman et al., 'Sex-Role Socialization'.

9 Katarina Filipović, 'Gender Representation in Children's Books: Case of an Early Childhood Setting', *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 32 (2018), pp. 310–325.

children, and that their own responses and teaching methods can alter this.<sup>10</sup> Many educators overlook the importance of how gender is represented in the books they offer to the children they teach, and this can be harmful.<sup>11</sup> Gender is a central aspect in children's reading behaviour, particularly in the genre of fiction, which forms the majority of their reading material.<sup>12</sup> Children often choose their books based on their interpretation of how they match to their own gender, especially with popular series. They may call one book or book series a 'girl's book' or vice versa. However, scholars such as Elizabeth Dutro<sup>13</sup> also show that children's actions may contradict their words in relation to what they actually want to read; outwardly, they may reject one book, whilst privately wanting to read another<sup>14</sup>. Dutro suggests that boys are likely to guard these gender boundaries in public, but privately transgress them. In contrast, girls are more likely to cross or ignore the gender boundaries and will seemingly do so with intent.<sup>15</sup> What this demonstrates is that children show various individual views of the concept of gender, which makes it a complex issue when thinking about reshaping gender.

Educators should therefore make sure to be considerate of gender boundaries themselves when supplying reading material to children. This is important because children need a physical space, in the literal sense, such as schools, and conceptually, to challenge the assumptions they may have about gender. The magic of the book is that books can give them this space. Children's literature can provide the impulse for children to challenge their assumptions about gender. Children's literature also plays a significant role in shaping children's sense of self-identity and understanding of the world around them. Children start developing their self-identity from an early stage, and studies have shown that children's literature is a crucial component in this process.<sup>16</sup> In this context, it is noteworthy that gender roles are a vital part of cultural norms and can often differ from one culture to another. The representation of gender roles in children's literature can significantly influence readers' attitudes and beliefs, making it an area of great importance for educators.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it is crucial for teachers to recognise and articulate their own attitudes towards gender, as this can directly impact the way they teach.<sup>18</sup> The classroom is inherently a political and social space<sup>19</sup>, in which teachers must work to ensure that the learning environment has a reduced gender bias.

This sort of critical thinking, instilled through children's literature, can serve as a catalyst for addressing and challenging societal gender norms and biases.<sup>20</sup>

Since children's literature serves as an essential resource, it is important to take into consideration the biases that may be inherent to the works read by children. Gender is often considered the most fundamental perspective through which children perceive and experience the world<sup>21</sup>, emphasising

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10 Ibid.

11 Renae Poarch and Elizabeth Monk-Turner, 'Gender Roles in Children's Literature: A Review of Non-Award-Winning "Easy-to-Read" Books', *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 16 (2001), pp. 70-76.

12 Elizabeth Dutro, "'But That's a Girls' Book!'" Exploring Gender Boundaries in Children's Reading Practices', *The Reading Teacher*, 55 (2002), pp. 376-384.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ann M. Allen, Daniel N. Allen, and Gary Sigler, 'Changes in Sex-Role Stereotyping in Caldecott Medal Award Picture Books 1938-1988', *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 7 (1993), pp. 67-73.

17 Mary L. Trepanier-Street and Jane A. Romatowski, 'The Influence of Children's Literature on Gender Role Perceptions: A Reexamination', Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 1999, pp. 155-159.

18 Masha Kabakow Rudman, *Children's Literature: An Issues Approach* (ERIC, 1995).

19 Junmin Kuo, 'Teaching ESL/EFL Students to Recognize Gender Bias in Children's Literature', *The Internet TESL Journal*, 11 (2005), n.p.

20 Courtney A. Gazda, 'Once Upon A Time: Exposing Sexism in Children's Literature', Unpublished Master's Thesis, The College at Brockport: State University of New York, 112 (2015), pp. 1-31; Tricia Lowther, 'Children's Books Still Promote Gender Stereotypes', *The New Republic*, 8 March, 2014. <<https://newrepublic.com/article/116943/childrens-books-still-promote-gender-stereotypes>> (19 May, 2024); Meredith McGowan, *Appreciating Diversity through Children's Literature: Teaching Activities for the Primary Grades* (ERIC, 1994).

21 Frank Taylor, 'Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books', *Teaching Sociology*, 31 (2003), pp. 300-311 (p. 300).

the need for an intentional examination of gender representation in children's literature, and how educators handle it.

### *Addressing the underrepresentation of alternate gender in children's literature*

One crucial aspect of addressing gender biases in children's literature is to ensure that books depict characters with distinct personalities regardless of gender. By selecting books that reflect fairness and inspire all types of gender expression, educators can actively work towards countering gender biases. It is important to offer realistic and engaging stories that address the complexities of gender. While some progress has been made in terms of women's representation in titles, roles, and pictures, there is still a significant need for improvement. The underrepresentation of women in folklore and fairy tales has been a topic of scholarly interest and discussion for several decades. Since the 1960s, gender has been a focal point in folklore studies, with researchers examining the gendered nature of these traditional stories and the implications of their representation. One of the key questions that have surfaced in this discourse is the fate of heroines in folktales, and the reasons behind their limited presence and stereotypical portrayal.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, it is crucial to examine and understand gender representation in folktales from a global perspective. By analysing gender norms in world folktales, scholars aim to ascertain whether these gender representations are specific to Western patriarchal societies, or if they are pan-human across different cultures. This broader comparative approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics present in folklore and their global significance. In classic tales, such as *Cinderella* or *Snow White*, we see portrayals of women as passive damsels in distress waiting to be rescued by a prince.<sup>23</sup> However, as time has progressed and societal views have shifted, so too have the narratives within children's books. Modern stories like *Ella Enchanted*<sup>24</sup> or *The Paper Bag Princess*<sup>25</sup> present strong female protagonists who are independent, brave, and capable of shaping their own destinies<sup>26</sup>. These stories not only empower young girls to break free from limiting stereotypes, but also encourage young boys to embrace qualities traditionally associated with femininity.

These characters serve as role models for young readers, showing them that girls can also hold characteristics traditionally associated with boys, like being brave, adventurous, and high-achieving. By highlighting the strengths and talents of female characters, these stories help to dismantle limiting beliefs about what it means to be a woman in society. Similarly, children's literature can also challenge rigid expectations surrounding masculinity, by portraying male characters who exhibit qualities such as sensitivity, empathy, and emotional vulnerability. By presenting a more nuanced view of masculinity that goes beyond traditional notions of strength and dominance, these books encourage boys to embrace their full range of emotions and express themselves authentically. This process can help break down harmful stereotypes that equate masculinity with aggression or stoicism.

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22 Kathleen Ragan, 'What Happened to the Heroines in Folktales?: An Analysis by Gender of a Multicultural Sample of Published Folktales Collected from Storytellers', *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, 23 (2009), pp. 227–247.

23 Linda T. Parsons, 'Ella Evolving: Cinderella Stories and the Construction of Gender-Appropriate Behavior', *Children's Literature in Education*, 35 (2004), pp. 135–154.

24 Gail Carson Levine, *Ella Enchanted: A Newbery Honor Award Winner*, reprint (New York: Quill Tree Books, 2022).

25 Robert Munsch, *The Paper Bag Princess 25th Anniversary Edition* (Toronto: Annick Press, 2005).

26 Parsons, Rosalind Sibielski, 'Reviving Cinderella: Contested Feminism and Conflicting Models of Female Empowerment in 21st-Century Film and Television Adaptations of "Cinderella"', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 36 (2019), pp. 584–610.

The underrepresentation of transgender people in literature adds to the gender issue in children's literature that can lead to harmful effects. Studies, such as "A tale of two trans men"<sup>27</sup>, have shown the benefits of representing alternative gender identities in stories. By writing new stories or altering traditional ones to include diverse gender identities, the topic is brought to the forefront, highlighting the existence of transgender individuals. This representation is crucial as it gives a voice to the disempowered and dispossessed, and humanises the 'Other' through gender-fluid retellings of traditional tales.<sup>28</sup>

Restorying, as previously mentioned, presents an opportunity to address the underrepresentation of transgender individuals in stories.<sup>29</sup> In the context of this paper, restorying can be viewed as a way to reimagine famous stories to include alternative gender identities. By incorporating diverse gender representations, stories can play a crucial role in increasing self-concept and representation for individuals who have been marginalised.<sup>30</sup> Switching the gender of a hero can change meanings and shift power structures in character constructions and overall stories. It is essential to consider children's reactions to these disruptions, as their understanding of the world is shaped by the stories they engage with, particularly before formal education.

Furthermore, the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in children's literature has evolved significantly over the years. Where, in earlier works, homosexuality was often stigmatised or ignored altogether, contemporary books like *And Tango Makes Three*<sup>31</sup> or *Melissa*<sup>32</sup> introduce diverse representations of gender identity and sexual orientation to young readers. Books like *Julián is a Mermaid*<sup>33</sup> introduce children to non-binary identities in a gentle and affirming way. Through colourful illustrations and heartfelt storytelling, this particular book celebrates individuality and self-expression, encouraging readers to embrace diversity and reject rigid gender categories. By depicting LGBTQ+ characters in a positive light, these stories help foster empathy, understanding, and acceptance among readers from a young age. By showing children a range of experiences beyond their own lived realities, literature has the power to broaden their understanding of gender as a fluid spectrum rather than a binary construct.

Children often respond to normative representations of gender, as seen by studies undertaken by Jackson<sup>34</sup>, Davies<sup>35</sup>, and Earles<sup>36</sup>. These studies have shown that sometimes, when restorying occurs, children may see the stories as having gone wrong and might struggle to understand the stories. This is because, by showing the disruption of normative gender presentations, the authors are inherently asking children which presentations are 'normal' or 'abnormal'. Earles' study<sup>37</sup> investigates this issue using feminist and queer theories. Queer theorists aim to dismantle conventional ideas about gender and sexuality, viewing language and queer concepts as influential forces that shape our understanding of the world.<sup>38</sup> Scholars, such as Foucault, illustrate how discourse can either empower individuals

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27 Jeana Jorgensen, 'A Tale of Two Trans Men: Transmasculine Identity and Trauma in Two Fairy-Tale Retellings', *Open Cultural Studies*, 5 (2021), pp. 181-193.

28 Ibid.

29 Marina Lambrou, *Narrative Retellings: Stylistic Approaches* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

30 Jorgensen, 'A Tale of Two Trans Men'.

31 Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, *And Tango Makes Three*, 1st edn (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005).

32 Alex Gino, *Melissa* (Previously Published as *George*) (New York: Scholastic Press, 2022).

33 Jessica Love, *Julián Is a Mermaid*, illustrated (Somerville: Candlewick, 2018).

34 Sue Jackson, "'She Might Not Have the Right Tools... and He Does": Children's Sense Making of Gender, Work and Abilities in Early School Readers', *Gender and Education*, 19 (2007), pp. 61-77.

35 Bronwyn Davies, *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool Children and Gender* (Language and Social Processes), revised (New York: Hampton Press, 2003).

36 Jennifer Earles, 'Reading Gender: A Feminist, Queer Approach to Children's Literature and Children's Discursive Agency', *Gender and Education*, 29 (2017), pp. 369-388.

37 Ibid.

38 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004).

or constrain them within societal norms.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, discussing 'queer' extends beyond embracing diverse sexual orientations; it involves acknowledging the restrictive social constructs imposed by society.

By switching the gender of heroes in stories, Earles 'queered' the gendered meaning and power structures centred in character creations. She then explores how children engage with disruptive storytimes, where the children are asked about main characters overcoming gendered stereotypes. The study showed that the storytimes give children the time to dive into a mindscape to develop their creativity, learn about the world, and be aware of their sense-making of the world<sup>40</sup>. The key findings of Earles' study, conducted through disruptive storytimes using a feminist and queer approach, shed light on how children engage with heroes and narratives. Both boys and girls leaned towards adventure narratives in their choices. This contradicted previous studies that split the interests by gender, resulting in boys preferring literature containing adventure and girls those including animals and conflict.<sup>41</sup> These findings support the statement that children are more than passive readers of books, but are actively influenced by them.

Thus, paying attention to how children interact with books shows how it influences their understanding of power, gender, and worldviews. Children need educational resources to grasp how meanings and objects influence their decisions. Books that delve into themes such as love, adventure, acceptance, security, bodily autonomy, tolerance, equality, collective action, and self-determination can play a crucial role in dismantling the binary thinking that reinforces dominant social structures and difficulties. The presence of a female adventure protagonist challenges traditional gender roles by endowing the female character with delimited bodily agency and freedom, thus questioning the usual portrayal of women/girls as heroes only when motivated by love.<sup>42</sup> The results suggest potential for discursive change, highlighting the importance of bodily agency for children's self-worth and understanding of abilities. The study also revealed how traditional notions of nurturing and love are still primarily associated with femininity, which poses challenges for feminist pursuits of social justice. By offering children literary examples promoting collective interactions, cooperation, and love, both authors and educators can contribute to deconstructing hegemonic gender norms for the benefit of all students.

In conclusion, the transformative power of children's literature in reshaping concepts of gender is undeniable. From the underrepresentation of women in folklore to the limited portrayal of transgender individuals in traditional stories, literature has played a significant role in perpetuating gender norms and stereotypes. However, as evidenced by recent efforts to adapt stories and incorporate diverse gender identities, there is hope for progress and change. Through an intentional selection of books that challenge normative gender roles and promote inclusivity, educators and authors can create opportunities for children to explore diverse experiences and identities. By providing alternative narratives and disrupting traditional stereotypes, literature becomes a catalyst for critical thinking and empathy-building among young readers. For future work, it is essential to continue advocating for gender-inclusive literature and representation. Amplifying diverse voices and stories can create a more just, empathetic, and interconnected world for generations to come. Children's literature holds the power to shape perspectives, challenge norms, and inspire empathy, making it a vital tool in

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39 Michel Foucault, 'Power/Knowledge', in *The New Social Theory Reader*, ed. by Steven Seidman and Jeffrey C. Alexander (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 73-79.

40 Lawrence R. Sipe, *Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom*, 2nd edn (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017).

41 Eleni Griva, Anastasia Alevriadou, and Klio Semoglou, 'Reading Preferences and Strategies Employed by Primary School Students: Gender, Socio-Cognitive and Citizenship Issues.', *International Education Studies*, 5 (2012), pp. 24-34.

42 Earles, 'Reading Gender'.

reshaping concepts of gender and fostering a more inclusive society.

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*‘And they are holding all of it bound together in a book. It is nice to hold something physical, like they are holding the weight of the actual world in the palm of their hands.’*

# A Writer's Creation, a Reader's Connection

Julie Thilges

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Julie Thilges is a graduate of the BA English Language and Culture at the University of Amsterdam, and currently pursues her MA in Communication and Information there. In her free time, she always likes to plan and (ideally) write novels, while she also enjoys side hustles in journalism and music.

**I**MAGINE THIS: A LONE writer sitting at their desk, a pen in their hand, clasped tightly, the tip hovering just above a blank page, trembling almost invisibly. An almost used up candle paints light and shadows onto the paper, casting a theatrical spectacle as the smell of the melting wax fills the air. The atmosphere was set, and the story had already happened in the writer's mind, examined from every angle, dissected in every possible way. The only remaining task was to write it down.

The anticipation of starting an elaborate story was daunting and thrilling and exciting all at once. They knew exactly what would happen. The idea had come to them one evening while sitting on their bed, a blanket wrapped around their shoulders as they held a cup of tea, the steam warming the tip of their nose as they took gentle, honey-sweetened sips. The next step was to write a plan for the story and name the characters.

Characters. Creating them was like breathing life into actual people. They began as a thought in the writer's mind before emerging as names on a page. They would become friends—more, even. Family. The characters would develop a personality and a background almost by themselves—the writer simply needed to think and jot down every fleeting thought.

When writing tentative notes, the pen dashed across the paper, leaving illegible words scribbled in messy traces of ink. The lines filled at an almost unimaginable speed as thoughts emerged quickly, shaping basic plot points. A hint of a smile crept onto their lips before spreading into a grin, their nose scrunching in excitement as a particularly great idea found its way out of the mind and onto the paper.

At the time of beginning the actual writing process, the writer sat at their desk once more, their notes scattered around them in disorder. They knew where everything was written—until they didn't, and they had to maniacally search through every bit of paper until they stumbled upon the note they'd been looking for. Holding something physical in their hands was comforting — like they had created something real.

Slowly, the blank pages were getting filled, the writer furiously typing away at their computer, the clickity-clacks of their fingers smashing down on the keys at a speed that allowed them to directly project their thoughts onto the screen in front of them. They sat there, pouring their sadness and pain and joy and happiness into the characters. It was these moments that all writers cherished—an abundance of creativity and unending inspiration that had them write pages and pages on end, with no break in sight. Sometimes, they would stare at their open document for hours, smiling, laughing even, enjoying their own writing before anyone else would get to see it.

These moments of triumph were few and far between, for such a flow of inspiration was ephemeral, and could vanish just as quickly as it had appeared, leaving frustration and doubt in its wake. With a heavy heart, the writer took a step back, frowning at their screen before shutting it off and burying their face in their hands. The art of creation was a difficult task, and beyond overwhelming at times. Frustrated, they turned away from their device, ignoring it, determined to not touch it anymore for the rest of the day. The week even. Maybe ever.

It was too hard. Writing. Giving up was easier. Perhaps that was a good idea. Except... the story lingered in their mind, and most of all, in their heart. The urge to continue life for their characters (or end it, if they were feeling particularly destructive) wouldn't leave them. The story was there. All they had to do was write down the scenes they thought of every evening and dreamt of each night.

With new determination, they sat back down at their desk, pushing past the blockage that kept them from writing. It didn't have to be good. They just had to get it out and improve it later. They owed it to themselves; they were their only audience — for now, at least —, and needed to know what would happen. And when writing, they poured little bits and pieces of their own life onto the page and into the characters.

After hours, and days, and weeks — months — of work, they leaned back in their chair, heaving a satisfied sigh. This had been agonising and an immense mental effort. However, they would do it again — they were certain of that. And they were proud. Proud of what they had created, and proud of what world their mind would conjure next.

Now imagine this: a lone reader, sitting at home on their bed, a blanket draped over their legs and shoulders, holding a copy of a newly released novel, their cup of tea standing right next to them on their nightstand, a candle burning and casting its lavender scent into the air. The reading light illuminates the pages they are holding, their eyes locked on all the words written across them.

Someone has written this, come up with this idea, and taken the time to create it so that everyone else on the planet can take it up and explore it on their own, not knowing what will come next, entering a world separate of their own, allowing an escape from their ordinary life, going along on journeys with the characters who will become friends and family. And they are holding all of it bound together in a book. It is nice to hold something physical, like they are holding the weight of the actual world in the palm of their hands.

It doesn't take long for them to love the characters. Did the author love them as well? Or did it take time to grow accustomed to them? The reader doesn't think they can ever leave them behind; perhaps the characters will linger in their mind—and heart—forever. Sometimes — oftentimes — they don't want to set the book aside and leave the characters behind, even if it is just for a short while. On the other hand, they want to take breaks from reading as often as possible, so they can enjoy the book for a longer period of time instead of digesting it in one sitting. Sometimes, they find themselves staring at the book for hours, smiling, laughing even, enjoying the writing before they inevitably share it with their friends.

Slowly, they become part of the story, fully immersing themselves, seeing their own reflection in the characters. They cry with the characters; they experience their sadness and pain and joy and

happiness as if they themselves were a part of the story. It is comforting. It is like a warm hug that isn't physically there.

A hint of a smile sneaks up on their lips before spreading into a grin, their nose scrunching in excitement as a particularly great line comes up next, and they are sure they will remember it for the weeks to come. With a steady hand, they underline their favourite lines with a soft pencil. They are physically incapable of turning away from the book. It has become part of their existence now. The book. The author. They all become one, and are now a permanent and unwavering part of the reader's life.

The characters' emotions are the reader's emotions now, and perhaps they were once the writer's emotions. Now a forever part of the characters and their world, the reader looks up from the pages, having almost reached the end. Their eyes sting and their heart beats just a little faster in their chest, feeling every line of the story with their very soul.

Upon finishing the book, they slowly put it down on their lap, sitting in silence for a while, letting the candle burn a little longer. The tea is long finished. A hollow feeling spreads out in their chest — reaching the end of a book is as fulfilling as it is painful, and they will do it a million more times, they are certain of that. The book closes by itself as it rests on the reader's lap without the reader noticing as they relive the events of the book, not yet ready to leave it all behind and face their own mundane life.

With each book they read, their own imagination doubles in size, and their heart is content.

And when they see the author's name at the end of the book — and every time after that — they feel an instant connection. This person has created something so beautiful and wonderful, they are like a friend, even though they have never formally met, and likely never will. They have poured their imagination and fantasies onto the page for people to read. There is something oddly beautiful and poetic and magical about the act of creation stringing people's lives together so minutely it hardly matters, but at the same time, it is all that matters.

Perhaps magic does exist, then. In art. In books. In life. The reader is holding it in their very hands, life and magic and love, all at the same time, collected on beautifully bound pages, with whole worlds to explore.



*‘Books are a witness that humans are mortal, but our ideas don’t have to be. And that is the true magic of the book - the ability to make us immortal.’*

# Unearthing the Past to Strengthen Our Future: A Look at Manuscripts as Time-Capsules

Sayuri Deokar

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Sayuri Deokar is an MA Multilingualism student at the University Konstanz. She did a BA in Linguistics at the University of Amsterdam. Her academic focus is on multilingualism, code-switching, and psycholinguistics.

**W**HAT PROMPTS PEOPLE to write down their thoughts?

The fear of forgetting?

The need for documenting?

The want to leave a mark on the world?

Whatever the reason may be, the value of written media remains uncontested. Even in today's increasingly technological world, humans remain attached to physical copies of their favourite books. Libraries still hold great importance in people's hearts, and bookstores are still a lovely place for a quiet day. In fact, books play such a big role in our lives that, in India, they are treated almost reverentially. Books, for us, represent teachers; essential vessels of knowledge that enrich our lives. Given this, it makes perfect sense that their physical form is treated with the utmost respect – they are not to be torn, defaced, touched with our feet, thrown, or mistreated in any way. Even if something like this were to happen accidentally, one intuitively apologises to the book. So even though it is implicitly known that a book is just a stack of papers bound together, this special treatment shows that writing on that stack of paper somehow turns an ordinary physical object into a book that has to be handled with great care.

Coming from an Indian house of academics, books were a core part of my upbringing. But there was one specific 'form' of written language that truly captivated me – manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> As one of the oldest mediums of written language, it is fascinating to see the different materials and methods used to write. From stone inscriptions to palm leaf manuscripts, the sheer amount of time and effort needed to complete even one manuscript is astounding. In the world of printing presses and mass production,

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1 Here, manuscripts include any document written or inscribed by hand with and on a variety of materials.

it is almost unimaginable that a book could take months to be completed. However, it definitely speaks to why these manuscripts were so highly valued and revered, beyond just their content.

Therefore, in this article, the focus will be on some of the stories and histories of the written word that truly show the magic of the book. The piece starts with the Indian history of writing and its relationship with the socioreligious context. Then the focus shifts to the migration of people and their manuscripts, to highlight their value through how they were treated. As part of this discussion, it is also important to look at instances where manuscripts were destroyed, and the reasons behind this.

### *The History of Writing in India*

As the home of one of the biggest collections of manuscripts in the world, India is the primary focus of this article. India possesses an estimate of ten million manuscripts; written in a vast number of Indian languages and scripts, these also span a plethora of genres, from religion to medicine and from law to erotica.<sup>2</sup> Including stories outside of India would also be fruitful for the sake of comparison, and to perhaps present a different side of manuscripts. This journey aims to showcase the fact that the magic of the book is not confined to a place or group of people, but rather, it is something that is fundamental to humanity. Much has changed since humans invented writing; even the writing itself. Yet the need to document, to report, to cement our histories and our existence in time, remains the same. Maybe these manuscripts – time capsules of some sort – unveil how magical books and manuscripts truly are.

For a long time, it was widely believed that the transmission of complex literary forms and content would only be possible via writing. However, Indian history and culture displays something different. The oldest evidence of writing in India dates from the middle of the third century BCE, with stone inscriptions from the rulers of that time.<sup>3</sup> This is astonishingly late compared to other advanced civilisations, yet an extensive body of literature had already been created and distributed. The oldest work according to the current understanding is the *gveda*, ‘the (sacred) knowledge consisting of stanzas’ – a Hindu religious text composed anywhere between 1500 and 1200 BCE.<sup>4</sup> It was orally transmitted for at least a thousand years, which is quite a feat considering the text is around 10,600 stanzas. This was the case for many other texts as well, proving they were able to survive without having been written down. In India, knowing texts by heart was held in high esteem, whereas writing things down was equated with spoiling texts. This, in many regards, is at odds with the current beliefs. Sloterdijk explains it as:

For the ancient world, indeed until the eve of the modern nation state, the ability to read actually meant something like membership of an elite shrouded in mystery – grammatical knowledge was once regarded in many places as the epitome of magic; in fact, even in mediaeval English, the word *grammar* is used to develop *glamour*: Those who can read and write will find other impossibilities easy.<sup>5</sup>

Again, this is at odds with the current beliefs regarding writing as a way to ensure longevity of knowledge and ideas, and to control who has access to them.

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2 National Mission for Manuscripts, ‘About Us’, <<https://namami.gov.in/about-us>> [17 May, 2024].

3 Oskar von Hinüber, *Der Beginn der Schrift und Frühe Schriftlichkeit in Indien* (Mainz: Akad. d. Wiss. u. d. Literatur, 1989); Harry Falk, *Schrift im Alten Indien: Ein Forschungsbericht mit Anmerkungen* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1993).

4 Michael Witzel and Toshifumi Got, *Rig-Veda; Erster und Zweiter Liederkreis: Das Heilige Wissen* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2007).

5 Translated from Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark: Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), n.p.

## *Role of the Written Word in India*

Then why was this not the case in India? Here, this divide was still present – women and people from lower castes were forbidden from learning texts written in Sanskrit, specifically religious texts,<sup>6</sup> and it was in fact believed that exclusively oral transmission of a work made it easier to ensure this division. This is precisely the time when other religious movements – such as Buddhism – arose as a counter to these Hindu traditions (fifth or fourth century BCE). The Buddha believed that his teachings should be open to everyone regardless of gender or social status, and therefore promoted using the medium of writing to record and transmit his teachings. So, in this case, books act as a symbol of equality, opening the doors of knowledge to two-thirds of the population which had so far been kept away from it.

Thus, Buddhist monks were creating and safekeeping a number of valuable manuscripts. As time passed, Buddhism spread to other Asian countries, but by the thirteenth and fourteenth century CE, it had disappeared from its homeland – India. And gone with it were the vast majority of texts and manuscripts, barring those which had been translated into Tibetan and Chinese. After China's invasion of Tibet, Tibetan monks – alongside lay people – fled Tibet and took asylum in India. Fascinatingly, when they migrated, they had the option to carry either manuscripts or food, and many monks chose to only carry manuscripts, because they believed that they were so valuable. They had to brave gunfire and starvation to smuggle the manuscripts out of the country.<sup>7</sup> Some of the manuscripts were then found in museums, and even though there have been efforts to return these items to Tibetans, it is not an easy task. Gretchen, the editor of the Buddhist publishing house Dharma Publishing, explains:

What we're doing is preserving or ensuring that this vital tradition that has important things to give to modern society ... survives to another generation, because there was serious doubt that this tradition would survive.<sup>8</sup>

Here, then, books become a vessel to carry forward history which otherwise could have been wiped out.

As for Indian manuscripts, many of the ones written on palm leaf did not survive due to the humid climate. However, a number of Buddhist manuscripts were discovered in Pakistan and Afghanistan due to the dry climate there. It is often forgotten that, before Islamisation, these two countries had a Buddhist past and were essentially Buddhist countries for over a thousand years. Remains of Buddhist monasteries were found which contained the manuscripts mentioned earlier, in the valley of Bamiyan, but unfortunately, they were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, books become symbols of a particular group or ideas, leading to their destruction; alongside the knowledge and stories contained within them.

Luckily, the surviving manuscripts were able to be protected and turned out to be around a thousand years older than any other manuscripts found in India. One of the ways in which some of the manuscripts were preserved was by hiding them in clay pots, which could be part of a ritual burial of sacred writings.<sup>10</sup> These manuscripts also bring people closer to the origin of writing, as a historical work from Sri Lanka explains that parts of Buddhist tradition and the Buddha's teaching

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6 Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the M-Anava-Dharma's-Astra* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2004).

7 Michelle Locke, 'Exhibit in Berkeley Offers Window on Tibet's Lost Libraries', *Los Angeles Times*, 19 November, 1995. <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-11-19-me-4934-story.html>> [17 May, 2024].

8 *Ibid.*

9 Jens-Uwe Hartmann, *Literatur ohne Schrift? Der Sonderfall Indien und die Rolle des Buddhismus* (Göttingen: Vienna University Press, 2016).

10 Stefan Baums, 'Die Schriftkultur Gandhāras', *Akademie Aktuell: Zeitschrift der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 44 (2013), pp. 20–23.

would otherwise be lost, because the monks who had memorised the texts were passing away due to natural disasters.<sup>11</sup> This is exactly the pitfall with an oral tradition, one that Vedic Hindu traditions did not want to acknowledge due to their desire for exclusivity. However, since this was not a belief held by Buddhists, writing became commonplace.

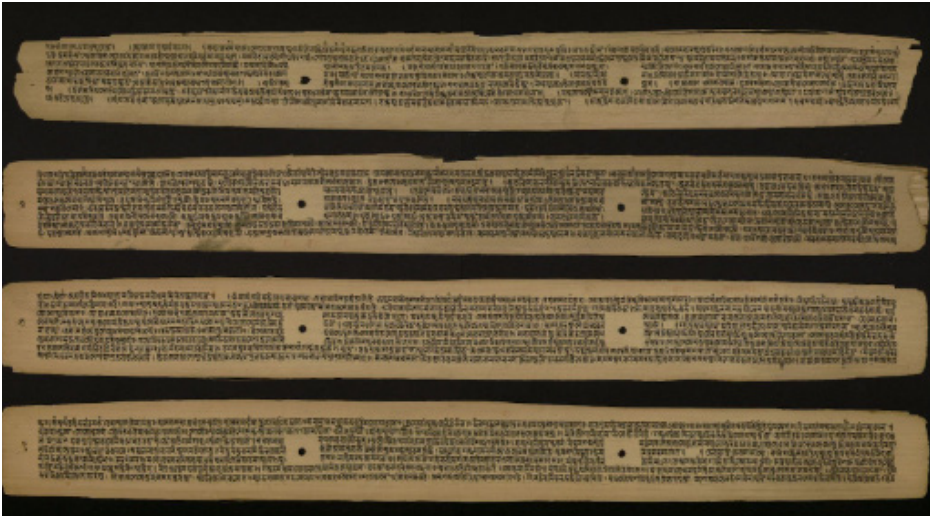


Fig. 1. fol. 17, manuscript Kavikamadhenu.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Dark Side of Manuscripts*

In this history of manuscripts, most seem to be a beacon to shed light onto a time and a people that would otherwise be a mystery. Yet not all that comes from these manuscripts is 'magical'. There have been a number of texts which have helped perpetuate the othering and the discrimination of certain marginalised groups. In India, a famous example of this would be the *Manusmṛiti*, a Hindu legal text dated to the first to third century CE. The text justifies the social hierarchy based on caste and sees women and people of lower castes as inherently inferior. On 25<sup>th</sup> December 1927, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar – a scholar, jurist, journalist, and the author of the Indian constitution – openly burned the *Manusmṛiti*.<sup>13</sup> In a society where books are not to be disrespected in any way, this act was quite shocking. Dr. Ambedkar, an avid reader who promoted literacy, was not dishonouring a book, but rather the ideas contained within it. This symbolic act not only shows the power that books hold, but also our associations with them.

11 Kenneth Roy Norman, *A Philological Approach to Buddhism* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1997).

12 Subhūticandra, 'Kavikāmadhenu on Amarakośa: Together with Si tu Pan chen's Tibetan Translation', Archive.org, 2014. <<https://archive.org/details/subhutticandraska0000subh>> [17 May, 2024].

13 Krishan Kumar, 'Why Did Babasaheb Burn Manusmṛiti? Unraveling the Motives behind a Historic Act', The Mooknayak, 26 December, 2023. <<https://en.themooknayak.com/discussion-interview/why-did-babasaheb-burn-manusmriti-unraveling-the-motives-behind-a-historic-act>> [17 May, 2024].

## Manuscripts of the Abbey Library of St. Gallen

This type of affinity to manuscripts and their importance is in no way unique to the Indian subcontinent. Recently I had the opportunity to visit the Abbey Library of St. Gallen in Switzerland, and the stories regarding the manuscripts there clearly shared some similarities with stories about Indian manuscripts. The library is considered to be one of the richest mediaeval libraries in the world, and holds an excellent collection of early mediaeval manuscripts, some of which are over a thousand years old. Given the fact that most of these were religious texts, they had much better odds of being protected over the course of centuries. This is likely since either the people responsible for destroying other texts were religious themselves, or they believed that the books still had some spiritual or magical powers, and therefore destroying them would result in bad luck or being cursed.

One such manuscript that stood the test of time is the *Prisciani Grammatica* from around 845 CE, written in Old Irish.<sup>14</sup> Not only was this manuscript essential in reconstructing the Old Irish language, but it also contains small remarks in the margins from the monk-scribes stating that 'I'm cold' or 'the ink is too thin'. Clearly, these comments have nothing to do with the actual contents of the book, however through the somewhat magical act of writing, they have memorialised the then current conditions of the scribes.

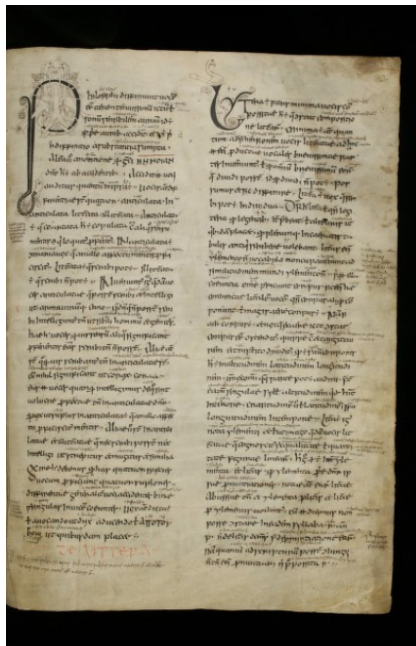


Fig. 2. Cod. Sang. 904, manuscript Prisciani Grammatica.<sup>15</sup>

14 E-Codices: Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland, 'Cod. Sang. 904, Prisciani grammatica', <<https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0904>> [17 May, 2024].

15 Ibid.

A similarly intriguing story comes from the manuscript *Evangelium Longum* – a book bound with carved ivory plaques and metal frames with gemstones. The ivory plates were gifted by the emperor to the archbishopric of Mainz. During the ninth century, Archbishop Hatto had to accompany King Arnulf, and asked his friend Abbot Salomo of St. Gallen to protect his treasures. However, the abbot spread a rumour that the archbishop had passed away, and distributed everything, including the ivory plates, which went to the Saint Gall monastery.<sup>16</sup> These were then adorned by monk Tuotilo; and thus the *Evangelium Longum* came to be. In this case, it appears as though the manuscript was not designed to be used, since the insides are in surprisingly good condition, meaning that it was rarely opened.<sup>17</sup> Instead, it was supposed to be a mere showpiece evangelary.<sup>18</sup> Keeping this in mind, manuscripts also appear to function as a way to display an individual's or an institution's wealth and prosperity.



Fig. 3. Cod. Sang. 53, front cover of the *Evangelium Longum*.<sup>19</sup>

The type of bookbinding illustrated above is called treasure binding, where various precious metals, stones, and other valuable materials are used in the making of the book. These types of manuscripts were predominantly designed for the altar and were visible to the masses.<sup>20</sup> This visibility is also the reason why many such manuscripts were destroyed or went missing, since the precious materials were removed by looters or sold by the owners. One such example comes from the *Lindau Gospels*, which also had a treasure-bound front and back. However, it was later discovered that the back cover must have come from a different, smaller, and older book, and was merely attached to this one. This means that there is another book without its covers, due to it being stolen or sold. This shows that books also take on the role of being financial capital, and their value is placed on not only the contents, but

16 Thomas Rainer, *Buch-Gewänder: Prachteinbände im Mittelalter* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2015), pp. 259–264.

17 David Ganz, 'Die St. Galler Buchkunst vom 8. bis zum Ende des 11. Jahrhunderts – by Anton von Euw', *Early Medieval Europe*, 18 (2010), pp. 473–477.

18 Rainer, *Buch-Gewänder*, p. 259.

19 Weltkulturerbe Stiftsbezirk St. Gallen, 'Vaulted Cellar', <<https://www.stiftsbezirk.ch/en/current-exhibitions/vaulted-cellar>> [17 May, 2024].

20 Michelle Brown, Elizabeth C. Teviotdale, and Nancy Turner, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018).

also their physical form. Therefore, these books become 'magical' not only to readers who care about what lies within, but also to anyone looking to make money.

The magic of the book is a theme that many can appreciate due to its relatability in the readers' everyday lives and experiences, but through the stories presented here, it can be seen that this has been the case for centuries now. As humans, we were able to first develop language, and then ways to write it down. As mentioned prior, in India, huge bodies of literature were transmitted orally for hundreds of years, showing that language could in fact survive without writing. Yet everything has been dynamic – ranging from scripts, illustrations, and themes to materials – all closely related to the tastes and standards of a specific time and culture. Books have been revered, protected, destroyed, lost, worshipped, and fulfilled so many roles. They are friends, teachers, guides, historians, and much more. They have brought people together and created divides, helped unearth our past and predict our future. They have solidified the idea that we as humans are mere mortal beings, but our ideas do not have to be. And that is the true magic of the book – the ability to make us immortal.

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*‘Quacks used handwritten or printed documents to stress their authority towards the gullible crowds flocking to their performances.’*



# The Power of Parchment: Questioning Quacks in Visual Arts and Vernacular Literature

Bram Caers

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Bram Caers is an Assistant Professor of Middle Dutch Literature at Leiden University. He is interested in worldly literature in manuscript and print, and in the interplay between both media.

**I**N PAINTINGS AND engravings from the sixteenth and seventeenth century onwards, one will often find depictions of books as well as loose paper or parchment documents, in the contexts in which they were likely used in daily life. Their artistic depiction of course has been somewhat idealised, and will often convey a metaphorical message to the onlooker. Nevertheless, it is likely that especially in the backgrounds of paintings focusing on something else than books or printed material, one will encounter a relatively true-to-life impression of how printed or written texts and images were used in early modern households, businesses, offices, and public spaces. For example, maps hung up on walls are a relatively common feature in the seventeenth-century depiction of interior spaces. They can be found in the more luxurious quarters of the wealthy, but also in the homes of less affluent characters such as craftsmen.<sup>1</sup> Depending on the size of the maps, their geographical focus, the level of execution, and other parameters, featuring one in the background of painted interior settings could convey any number of messages, ranging from knowledge over wealth to vanity. What remains certain from these visual sources is that maps will have been an integral part of the decoration in early modern households, like picture frames today.

From a book historical perspective, the depiction of printed items in the visual arts is an interesting way to question the market for print illustrations (engravings, woodcuts) in various forms and genres. Research platforms and reference works traditionally focus solely on the book as a material object,

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1 For an exploration of maps as decoration items, see James A. Welu, 'The Sources and Development of Cartographic Ornamentation in the Netherlands', in *Art and Cartography: Six Historical Essays*, ed. by David Woodward (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 147–173.

preserved into the present day.<sup>2</sup> Decorative printed material has only very rarely been preserved, precisely because it was being used as decoration, and was subject to more wear and tear than engravings kept in books, folders, or albums, for example. The visual arts, however, can provide insight into an ephemeral part of the printing industry that could all too easily be overlooked.

In the following paragraphs, I would like to discuss the visual representation of print items in a relatively specific context in which artists apparently chose to depict printed or handwritten documents: that of the itinerant quack. These colourful characters have drawn the attention of scholars from the viewpoint of social history, art history as well as literary history, but so far, scarce attention has been paid to the fact that they are often depicted with handwritten or printed documents.<sup>3</sup> I will discuss a number of examples dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and will devote attention to the interaction between text and image, both in the visual representation of the documents and in their accompanying text. In doing so, I hope to show how these quacks (ab)used the magic of the book to draw a gullible crowd to their performance. The discussion will provide a contextualisation of the role documents played in the stereotypical imagery surrounding quacks, and likely in real life.

### *Charters on sticks*



Fig. 1. Pieter van der Heyden, after a design by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Stone Operation or The Witch of Mallegem*. Antwerp: Hiëronymus Cock, 1559. Engraving on paper. Bruges: Prentenkabinet – Van Hoorebeke, 2014.GRO0027.III.

- 2 A recent exception is Books as Symbols in Renaissance Art (BASIRA), an online database that aims to gather 'representations of books and other textual documents in the figurative arts between approximately 1300 and 1600 CE'. See <<https://basiraproject.org/>> (5 June, 2024).
- 3 For a social history perspective, see David Gentilcore, "'Charlatans, Mountebanks and Other Similar People': The Regulation and Role of Itinerant Practitioners in Early Modern Italy", *Social History* 20 (1995), pp. 297-314. For an art historical approach, see Wendy Wauters, "'Extracting the Stone of Madness' in Perspective: The Cultural and Historical Development of an Enigmatic Visual Motif from Hieronymus Bosch: A Critical Status Quaestionis", *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen / Antwerp Royal Museum Annual 2015-2016* (2018), pp. 9-36. A discussion of the literary stereotype, especially in Dutch literature, is provided by Femke Kramer, *Mooi, vies, knap, lelijk: grotesk realisme in rederijerskluchten* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2009). Gentilcore (pp. 300, 305) refers to quacks using 'printed handbills to sell and describe their wares' – for an example from England, compare Alun Whitey, "'By the King's Special Grant': A Venetian Quack in Early Modern Britain", *Dr Alun Whitey*, 19 February, 2014. <<https://dralun.wordpress.com/>> (7 May, 2024). These handbills differ from the documents under discussion here, which were intended for ostentatious display.

In a famous engraving that is referred to as *The Stone Operation or The Witch of Mallegem*, designed by Pieter Bruegel the Elder and printed in 1559, we encounter a lively scene populated by fools who attend the session of an itinerant *keisnijder*, a quack doctor who promises cures for all ailments.<sup>4</sup> Fools from all around flock to his treatments, while the doctor is in the midst of removing a *kei* or stone from the head of one patient, in the feeble light of a lantern held close by. The expression of ‘keisnijden’, literally ‘cutting stones from people’s bodies’, is a reference to a proverb in Middle Dutch, which associates folly with people who have a stone in their heads.<sup>5</sup> While not all bystanders have visible lumps on their heads or elsewhere on their bodies, the folly of these prospective patients is evident enough from their faces: with their mouths ajar or wide open, some showing vivid emotions, most characters are obviously intended to come across as half-witted and gullible, serving as a warning for the onlookers not to follow in their footsteps.<sup>6</sup>

At least part of the attraction of the quack’s supposed skills, it would seem, lies in some of the objects that are depicted in their vicinity. Mounted on standing wooden poles, we see important-looking certificates, with large seals hanging down from them. One charter shows the picture of a large knife, which the quack purportedly uses to cut out ‘stones’ from people’s heads and bodies. And aside the documents, the pole also sports sets of stones which allegedly had been successfully removed from patients at previous sessions. The documents themselves, with their large seals, make an official, important, and expensive impression, and that was precisely the idea. They will have been posted against walls, or hung high above people’s heads on spears or scaffolds, so as to publicise the business of the quacks, by stressing their authority. In this particular design, the text on the certificates is not legible, although it is clear that it is supposed to represent Latin.<sup>7</sup> In the bottom of the charter, there are only two legible words, making out the name of someone who purportedly signed the document to lend it authority: ‘Jan Kakernakel’. This of course is a fictitious name, freely translating to ‘John Sack-of-Bones’, or in any case to a term of abuse which is known from other sources. The overall message is clear: the quack attracts fools, peddling solutions to problems that either do not exist, or that he cannot cure using the methods and tools he uses.



Fig. 2. Anonymous, after a design by Maarten de Vos, *De Keisnijder*. Amsterdam: Claes Jansz. Visscher II, [1550-1599]. Engraving on paper. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-78.805.

4 The engraving has been discussed thoroughly in art historical scholarship. My analysis here is based on Bruegel: *The Complete Graphic Works*, ed. by Maarten Bassens & Joris Van Grieken (London: WW Norton, 2019), pp. 182–185.

5 The visual motif of keisnijden is first (1501–1505) encountered in the work of Hieronymus Bosch, who in turn was inspired by literary sources, or indeed simply by the existence of a proverb in Dutch: see Wauters, “Extracting the Stone”, pp. 9–10.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

7 In a contemporary criticism of quacks, the Leiden physician Pieter van Foreest referred to the ‘nonsensical Latin’ that quacksalvers and mountebanks used to radiate their authority: see Vivian Nutton, ‘Idle Old Trots, Cobblers and Costardmongers: Pieter Van Foreest on Quackery’, in *Petrus Forestus Medicus*, ed. by Henriette A. Bosman-Jelgersma et al. (Haarlem: Stichting ADL, 1996), pp. 243–256 (p. 246). Literary representations of quacks will often have these characters quote from non-existent or badly referenced authoritative sources in Latin, e.g. Cornelis de Bie, *Klucht vanden nieuw-gesinden doctoer die ik noeme meester Quinten-quack en Cortisaen, zynen Bly-geestigen knecht (Dendermonde, [1706])*.

A similar example, in a design by Maarten de Vos dating from the last quarter of the sixteenth century, depicts the *keisnijder* in an interior setting, with his utensils at the ready and in the midst of extracting a stone from a patient's head. Here too, however, we are probably dealing with an itinerant quack, which can be derived from his clothes and from the caption in Dutch indicating that he is 'now' visiting the town of Mallegem, which translates freely as 'town of fools'.<sup>8</sup> The quack here is named 'Meester Blaeskake', 'Master Windbag', which is also a tell-tale sign of his quackery. While this quack performs his surgery in an interior space, the depiction shows remarkable similarities to that in Bruegel's design, which predates this engraving by a few decades. Here also, we see an impressive charter, weighed down by no less than four seals, to which have been attached three additional letters of recommendation, one with two small seals of its own. The stones that allegedly have been cut out of previous patients, have here been attached to the charter, providing a visual echo to the wax seals, attempting to lend to this specific quack the authority of a well-practiced surgeon. And while we cannot readily assume that the interior space is the quack's cabinet, there are books on a shelf in the background which add to the general idea of stressing the quack's foundations in relevant medical literature. Interestingly, whereas Bruegel's quack apparently was accompanied by a number of employees to help propagate his message, this character seems to be a one-man operation, publicising his talents also on his person. He has a necklace made out of extracted stones, and an eastern-looking hat adorned with several embellishments that will certainly have caught the attention, and that may well have reinforced his image as a wise, well-travelled doctor.<sup>9</sup> Their international looks and their claims to foreign ascendance are a common feature of quacks, both in the Dutch context and elsewhere. This of course allowed them to make any number of claims, impossible as it was for the audience to verify their veracity.<sup>10</sup>

The key elements in the depiction of the quack which are present in the two sixteenth-century engravings discussed here, seem to have formed an integral part of the stereotypical image of the itinerant doctor. While the connection to 'cutting stones' is specifically related to the Dutch context, as it is a reference to a proverb in the Dutch language, comparable characters exist also elsewhere, often in the role of itinerant dentists — i.e. pulling teeth instead of cutting stones — or inspectors of urine flasks.<sup>11</sup> The overall impression, however, stays the same: the quacks are characters who are all but serious in their appearance, wearing strange clothes and advertising their craft on their person through flags, special adornments or typical hats, but who build authority by ostentatiously showing official-looking documents and claiming previous successes in far-away lands.<sup>12</sup> A final case in point in which the ostentatious display of documents and proofs of authority is very present, is an anonymous painting, dating from the 1620s, of a quack in a street scene, bragging – on horseback! – about his feats of medicine, surrounded by a purpose-built display with paintings of his cured patients, accompanied by text propagating his work: 'allen deese, ende meer ander, hebbe ick genesen, alst blyck by mynne brieven, ende sertefika[t]jen' ('all these and many more, I have cured, as testified by my letters and

8 Not all quacks and charlatans moved about; some chose to stay in the same place for considerable time. See Gentilcore, "Charlatans", pp. 313-314.

9 See also Wauters, "Extracting the Stone", p. 21, who indicates that the outer appearance of quacks increased in frivolity throughout the sixteenth century.

10 Legislative efforts were undertaken to crack down on all-too hyperbolic statements, but quacks continued to be tolerated to a certain extent: see Gentilcore, "Charlatans", p. 304.

11 Ibid., p. 298. Nutton, 'Idle Old Trots', p. 251, refers to examples from Italy, Spain, England, the German Empire, and the Republic, from the perspective of the response these practices met in critical discourse by learned physicians, and calls quackery 'typical of Western Europe in the early modern period'.

12 Gentilcore, "Charlatans", p. 310, refers to a case brought before the Medical College in Rome, which noted that the quack hung 'a picture above the said demonstration with certain letters'. This was used as an argument against the quack.

certificates').<sup>13</sup> On a table in front, as well as attached to the paintings, is an impressive display of charters with seals, freely accessible for onlookers to browse, stressing again the sense of authority.



Fig. 3. Anonymous, *The quack*. [1619-1625]. Oil painting on panel. Rijksmuseum, SK-A-1429.

### *Stereotypes in text and on stage*

In the Low Countries as well as elsewhere, practitioners of serious medicine — these would include learned physicians as well as more practically oriented professionals such as surgeons or midwives — were engaged in campaigns against quackery, in the forms of written treatises as well as judicial endeavours.<sup>14</sup> Quacks were being called out and brought to court, even if there was no way of putting an end to the practice in general, as long as people were gullible enough to que for quack's cures in markets and squares.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, the treatises that have been preserved, allow for an interesting insight into the perception of quackery, and provide a textual counterbalance to the sources from the visual arts. A good example is a treatise on syphilis by the sixteenth-century English master surgeon William Clowes (c. 1543-1604) published in London in 1585. This *Briefe and necessarie treatise* is addressed 'to all the true professours of chirurgerie', and includes in its opening paragraphs a vicious attack on the 'ignorant asses' who discredit the true practitioners.<sup>16</sup> The imposters, he says, are 'commonly called Quacksalvers, Mountibanks, Landlopers, Fugitives, and other Maisterlesse makeshiftes'. How ever loudly they try to proclaim their authority, Clowes asserts that they are as easily recognisable as an 'Asse by his eares, or the Lyon by his pawes: for they delight most commonly to proclaime their dealings, in open streets and market places by prating, bragging and liyng [sic], with their **libelles**,

13 Y. Bruijnen, 'Anonymous, *The Quack*, c. 1619 - c. 1625', Rijksmuseum, 2024. <<https://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.4839>> (7 May, 2024).

14 Gentilcore, "Charlatans", p. 303.

15 Also, quacks were tolerated to a certain extent, as regular medicine was in no way capable of covering all medical needs, especially in the countryside. Some quacks will also have had noble intentions, but the overall perception is negative. See Gentilcore, "Charlatans".

16 William Clowes, *Briefe and Necessary Treatise, Touching the Cure of the Disease Called Morbus Gallicus, or Lues Venerea, by Unctions and Other Approved Waies of Curing, Newlie Corrected and Augmented* (London, 1585), fol. A3r and p. 9.

bannars, and wares, hanging them out abroade, after the like order as it is here set downe'. What follows is a woodcut that is strongly reminiscent of the iconography in the engravings discussed above, including the depiction of stones taken from patients (although here the charter reads 'MENDAX' – liar, so as to leave no doubt for the reader of this treatise).<sup>17</sup> For Clowes, the ostentatious display of 'libelles', i.e. printed or handwritten documents, apparently was an inherent part of the way quacks attempted to draw the attention of passers-by.

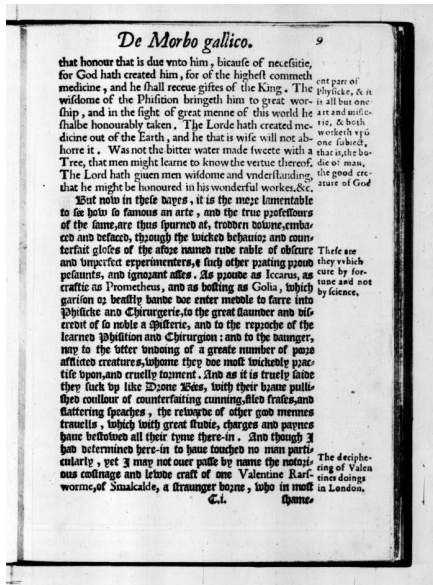


Fig. 4. Thomas Clowes, *The Briefe and necessarie treatise...* London: 1585, p. 9.

While surgeons and physicians such as William Clowes were dead serious about combatting the practices of quacks and other medical frauds, their discourse cannot be disconnected from the stereotypical image of quackery in visual arts and literary sources. The interplay between the visual and literary arts gave rise to specific new genres such as emblem books, which explicitly link text and image in a combined message of morals to the Early Modern reader and onlooker. Engravings, too, were often accompanied by short poems indicating their meaning. In both cases discussed above, a poem was included at some point in their printing history.<sup>18</sup> When we take a closer look at the poems, we find that they sometimes provide a textual echo to the depiction of documents in the image. The Bruegel design, in its fourth state, included a French poem in which the quack boasts his connection to important courts all over Europe in the style and fashion of a list of noble titles, which often opens princely charters. Upon closer inspection, domains referred to are either fictitious, or will point towards existing places associated with madness or folly. However, their inclusion can be seen as an

17 Interestingly, there is reminiscence of the Dutch tradition here, both in terms of the visual reference to 'keisnijders', as well as in the words Clowes uses for quacks. This may well indicate that the Dutch stereotypical imagery of quacks, both in terms of text and in terms of visual representation, had some influence abroad. This provides some nuance to the findings of William Schupbach, 'A New Look at the Cure of Folly', in *Medical History*, 22 (1978), pp. 267–281, as referenced in Wauters, "Extracting the Stone", p. 31. There is also a banner with a Latin saying from Plautus, *felix quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum* (translated freely as: lucky is he who is made cautious by the dangers experienced by others).

18 Bassens & Van Grieken, Bruegel, p. 182.

implicit reference to the documents in the image:

Maistre Jean de la folie, grand Operateur et medecin Iure dans la court estatz et domeines du Treshault et trespuissant monarque colÿn par la disgrace / des cieulx empereur souuerain de tout l'univers, Roÿ des enragez des creux, sotz et esceruelez, Sr. d'Orleans en France, de Lille en Flandre, de Ghele en / Brabant, de Maubeuge en Haÿnault, grand maistre et commandeur general de los locos en Espagne, delli mati en Italie vande sotten des / Paÿs bas, der naren de Germanie etc. etc.<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere in the iconography of quacks, one finds similar instances where the accompanying text refers explicitly or implicitly to the charters, books or documents depicted. An interesting example, because it has strengthened the message of foolishness by depicting both the quacks and the audience as monkeys, is an engraving dating from 1720 by Matthijs Pool, which in the Dutch caption (interestingly, not in the French) comments: 'Dees Aap zwetst op zijn zalve, en Apen hem begluuren, | Hij pronkt met **Brieven**, en maakt loutere Apenkuuren' (This monkey brags about his ointments, to an audience of monkeys. | He shows off his letters, but only does monkey tricks').



Fig. 5. Anonymous, Aap als kwakzalver. Amsterdam: Matthijs Pool, 1720. Engraving on paper. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-9423.

In literary texts that were not intended to accompany a visual representation of quackery, one also finds numerous references to quacks, itinerant doctors, urine readers and other medical frauds. In theatre, for example, the quack was part of the repertoire as a comical stock character, often endowed with a funny German accent. In fact, the 'performance' of a quack on his own makeshift stage in

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 182. Translation provided (p. 185): 'Master John of Folly, great surgeon and sworn doctor at court, the state and the domains of the august and mighty prince Colyn, by the displeasure of this sovereign emperor of the entire universe, King of the mad, the insane and the emptyheaded, Lord of Orleans in France, of Lille in Flanders, of Geel in Brabant, of Maubeuge in Hainaut, grandmaster and supreme commander of the locos in Spain, the mati in Italy, the sotten in the Low Countries, the naren in Germany, etc. etc.'

markets and streets, was not all that dissimilar from theatrical practice in the sixteenth century. Both were performed by itinerant groups or characters trying to make a living out of attracting as large an audience as possible.<sup>20</sup> From this shared ‘performance’ aspect, one may well imagine that rhetoricians and later stage actors will have enjoyed staging quacks as characters, which would have lent them the opportunity to ridicule the competition in a way.<sup>21</sup> A character in a 1615 farce by Samuel Coster made this connection explicit, by challenging an itinerant quack to perform some theatre or play some music, or else pack his bags.<sup>22</sup>

A well-known example of a quack on stage is the lead character in Bredero’s *Klucht vanden hoogduytschen quacksalver*, going by the name of ‘Rijckhart vande goude Mynen’ (‘Rich Man of the Gold Mines’). Rijckhart is an itinerant healer peddling all sorts of ointments, medicines and herbs, which he allegedly gathered during his travels in far-away lands. Here, in text instead of image, we encounter the same colourful character, loudly proclaiming his wares and skills to an audience of gullible fools flocking to the promise of a cure. While in the opening monologue, the quack interestingly does not refer to any document to stress his authority, one of his patients (or ‘victims’) further on does. Having approached the quack for a medicine that will increase his sexual appetite, he is surprised by an unexpected by-effect in the form of diarrhoea, for which the quack of course had forgotten to include fair warning. In calling out the quack for a false cure, the victim includes a reference to ostentatiously showed documents of authority:

Gaet heen, ghy Lapsalver, ghy snoode leughen verkooper  
 Ghy bedrieger, ghy schelm, ghy loose langtlooper  
 Och die vremde miesters of vremdelinghen ghelooft,  
 Die mist zijn sinnen, en wert van zijn sinnen berooft.  
 Gaet heen ghy fielt, ghy guyt, ghy eerloosen knoet of deen,  
 Die u aennemen die ontsteedly hert, sin en reen,  
 Met u brasseletten, en schijn schoone ringhen,  
 En met u brieven vals, en ander wonder dinghen.<sup>23</sup>

Almost a century later, in a Southern Netherlandish farce by Cornelis de Bie, the audience is given insight in the fabrication of false documents, in a discussion between master quack Quinten Quack and his servant Cortisaen. In a comical exchange riddled with verbal abuse going both ways, the quack insists that Cortisaen run out to fetch his ‘letters’, which according to the servant are ‘al autenticq besegelt en seer schoon’ (‘with authentic seals and very beautiful’), to which the quack replies: ‘Sy dienen my voor toon der waerheyd’ (‘I use them to prove my truthfulness’).<sup>24</sup> The ensuing conversation amounts to a comical practice round for the quack’s selling pitch. The audience learns that while the ‘authentic’ letters claim for Quinten Quacks an exotic pedigree and ample professional experience in curing the most spectacular cases of illness, he was in fact born in Mechelen and never performed any

20 Gentilcore, “Charlatans”, pp. 299, 308–311; See also Wauters, “Extracting the Stone”, p. 25. Kramer, Mooi, vies, knap, lelijk, pp. 304 ff., lists Dutch rhetoricians’ plays which feature illness and questionable healing methods.

21 Gentilcore, “Charlatans”, p. 308, mentions an interesting example of a theatrical author writing an intermezzo on the commission of a quack named Buonafede Vitali, intending to use it to sell his wares, in 1735.

22 [Samuel Coster], Een Tafel-spel van twee Personagien, te weten, een Quacksalver met zijn knecht: de Quacksalver is gheenaemt Meister Canjart, ende de knecht is gheenaemt Hansje quaet Cruyt (Amsterdam, 1615), fol. A1r.

23 Gerbrand Adriaensz. Bredero, *Klucht vanden Hoochonduytschen quacksalver* (Amsterdam, 1622), [p. 9], my bold. Transl.: Be gone, you quack, you seller of lies | you fraud, you thief, you lazy vagabond. | Ay, who believes foreign masters or strangers | he is without senses, or is robbed of them. | Be gone, you naughty thief, honourless braggart. | You steal from those who seek your service, | with your bracelets and beautiful rings, | and with your false letters and other wondrous things.

24 De Bie, *Quinten-quack en Cortisaen* (Dendermonde, [1706]), p. 10.

successful operation. Nevertheless, Quinten Quack insists that his experience ‘blykt aen dese brieven’ (‘becomes apparent from these letters’), and that he can make his audience believe his claims using ‘d’Attestation op parkement gezegelt’ (‘the proof on sealed parchment’).

## *Epilogue*

Early modern Dutch literature is riddled with examples of deceitful doctors, sellers of magic cures, and other quack-like characters. Their literary representation is akin to the way in which they are depicted in contemporary visual arts. The quack’s stereotypical features, in visual as well as literary sources, have been discussed at length, but so far little attention has been paid to the fact that quacks used handwritten or printed documents to stress their authority towards the gullible crowds flocking to their performances. These would include charter-like documents, preferably with large seals, but also letters of recommendation, or large posters — printed broadsheets or paintings on cloth — advocating the quacks’ products and services. The examples discussed show that quacks and other charlatans consciously and ostentatiously used the ‘magic of the book’, i.e. the authority that radiated from these fabricated documents, to publicise their business. At the same time, the moralistic message that is embedded in visual as well as literary representation of quackery, shows that the power of print was also employed to issue a warning against the fraudulent activities of itinerant doctors.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this message will have been directed towards a general audience, and went hand in hand with treatises on popular medicine that addressed the problem of illicit practices by untrained doctors. As the time passes, especially the visual representation in print seems to move towards a younger audience. In the nineteenth century, quackery will still have been a common sight in streets and squares, and we see a continuation of the stereotypical images of quacks going about their business. However, the message now is either explicitly aimed at children, for example in an abundance of penny prints focusing on quacks and other tricksters visiting town markets, or is delivered from a satirical distance, e.g. in the form of carnival scenes.

The gradual shift of the moralistic message of the quackery prints towards a more youthful audience is a story that I hope to continue elsewhere, but I will provide a teaser example: an engraving by Gerrit Oortman, specialising in prints for children, which shows a quack in the stereotypical setting, with a servant wielding an important charter. The accompanying poem warns children against the deceit of quackery, and refers to the ‘brief op perkament, als aan een hof geschreven’ (‘a letter on parchment, as if written at court’). This example is one of many that show how the representation of quackery survived the ages, but was now explicitly aimed at children. So be warned, young readers: quacks can change their clothes, but not their tricks.



Fig. 6. Gerrit Oortman, *Beschouw, ô jeugd! deez' print; lach vrij bij deeze plaat, Maar lees aandachtig ook het geen 'er onder staat* (transl. 'Behold, o youths, this image. Laugh, but also read with care what is written below'). Woodcut on paper. Amsterdam: Johannes Brouwer, 1805-1808. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-84.297.

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*‘Sorcery was not simply the magic of the people, it was overwhelmingly the magic of women’. The power that witches gained from speech was seen as markedly feminine.’*

# Magic Words: A Linguistic Analysis of Early Modern British Witchcraft Records

Sanne Dekker

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Sanne Dekker studied literature, linguistics, and ancient history at the University of Amsterdam and Leiden University. Her main interest is in corpus-assisted discourse studies of sociohistorical texts.

**I**N 1591, AGNIS Sampson was put on trial for witchcraft. Commonly known as the Wise Wife of Keith, Agnis was a midwife who was believed to possess healing powers. She was one of the numerous people that were accused of witchcraft by a maid called Geillis Duncan. Geillis had confessed under torture to being a witch herself and soon after provided the court with a list of other witches' names. Agnis in particular was accused of raising the storm that threatened King James VI of Scotland on his journey from Denmark back to Scotland. She was imprisoned and questioned by none other than the king himself. After days of torture and having all of her hair shaved off in search of a 'privy mark' by which witches were identified, Agnis confessed to causing the storm and was strangled with a garrote and burnt at the stake.<sup>1</sup>

The above tale describes the trial of one of the thousands of people who were persecuted for witchcraft in Early Modern Europe. The Early Modern witch hunts were not instigated or overseen by a unified international institution, but were rather hundreds of separate undertakings that nonetheless seemed to follow a similar pattern every time. Witches were not only widely believed to be real; there was an all-pervading fear of witches and sorcery in the Early Modern era. Though the fear of witches had been around since ancient times, thousands of years before the common era, it was believed that the problem of witchcraft was getting increasingly serious. Many a learned man wrote about the dangers of witches, amongst them King James, who wrote about '[t]he fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaues of the Deuill, the Witches or enchaunters', who 'were

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1 William Wright, 'Newes from Scotland, declaring the damnable life and death of Doctor Fian a notable sorcerer, who was burned at Edenbrough in January last. 1591', Early English Books Online, 1592. <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A00710.0001.001?view=toc>> (2 June, 2024).

neuer so rife in these partes, as they are now'.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently, witchcraft was a major concern for the Early Modern people; the alarming number of witchcraft trials accounts for that. However, the exact reason behind these trials, and this fear and condemnation of witchcraft, is still a point of disagreement amongst scholars. The late twentieth century saw a rise in academic interest in witch hunts, especially the infamous Salem witch trials. Theories on the causes of the Early Modern European witch hunts remain relatively speculative, and vary from religious conflict to gender-based persecution, and from climate-economic causes to functionalist reasons.

Stemming from my BA thesis, supervised by Dr. Robert Cloutier at the University of Amsterdam, the present study investigates witchcraft records from Early Modern Britain, in order to gain insight into the driving factors and proposed causes behind witch hunts. A specially-made historical corpus of witch hunter manuals, daemonologies, treatises, and pamphlets is employed to explore how linguistic trends reflect on ideologies that were applied to witches at the time, and what support these offer for the proposed causes of the witch hunts. By labelling each record with the genre of the text and the year in which it was composed, differences across genres and ideological changes over time may also become evident.



Fig. 1. Iss 229, fols. 2v-3r, a daemonology used in the corpus<sup>3</sup>

2 King James I of England, 'Daemonologie in forme of a dialogue, diuided into three bookes', Early English Books Online, 1597 (pp. xi, 81). <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A04243.0001.001?view=toc>> (2 June, 2024).

3 Nathaniel Crouch, 'The kingdom of darkness or, The history of daemons, specters, witches, apparitions, possessions, disturbances, and other wonderful and supernatural delusions, mischievous feats and malicious impostures of the Devil. Iss 229', Archive.org, 1688. <[https://archive.org/details/per\\_witchcraft-in-europe-and-america\\_the-kingdom-of-darkness\\_-crouch-nathaniel-16323\\_1688\\_229/](https://archive.org/details/per_witchcraft-in-europe-and-america_the-kingdom-of-darkness_-crouch-nathaniel-16323_1688_229/)> (2 June, 2024).

## Religious Warfare

[T]hey all consult with Satan to save themselves, and Satan stands ready prepared, with a *What will you have me doe for you, my deare and nearest children, covenanted and compacted with me in my hellish league, and sealed with your blood, my delicate firebrand-darlings*.<sup>4</sup>

One of the earliest theories on the cause of the Early Modern witch hunts is that they were a form of religious warfare. Witchcraft records are rife with Christian terminology,<sup>5</sup> and so religion is unsurprisingly one of the first things historians look at to explain the witch hunts. Their theories commonly point to the period of extreme doctrinal insecurity and violence in the Early Modern era that was brought about by the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648).

Supporters of this theory of religious warfare typically argue that witch trials were used to fight followers of the opposite denomination. During the Reformation, Catholics accused Protestants, and vice versa, of worshipping Satan. Similarly, almost all witches were condemned for being in league with the Devil. Catholic symbols, saint-worship, and rituals such as Mass were seen by Protestants as not only futile, but even sacrilegious and akin to witchcraft: ‘why should I not compare the Priests, (that consecrate Crosses and ashes, water and salt, oil and cream, boughs and bones, stocks and stones ...) to the vilest witches and sorcerers of the earth?’<sup>6</sup>

Although religion is a main theme in many witch trial records, the influence of Christianity and the Catholic and Protestant churches in fuelling witch hunts is still subject to debate. Since the early Middle Ages, Christianity was deeply embedded in Europe and pervaded all aspects of society.<sup>7</sup> It is thus not uncommon that religious institutions were an authority on legal matters, as they also were in ancient times.<sup>8</sup> Oster also notes that ‘the mass of [Early Modern] trials saw very little formal church involvement’.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Scarre argues that the concept of witches as devil-worshippers was of much more importance to theologians and witch judges than it was to members of the general public, who were more concerned about the harm and misfortune that witches could cause.<sup>10</sup> He criticises the theory that the belief in and fear of witches was a mere façade to allow churches to control and establish dominance over the populace, arguing that this not only leave[s] it obscure why witch trials should be specifically an early modern phenomenon: it also paints an excessively black picture of human nature not called for by the historical evidence, which does not support the view that people prosecuted others as witches without really believing in witchcraft.<sup>11</sup>

Still, witchcraft records have undeniably religious undertones. But rather than looking towards the Protestant Reformation as the reason for this, it can alternatively be explained by the fact that witchcraft was considered ‘primarily a spiritual crime’, due to its ritualistic practices and connection to supernatural powers.<sup>12</sup>

If this theory is correct, then a corpus linguistic analysis would show a high number of religious

4 Matthew Hopkins, ‘The discovery of vvitches: in answer to severall queries, lately delivered to the judges of the assize for the county of Norfolk’, *Early English Books Online*, 1647 (fol. 9). <[https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo;idno=A86550.0001.001](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo;idno=A86550.0001.001>)> (2 June, 2024).

5 See for example: Cullen (1698); Horneck (1682); Bower (1653).

6 James Calphill, *An Answer to John Martiall’s Treatise of the Cross*, vol. 11, originally published 1565 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1846), p. 17.

7 David Petts, *Pagan and Christian: Religious Change in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), p. 15.

8 See for example Karen Rhea, ‘Religion of the Common People in Mesopotamia’, *Religion Compass*, 1 (2007), pp. 245–259.

9 Emily Oster, ‘Witchcraft, Weather and Economic Growth in Renaissance Europe’, *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 18 (2004), pp. 215–228 (p. 216).

10 Geoffrey Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1987).

11 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

12 Friedrich von Spee, *Cautio Criminalis, Or, A Book on Witch Trials*, transl. by Marcus Hellyer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. xviii.

keywords but a lower number of specifically Catholic or Protestant keywords.<sup>13</sup> However, if the theory of denominational strife is correct, then a corpus linguistic analysis would show a high number of specifically Catholic or Protestant keywords, as well as negative sentiment scores for the key terms of both denominations to reflect the enmity between denominations.<sup>14</sup> The present study's findings suggest a more theoretical connection between witchcraft and religion. The keyword analysis indicates that the religious overtones of witchcraft records can be attributed to the inherently spiritual nature of witchcraft, though the catchword analysis also provides some support for the theory that witch hunts were used to attack Catholicism.

### *Climate Economics*

O says she, I learnt this wick of my Mother, and added, That she could not only cause it to rain but hail, and could raise a great Tempest and that her Mother was taught by a Master who came to her privately, and that whatever she desired of him was presently performed.<sup>15</sup>

Looking beyond socio-cultural explanations, several historians and economists propose that economic crises, as a result of extreme meteorological conditions, had contributed to the significant increase in witch hunts in the Early Modern period. Witches were believed to possess a myriad of supernatural powers, including control over the weather; they were supposedly able to raise storms, conjure rain or hail, and blast people and animals with lightning.<sup>16</sup> Such powers could have enormous effects on the economic well-being of a community, as extreme weather often precipitated crop failure. Other food sources such as fish were likewise eliminated, as ice covered the seas and storms sank fishing boats.<sup>17</sup>

Two main theories have arisen within the domain of climate economics, namely the scapegoat theory and the income shock theory, both of which rely on one major event in Early Modern History: the Little Ice Age, which is 'the 16th–mid 19th century period during which European climate was most strongly impacted [by mountain glacier expansion]'.<sup>18</sup> For over three hundred years, Europe was plagued by low temperatures, unusual atmospheric circulation, and extreme meteorological conditions, leading to many crop failures.<sup>19</sup>

The scapegoat theory argues that people 'have a seemingly innate need to purge sins via an innocent victim' by blaming their own problems on an outsider.<sup>20</sup> Evans-Pritchard argues that a belief in witchcraft enables people to exercise indirect control over uncontrollable misfortunes, by eliminating the imagined source of the misfortune.<sup>21</sup> Research shows that there is a 'strong negative relationship between economic growth and crime across countries'.<sup>22</sup> Social, ecological, and economic

13 A keyword refers to a word that appears with significantly higher frequency in a specific corpus compared to a reference corpus. Keywords are used to identify words that characterise a particular text or set of texts.

14 A sentiment score is a numerical value assigned to a word that indicates the emotional tone of the word within a specific context. Sentiment scores were calculated based on the number of positive, negative and neutral collocates of each catchword.

15 Crouch, 'The kingdom of darkness or, The history of daemons', fol. 131.

16 Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. and transl. by Montague Summers, originally published 1486 (London: Pushkin Press, 1948), p. 147.

17 Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History 1300–1850* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 12, 28.

18 Michael Mann, 'Little Ice Age', in *The Earth System: Physical and Chemical Dimensions of Global Environmental Change*, ed. by Michael C. MacCracken and John S. Perry (New York: Wiley, 2002), pp. 504–509 (p. 1).

19 *Ibid.*

20 Naomi Janowitz, 'Inventing the Scapegoat: Theories of Sacrifice and Ritual', *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 25 (2011), pp. 15–24 (p. 15).

21 Edward Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

22 Edward Miguel, 'Poverty and Witch Killing', *The Review of Economic Studies*, 72 (2005), pp. 1153–1172 (p. 1153).

disasters have specifically been connected to witch killings in various countries and time periods.<sup>23</sup> Scarre, however, argues that ‘there is insufficient basis for claiming that witch prosecution was a method of responding to disaster’, pointing to regional evidence put forward by Midelfort (1968) and Monter (1969) contradicting the positive relationship between economic disasters and witch hunts.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, a regional study by Miguel does demonstrate that witch killings increase significantly in years of extreme rainfall (viz. drought or flooding), which seems to support the scapegoat theory.<sup>25</sup> However, the same study finds no connection between disease outbreaks and witch killings, even though witches are believed to control both extreme weather and diseases. Miguel explains these findings using the income shock theory, which states that economic strain increases violent crime, specifically religious violence.<sup>26</sup> This would explain why ecological disasters, which heavily influence the economy, are positively connected to witch killings, but disease outbreaks, which have less of an effect on the economy, are not connected. Importantly, Miguel stresses that this finding ‘does not imply that individuals ... do not genuinely believe in witchcraft’ because climatic cycles seem to prove the effectiveness of witch killings.<sup>27</sup>

If the climate-economics theory is correct, then the corpus linguistic analysis would result in a high number of keywords related to the weather and harvests. Additionally, a collocation analysis would result in a high number of negative collocates for words related to the weather and harvests, reflecting the bad state of the climate and economy. More specifically, if the income shock theory is correct, then the keyword analysis would result in a high number of keywords related to disasters that influence the economy. However, if the scapegoat theory is correct, then the keyword analysis would also result in a high number of keywords related to disasters that do not affect the economy. The present study finds a more theoretical connection between witchcraft and climate economics, supported by linguistic evidence. Books and treatises contain direct linguistic connections between witchcraft and climatic conditions that negatively affect harvests, which supports the income shock theory. However, the ‘transferring of crops’ once again points to the scapegoat theory and may be further explored by literary analysts.

### *Gender-Based Persecution*

[I]t is certaine that women are employed to strangle children, and to carry and present them to the Diuell, and to make a kind of oymnt of their grease; but Sorcerers and men Witches doe seldome or neuer dip their fingers in these bloody actions.<sup>28</sup>

Arguably, the most widely known fact about the Early Modern British witch hunts is that the majority of those accused of witchcraft were women; around 80%, in fact.<sup>29</sup> With the contemporary emergence of feminist literary criticism, the witch hunts started to be examined for the misogynistic paradigms that existed within Early Modern European society. During this period, the general and social inferiority of women that had been established centuries earlier began to be linked to ‘a

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23 See for example Behringer (1999); Oster (2004); Machangu (2015).

24 Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic*, n.p.

25 Miguel, ‘Poverty and Witch Killing’, n.p.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 1153.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 1155, 1157.

28 Sébastien Michaëlis, ‘The admirable history of the possession and conuersion of a penitent woman Seduced by a magician that made her to become a witch, who was brought to S. Baume to bee exorcised’, *Early English Books Online*, 1613 (fol. 78). <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A07467.0001.001?view=toc>> (2 June, 2024).

29 Anne Llewellyn Barstow, ‘On Studying Witchcraft as Women’s History: A Historiography of the European Witch Persecutions’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 4 (1988), pp. 7–19 (p. 9).

spiritual inferiority which rendered them especially susceptible to the allures of malevolent forces'.<sup>30</sup> The inferiority of women is reiterated repeatedly by Early Modern philosophers, authors, and legal officers. For authors who concerned themselves with witchcraft, it was thus a logical conclusion that 'the woman being the weaker sexe, is sooner intangled by the devils illusions with this damnable art, then the man'.<sup>31</sup>

The belief that women were much more likely to practise witchcraft resulted in several terms gaining female connotations, just like the word 'witch' has a female connotation for the modern reader. In Early Modern English, the word 'witchcraft' was relatively gender-neutral. The term 'sorcery', however, seemed to have had a distinctly female connotation. As Anderson and Gordon point out: 'Sorcery was not simply the magic of the people, it was overwhelmingly the magic of women'.<sup>32</sup> The power that witches gained from speech was seen as markedly feminine, as there was 'a widespread cultural belief that physical violence was a male peculiarity, and verbal violence a female one'.<sup>33</sup> So, words such as 'enchantment', 'spell', and 'charm' supposedly all had feminine connotations. If this theory is correct, then a collocation analysis of speech-related words will show a high number of feminine collocates.

A main theory that aims to explain the gender bias in witch hunts is that the emergence of the male medical profession caused the violent targeting of female midwives, healers, nurses, herbalists, and 'wise women'. Healing and midwifery had been respected female occupations for centuries,<sup>34</sup> and the women who practised these arts thus formed fierce 'competition to the nascent male medical profession of the early modern period'.<sup>35</sup> Harley aims to debunk the 'myth of the midwife-witch', noting that 'in few of the vast numbers of trials were midwives accused'.<sup>36</sup> Still, several scholars who have researched the identities of accused witches have shown that mostly women practised healing.<sup>37</sup> If this theory is correct, then a corpus linguistic analysis will result in a high number of keywords related to healing or the medical profession. Furthermore, a collocation analysis will result in a high number of negative collocates for words related to traditional female healing and a high number of positive collocates for words related to the male medical profession.

Another theory claims that Early Modern Britain 'experienced a crisis in gender relations'.<sup>38</sup> The increasing independence of women during this time threatened the existing gender hierarchy in which women were subservient to and dependent on men. This theory also offers an explanation for the typical profile of accused witches, which still fits the stereotypical image of the witch today: they were 'old, socially isolated (in many cases widowed), poor'.<sup>39</sup> All of these women lived outside conventional hierarchies and outside husbandly control, making them 'anomalies in the patriarchal order, and hence fit targets for the type of hostility which might lead to individuals being accused of witchcraft'.<sup>40</sup>

If this theory is correct, then a corpus linguistic analysis would show a high number of keywords

30 Alan Anderson and Raymond Gordon, 'Witchcraft and the Status of Women: The Case of England', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 29 (1978), pp. 171-184 (p. 173).

31 M. William Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Cantrell Legge, 1618), p. 39.

32 Anderson and Gordon, 'Witchcraft and the Status of Women', p. 175.

33 James Anthony Sharpe, 'Witchcraft and Women in Seventeenth-Century England: Some Northern Evidence', *Continuity and Change*, 6 (1991), pp. 179-199 (p. 186).

34 Barstow, 'On Studying Witchcraft as Women's History', p. 8.

35 Ritta Jo Horsley and Richard A. Horsley, 'On the Trail of the "Witches": Wise Women, Midwives, and the European Witch Hunts', *Women in German Yearbook*, 3 (1986), pp. 1-28 (p. 2).

36 David Harley, 'Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch', *Social History of Medicine*, 3 (1990), pp. 1-26 (p. 1).

37 See for example Ehrenreich and English (1973); Sharpe (1991).

38 Sharpe, 'Witchcraft and Women', p. 183.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

40 *Ibid.*

related to the subversion of the conventional social hierarchies. Furthermore, a collocation analysis would result in a high number of negative collocates for words denoting people who exist outside these hierarchies. In the present findings, the witchcraft records contain no evidence for the theory that witchcraft by means of speech had feminine connotations. The records do, however, illustrate the perceived spiritual inferiority of women. And though the linguistic evidence that midwives, widows, spinsters, and poor women were targeted is weak, the records do reflect the enmity between male medical practitioners and traditional female healers and directly connect female healers to witchcraft.

### *Functionalist Reasons*

That she hurt Thomas Garret's Cowes, because he refused to write a Petition for her. ... That being angry with Edith Watts, the Daughter of Edmond Watts for treading on her Foot, she cursed Edith with a Pox on you, and after touched her, which hath done the said Edith much harm .... That being provoked by Swanton's first Wife, she did before her death curse her, with a Pox on you.<sup>41</sup>

Several scholars abandon the search for large natural or cultural issues that may have caused the witch hunts, and instead investigate the popular experience of the witch hunts. A common argument against the theories presented so far in the present article is that peasants would not have concerned themselves with such monumental societal issues. As Scarre notes, peasants were 'not engaged in the business of confessional [i.e. denominational] strife',<sup>42</sup> nor is it rational to think that men were 'sharpening their misogynistic impulses before launching a witchcraft accusation'.<sup>43</sup> Instead, functionalists argue, the common man used witchcraft accusations as a means of settling personal conflicts. This argument is supported by the many mentions during trials of personal conflict between the accused witch and the accuser, as well as the fact that accused witches were 'generally unpopular on account of their loud and aggressive natures, their inability to get on with their neighbours, and their constant begging'.<sup>44</sup>

A common theme found in the Early Modern British witchcraft trials is conflict over alms. Several testimonies relay events in which the accused witch begs the accuser for alms, which the accuser refuses to give. The accused witch then generally leaves the scene angry and cursing, which is what causes them to later be accused of witchcraft, especially if, soon after the encounter, the accuser suffers a personal misfortune, such as an accident, an illness, or the death of a family member or cattle. Scarre notes that a personal misfortune striking soon after one has been 'cursed' seems to confirm the reality of witchcraft, which makes it likely that, more often than not, the accuser was sincerely convinced of the accused's guilt.<sup>45</sup> If the functionalist theory is correct, then a corpus linguistic analysis would result in a high number of keywords relating to conflict and/or personal misfortunes. Additionally, a collocation analysis would result in these keywords having collocates that specifically tie unruly behaviour and personal misfortunes to witchcraft.

The linguistic analyses of the present study provide evidence for several, though not all, of the theories posed by historians and literary analysts and have furthermore produced new insights into the Early Modern British witch hunts. In summary, the linguistic evidence shows the most support for

41 Joseph Glanvill, 'Saducismus triumphatus, or, Full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions in two parts: the first treating of their possibility, the second of their real existence', Early English Books Online, 1681 (fol. 152). <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ebo;idno=A42824.0001.001>> (2 June, 2024).

42 Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic*, p. 40.

43 Sharpe, 'Witchcraft and Women', p. 183.

44 Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic*, p. 41.

45 *Ibid.*

functionalist theories – in particular, theories that connect witchcraft accusations to (inter)personal issues, though not particularly conflict over alms. The linguistic evidence shows that a genuine fear of witchcraft, and the adversity it supposedly caused individuals, was a main driving factor behind the trials. The corpus analysis strongly connected disease to witchcraft, especially in an immediate practical sense, which supports the scapegoat theory. This connection has not received much attention yet and thereby provides an interesting topic for historians to research further. Moreover, the linguistic evidence indicates that doubts about the reality of witchcraft amongst learned men may have been more common than previously thought. It also reveals a heavy focus on the body and sexuality of witches, which makes for an interesting topic for historians to explore further, especially with changing social hierarchies in mind.

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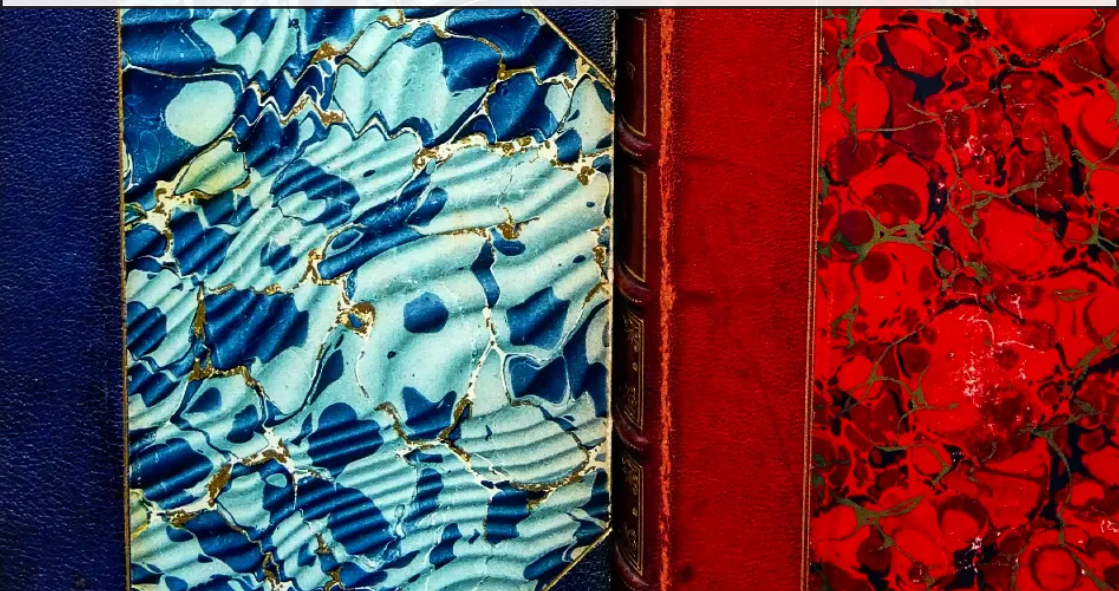
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*‘By dissolving the boundaries that restrict who gets to be a wizard and who becomes a witch, A Hat Full of Sky proposes that magic, at the end of the day, is something accessible to all.’*



# Male Witches, Female Wizards, and Those in Between: How *A Hat Full of Sky* Renegotiates Gendered Magic

David Slot

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David Slot is a graduate of the University of Amsterdam's RMA in Literary Studies. His research interests include agriculture in science fiction, assemblage theory, and stories about insects. He is currently researching skep beehives as co-constituted places.

**T**ERRY PRATCHETT'S DISCWORLD is a satirical fantasy series spanning forty-one novels. It begins in 1983 with *The Colour of Magic* and ends with the posthumous publication of *The Shepherd's Crown* in 2015. The present case study, *A Hat Full of Sky* (2004), is set towards the latter end of Discworld. It is also the second title featuring Tiffany Aching, the witch who will ultimately succeed Granny Weatherwax, head witch of the Ramtop mountain witches, and a returning character since *Equal Rites* (1987). As such, *A Hat Full of Sky* is invested in themes of transition. Firstly, on a social level: the Discworld stands on the cusp of a new era, one foot in the mediaeval centuries of its past, the other in an industrial revolution that is altering its socio-economic organisations irreversibly. Secondly, transition is happening on the level of gender. Thus far, the categories of witch and wizard have—while satirised to an extent—remained relatively unchallenged; wizardry for men, witchcraft for women. As Tiffany enters into the craft, however, this binary system is beginning to falter.

In its transition away from an oppositional model of gendered magic and towards one where event-ness wins out static substance, *A Hat Full of Sky* constructs an intersection of gender and magic well-equipped to address complexity. *A Hat Full of Sky* is the first Tiffany Aching novel to disrupt the traditional binary of wizard/witch, and the present article aims to trace the trajectory of that rupture. After all, I argue not just that Tiffany's engagement with the Ramtops' witches revisits the consequences of Discworld's traditionally binary construction of witch/wizard, but that the novel in fact renegotiates this very construction. To accurately perform an examination of said renegotiation, I draw on Deleuze and Guattari's 'assemblage', a theoretical framework that conceives meaning as formed in the 'connection between disparate components' rather than as a fixed substance contained

within.<sup>1</sup> By tracing the parallel trajectories of Tiffany Aching's approach to witchcraft and that of the Deleuzian assemblage, I explain why it is only now, almost forty novels after the appearance of the first female wizard in *Equal Rites*, that male witches and female wizards find a permanent place on Discworld.

*A Hat Full of Sky* is the second title to feature Tiffany Aching, yet it is only now that she is old enough to be introduced to the delicate network of witches existing outside her homeland. And while witches are certainly no strangers to longtime readers of the Discworld, Tiffany's focalisation of their world provides a new perspective; through the eyes of this young witch from the 'sheep-farming, magic-distrusting Chalk Downs country',<sup>2</sup> which no one thinks can grow good witches,<sup>3</sup> *A Hat Full of Sky* unveils a more expansive, more interwoven witch society on Discworld. Tiffany soon discovers, for instance, that witches are, as a rule, solitary. Each manages a steading, caring for its inhabitants in the role of healer, midwife, and undertaker. In this they are juxtaposed to the Discworld wizards, who study together in Ankh-Morpork's Unseen University, and who have little interest in care work. This is no coincidence, for Discworld builds on the traditional archetypes of witch and wizard. In *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England*, Breuer explores their origins, examining the 'strategies used by writers of Arthurian literature to gender particular kinds of magic as masculine or feminine'.<sup>4</sup> She concludes that in the mediaeval British literary tradition, 'prophecy and transformative magic is masculine, while healing and household magic is feminine'.<sup>5</sup> On Discworld, the tradition holds; witchcraft and wizardry are different sets of practices, each restricted to a domain and a gender, and these appear—at first glance—to be on equal footing. On the Ramtops, the Discworld mountain range where witches are most common, witches certainly hold their own, and a witch's authority, made evident by her black garb and pointy hat, is rarely challenged. And yet, a tension exists between witches and wizards even here. *Equal Rites* (1987), third in the Discworld series, has attempted to tease out the undercurrents of that tension. In *Equal Rites*, a retiring wizard accidentally gives his staff to a baby girl, christening the first female wizard into being. This girl wizard, Eskarina Smith, is trained both by the witch Granny Weatherwax and the wizards at Unseen University, and their contrast reveals the hierarchy inherent to the binary opposition of witch/wizard.

As binary sets of practices, each of the two crafts boasts a distinct methodology for magic. For instance, Granny Weatherwax is an accomplished borrower—someone who can temporarily extend their consciousness into the mind of another being—and her teachings to Eskarina establish early on in the series what exactly sets witches and wizards apart:

Granny's body stilled. The owl felt her enter its mind, and graciously made room ... This was the sort of thing wizards could never know. If it occurred to them to enter a creature's mind they'd do it like a thief, not out of wickedness but because it simply wouldn't occur to them to do it any other way, the daft buggers.<sup>6</sup>

Based on her description, one might argue wizardry and witchcraft are merely two philosophies for accessing the same resource, each with certain skills—such as borrowing—at their disposal. And, indeed, witches on Discworld are not openly disenfranchised, at least in areas such as the Ramtops. Literary scholar Brennan Croft argues that, 'on Discworld, witches and wizards occupy totally

1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalism And Schizophrenia* (Chicago: University Of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 21.

2 Janet Brennan Croft, 'The Education of a Witch: Tiffany Aching, Hermione Granger, and Gendered Magic in Discworld and Potterworld', *Mythlore*, 27 (2009), pp. 129–142 (p. 129).

3 Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky* (London: Corgi, 2005), p. 124.

4 Heidi Breuer, *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 10.

5 Michael Heyes, 'Review of "Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern Europe" by Heidi Breuer', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 9 (2014), pp. 235–237 (p. 235).

6 Terry Pratchett, *Equal Rites* (Kolkata: Signet, 1988), pp. 39–40.

different niches, ... trained separately according to traditional concepts of gender-related strengths and weaknesses'.<sup>7</sup> However, this optimistic view of the two groups as equal yet different is quickly undermined by the narrative itself. In this scene Granny is arguing with the retired wizard who gave Eskarina his staff, refusing to accept that her pupil is also a wizard, and tells him: 'she is not going to be a wizard, is that quite clear, wizardry is not the way to use magic, do you hear'.<sup>8</sup> She adds: '[i]t's the wrong sort of magic! ... it's nothing but lights and fire and meddling with power and she'll be having no part of it and good night to you'.<sup>9</sup> Granny delineates here two oppositional practices. If witchcraft is about restraint and care work, then wizard magic is about power; about 'talk[ing] too much and pinn[ing] spells down in books like butterflies but, worst of all, [thinking] theirs was the only magic worth practicing'.<sup>10</sup> Specifically in Granny's wording of 'pinning spells down in books,' she evokes wizardry's drive for clearly delineated boundaries, and the use of language to maintain these. Moreover, wizard magic is not only about power, but also about powerlessness. In the same way that wizardry delineates who has access to power—its knowledge of spells and theory hidden away at the Unseen University—it also determines who does not. There are no women at the University, nor are they involved in their own academic study. The wizard's abstract definition of witchcraft as tied to the 'primitive' and 'basic' is as ignorant as it is intentional,<sup>11</sup> and while witches on the Ramtops stand their ground, in urban centres such as Ankh-Morpork they are conspicuously absent from public life. Evidently, then, even in a context where both groupings are portrayed as participating on even ground with one another, an element of subordination has crept between wizards and witches.

Interestingly, the policing of boundaries is performed just as strongly by the witches themselves as it is by wizards. In *A Hat Full of Sky*, tensions simmer between the senior witches—each with their own approach to the craft. Miss Level, for instance, is a research witch, which is to say: 'the type who wonder "eye of what kind of toad?" [and therefore] a bit too close to book-learning for traditionalists like Granny Weatherwax'.<sup>12</sup> And that is to say nothing of Granny's opinion of Letice Earwig, who has married a wizard and writes books about 'Higher Magik'.<sup>13</sup> Just as wizardry comes at the expense of witchcraft, so does witchcraft come at the expense of wizardry, its forms and methodologies limited by what they cannot be. It is no surprise, then, that *Equal Rites*' Eskarina Smith disappears from the future witches series' novels: neither fully a wizard nor fully a witch, her very existence destabilises both terms, and only by her character's removal can they remain.

With the binary opposition of witches and wizards now established, we find that *A Hat Full of Sky* explores alternatives to this construction. If wizardry centres the 'pinning down' of magic in books and words, Tiffany Aching's lessons challenge the focus on linguistic signification by conceiving a different process of meaning-making. This is an important distinction: witchcraft is not untrained wizardry, nor is wizard magic witchcraft cut off from care work. Instead, different ontologies are at play here. Granny Weatherwax tells Tiffany: 'Think? I got no business to be thinking about it, young lady! ... Got to be up and doing'.<sup>14</sup> Unlike wizardry, witchcraft is as much about magic as it is about not using it, and thus processes of non-magical labour run central to its practice. This emphasis on process rather than essence is made explicit after Tiffany is possessed by the hiver, and must now untangle her own self from the memories of all the previous minds the hiver has consumed. Granny Weatherwax tells her: 'Milk the goats now, Tiffany! ... The hands know how, the mind will remember

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7 Croft, 'The Education of a Witch', p. 129.

8 Pratchett, *Equal Rites*, p. 41.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

12 Croft, 'The Education of a Witch', p. 132.

13 Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*, p. 129.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

and grow stronger, Tiffany!'.<sup>15</sup> And so they do, bringing back Tiffany from amidst the other minds and memories. By 'be[ing] up and doing, ... be[ing] Tiffany as hard as [she] may', the 'other voices ... leave [her] alone'.<sup>16</sup> This is a process of meaning-making unlike that of wizards, with their celibacy and clearly defined boundaries. Selfhood here is not shaped by signification's lack and absence.<sup>17</sup> Instead of signs as 'deferred presences',<sup>18</sup> the name Tiffany is linked to sets of embodied activities; milking, cheesemaking, crafting. This mode, of course, retains the same 'deferral' that signification does: actions are without end, iterative, never reaching a higher plane of 'signified'.<sup>19</sup> Yet 'lack' is here interpreted differently. In fact, process—and the practised skill that comes with it—is precisely what composes witchcraft, and there is no circumventing it; Tiffany's attempt to cheat the process-oriented nature of the craft by creating a cheese with magic produces nothing but a foul-tasting disaster.<sup>20</sup> In short, process is not a defect but a quality of Pratchett's Discworld.

I propose, then, Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage as a lens to understand meaning-making in witchcraft, as it too is shaped through activity. Assemblage prioritises the 'event-ness of identity' as much as witchcraft does, moving away from 'constants [to foreground] variation to variation'.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, it challenges the idea of identity as essence, and further exploring this affinity proves fruitful. Firstly, both favour horizontal networks over the hierarchical dualism of wizard and witch, sign and signified. Deleuze and Guattari use the rhizome as an example of the directionality of the assemblage, writing that '[t]here are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines'.<sup>22</sup> Granny Weatherwax's borrowing utilises this in equal measure. When Tiffany nervously asks her: 'You... take over [the owl's] mind?', the older witch responds: 'No! I'm not one of your hivers! I just... borrows a lift from it, I just... nudges it now and again'.<sup>23</sup> Not only does the borrowing that occurs between the owl and Granny Weatherwax here deny moves to domination and subordination in favour of interdependence, it also draws on the second point of connection between Pratchett's witchcraft and the assemblage: the value of affinity rather than genealogy. Notably, using witchcraft as an example, Deleuze and Guattari argue that '[w]itch influence was thought to be transmitted in the food that the women prepared ... Kachin witchcraft is contagious rather than hereditary ... [I]t is associated with affinity, not filiation'.<sup>24</sup> Tiffany invokes this same tension between descent and alliance when she tells the hiver: 'I'm made up of the memories of my parents and grandparents, all my ancestors', and then adds: '[a]nd I'm made up of everyone I've ever met who's changed the way I think. So who is "me?"'.<sup>25</sup> To both Tiffany and Deleuze and Guattari, interdependence grounds the assemblage. This is depicted again when Granny shows Tiffany where she makes her witch's hats, revealing the elaborate process of construction involved. Of particular note in this scene is, firstly, construction as a manual activity; Granny explicitly references 'making [her] own' as a task that involves materials, labour, and skill, in this case involving 'thin strips of willow and pins and black cloth'.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, it is an ultimately unending task, as it must be repeated yearly. Granny's understanding of self as an assemblage to be continuously 'constructed' implicates

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15 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.

17 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, The First Complete Edition in English, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 410.

18 Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 9.

19 Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 431.

20 Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*, p. 225.

21 Margrit Shildrick, "'Why Should Our Bodies End at the Skin?': Embodiment, Boundaries and Somatechnics', *Hypathia*, 30 (2013), pp. 13-29 (p. 21).

22 Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalism And Schizophrenia*, p. 8.

23 Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*, p. 259.

24 Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalism And Schizophrenia*, p. 247.

25 Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*, pp. 288-289.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 320.

also the third point of intersection between witchcraft and the assemblage: the sustained temporality in which the assemblage constructs itself. Useful here is Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Body without Organs, which 'can be seen as a process that is directed toward a course of continual becoming and not geared towards any teleological point of completion', for it emphasises this most striking quality of Pratchett's witches.<sup>27</sup>

The impact of *A Hat Full of Sky's* renegotiation of magic is visible in one of its sequels, the posthumously published *The Shepherd's Crown*. Here, Tiffany Aching steps fully into adulthood, succeeding the late Granny Weatherwax as head witch and setting a new course for witchcraft. A key change she makes is initiating the first male witch, Geoffrey Swivel. Geoffrey appears on Tiffany's doorstep a little after Granny Weatherwax's death, asking to become her apprentice. He tells her: '[my tutor] told me of one witch who became a wizard, so surely, mistress, the concept must go both ways?'.<sup>28</sup> Tiffany now makes a significant change to the world, capitalising on one of multiple instances where, standing 'between two courses of action, ... what she did next would matter'.<sup>29</sup> Unlike previous head witches, Tiffany decides to take on Geoffrey as her apprentice and calls him a 'calm-weaver', creating a new category for male witches that circumvents prying questions from her colleagues; but if *The Shepherd's Crown* teaches anything, it is that witches come in all shapes and sizes,<sup>30</sup> and Tiffany certainly teaches him the same skills and jobs expected of a female witch. Likewise, Eskarina Smith too regains a presence in Tiffany Aching's iteration of witchcraft. She assists Tiffany in *I Shall Wear Midnight* (2010), where she confesses: 'I never really felt like a wizard, so I never really worried about what anyone said. And anyway, I had the staff, and no one could take that away from me'.<sup>31</sup> Eskarina has been absent from Discworld for thirty-five novels, and her reappearance now is no coincidence. Something has changed in the manner in which gender and magic relate to one another on Discworld, and within this new assemblage-based framework, people like Eskarina—who are at once witch and wizard both and neither—can finally find a place to be.

In this essay, I have thus briefly explored the history of witches and wizards as binary opposition on Discworld, employing signification to show how both are created and maintained through contrast with the other, and how this dynamic inevitably introduces some measure of subordination.<sup>32</sup> By tracing the unstable elements within the texts, specifically the birth (and disappearance) of the first female wizard, Eskarina Smith, in *Equal Rites*, I have proven that oppositional signification is not a sustainable model of meaning-making for a world more complex than the closed categories of masculine wizards and feminine witches. Consequently, I have untangled an alternative mode of meaning-making, arguing that the embodied, network-based ontology proposed by Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage proves much more productive in shedding light on the manner in which Pratchett reterritorialises magic-use on the Discworld. Ultimately, through this transition from a binary model of dominance and subordination to one of network and interdependence, what is achieved in *A Hat Full of Sky* is the shaping of a new type of magic practitioner. By dissolving the boundaries that restrict who gets to be a wizard and who becomes a witch, *A Hat Full of Sky* proposes that magic, at the end of the day, is something accessible to all.

27 Amy Chan Kit-Sze, 'Re-Reading Ursula K. Le Guin's SF, The Daoist Yin Principle in Ecofeminist Novels', in *Dystopias and Utopias on Earth and Beyond, Feminist Ecocriticism of Science Fiction*, ed. by Douglas A. Vakoch (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 132.

28 Terry Pratchett, *The Shepherd's Crown* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 146.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 279.

31 Terry Pratchett, *I Shall Wear Midnight* (New York: Doubleday, 2010).

32 Derrida, *Positions*, p. 41.

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# HAMLET,

Evening Only  
SPECIAL PERFORMANCE OF

# HAMLET.

The Scenery painted by George J. Dodson. The Dresses designed by Grasset. The Overture, Preludes, and Entr'actes specially composed by Norman O'Neill.

This Presentation has been designed and produced by  
Mr. MARTIN HARVEY on entirely new lines.

CLAUDIUS, King of Denmark  
 HAMLET, Son to the former and present King.  
 POLONIUS, Lord Chamberlain  
 HORATIO, Friend to HAMLET  
 LAERTES, Son to POLONIUS.  
 VOLTIMAND,  
 CORNELIUS,  
 ROSENCRANTZ,  
 GUILDENSTERN, } *Courtiers*  
 ERIC,  
 Gentleman,  
 Priest.  
 MARCELLUS, } *Officers.*  
 BERNARDO,

Claudius (King of Denmark) ..... Mr. CHARLES GLENNEY  
 Hamlet (Son of the late, and Nephew to the present King) ..... Mr. MARTIN HARVEY  
 Ghost of Hamlet's Father ..... Mr. PHILIP HEWLAND  
 Horatio (Friend to Hamlet) ..... Mr. GEORGE COOKE  
 Polonius (Lord Chamberlain) ..... Mr. FRED. WRIGHT, Senr.  
 Laertes (his Son) ..... Mr. OWEN ROUGHWOOD  
 Guildenstern (a Courtier) ..... Mr. A. FIELD  
 Rosencrantz (a Courtier) ..... Mr. LEONARD CRASKE  
 Osric ..... Mr. ALFRED MANSFIELD  
 First Player ..... Mr. P. H. STONEY  
 Second Player ..... Mr. J. CHARLES  
 Marcellus (an Officer) ..... Mr. DENHOLM MUIR  
 Bernardo (an Officer) ..... Mr. RICHARD NEVILLE  
 Francisco (a Soldier) ..... Mr. H. BARBER  
 First Gravedigger ..... Mr. PERCY FOSTER  
 Second Gravedigger ..... Mr. EDWARD COMBERMERE  
 Reynaldo (Servant to Polonius) ..... Mr. O. T. EARLE  
 A Priest ..... Mr. E. J. FRASER  
 A Messenger ..... Mr. H. GRAVES  
 Gertrude (Queen of Denmark, Mother to Hamlet) ..... Miss MARY RORKE  
 Player Queen ..... Miss MAUD RIVERS  
 Ophelia (Daughter of Polonius) ..... Miss N. DE SILVA  
 Lords Ladies, Switzers, Heralds, etc., etc.

## ACT I.

SCENE I.—ELLSINORE. A Castle.  
 FRANCISCO at his post.  
 BERNARDO  
 Ber. Who's there?  
 Fran. Nay, answer me yourself.  
 Ber. Long live the king  
 Fran.  
 Ber.  
 Fran. You come most ill-temper'd hour.  
 Ber. 'Tis now struck twelve  
 Fran. Francisco.  
 Fran. For this relief much thanks.  
 cold.

That, if again this apparition  
 He may approve our eyes and speak to it.  
 'twill not appear.

'The act of spirit possession symbolises the power of the imprecator, of the invoker, who can summon spirits and communicate with them.'

I am sick at heart.  
 Ber. Have you had quiet guard?  
 Fran. Not a mouse stirring.  
 Ber. Well, good-night.  
 you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,  
 the rivals of your watch, bid them make haste.  
 Fran. I will. Last night, that's what I saw.  
 Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS.  
 Hor. Friends to this ground.  
 Mar. And liegemen to the Dane.  
 Fran. Give you good-night.

Hor. Truly, 'twill not appear.  
 Ber. And let us once again assail your ears,  
 That are so fortified against our story,  
 What we two nights have seen.  
 Well, sit we down,  
 speak of this.  
 Last night, that's what I saw.  
 to illum

# Shang dynasty Wu 巫 culture in a third century BCE manuscript: The Shaman Yi Yin in Chi jiu zhi ji Tang zhi wu 赤鳩之集湯之屋 (The Red Pigeons that settled on Tang's House)

Stefano Novara

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Stefano Novara is a research MA student at Leiden University. After writing a thesis on early Chinese manuscript culture at Venice University, he now focuses on Medieval Chinese Buddhism. He enjoys the challenges of studying Classical Chinese Languages in all their nuances.

**B**OOKS HAVE THE power to influence many aspects of society, among others the development of cultures, philosophies, and politics. In China this is particularly visible in those rising between the middle and the lower regions of the Yellow River, known as the Central Plain. In ancient times, during the Shang dynasty (商朝, ca. 1766–1046 BCE), written recordings were already produced in the form of divination tools.<sup>1</sup> Many are the discoveries of carved oracle bones and tortoise shells through which Shang ancient culture is shared.<sup>2</sup> These written artefacts enable the reader to accompany the society of the Shang dynasty through their past lives, learn about their cultural heritage, and discover their legends and myths. Later, between the Zhou (周朝, ca. 1100–221 BCE) and the Han (漢朝, 206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, many of the most renowned Chinese texts were written. Among these extant texts, we find an attempt to historicise the myths of the earlier era.<sup>3</sup> In fact, ‘although the texts do not contain mythical narratives, the accounts of ancient history and the dynastic ancestors do contain events

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1 Although, according to historiography, the first Chinese dynasty is the Xia (夏) dynasty, it is not supported by archaeological finds. Concerning the historicity of Xia and Shang dynasty, see the works about the archaeological sites of the late bronze age of the Erlitou and the Erligang cultures in Allan (2007); Duan (2014); Bagley (1999).

2 In ancient China, divination was a well-established and articulated practice. The divination questions and responses were usually written on animal's bones or tortoise's shells. These are usually referred to as oracle-bone inscriptions. For a better understanding of this wide topic, see Andreini (2013); Keightley (1988); Fracasso (2013).

3 Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art and Cosmos in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 20.

which breach the confines of reality'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, according to Sarah Allan, what once constituted the myths and the folklore of ancient China has gone through a process of historicisation.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the texts that record ancient history are imbued with mythological nuances.

It is in these accounts that we find concrete references to a supposed shaman culture of ancient times. 'Shaman' translates from the Chinese term *wu* (巫), which is defined as follows: 'a title that refers to a very unusual type of person found throughout Chinese history and represents one of the earliest envisioned religious figures present from the very beginnings of Chinese civilization'.<sup>6</sup> This broad category can encompass every hero of the past, as well as those who are said to be able to communicate with spirits.<sup>7</sup> According to the Zhou dynasty's literature, among these particular group of people, Yi Yin (伊尹) is of great importance. We find countless references about his life as the minister who aided the first dynastic king of the Shang, Cheng Tang (成湯, Tang the Victorious), in establishing his reign. Tang, thanks to Yi Yin's aid, could defeat Xia dynasty's tyrant, Xia Jie (夏桀, Jie of Xia).

Using a Warring States-era bamboo manuscript – the *Chi jiu zhi ji Tang zhi wu* (赤鳩之集湯之屋 [The Red Pigeons that settled on Tang's House]), henceforth *Chujiu*, of Qinghua University's manuscripts collection – this article will discuss the topic of *wu* as depicted in early Chinese literature.<sup>8</sup> The topic will be viewed from the lens of the theory of totemism, as it can give additional insights on Shang's myths and culture. The text will be analysed in English translation and will answer the following questions: how was the Shang's *wu* culture depicted by the pre-Qin literature? Can the figure of Yi Yin, as described in the said manuscript, be considered an archetype of *wu*? What does this text tell about the *wu* culture?<sup>9</sup>

To answer these questions, I will point out the importance of the leitmotiv of *wu* in the literature of the time, using the manuscript in question as a case study.

## The Wu (Shamanic) culture

From the study of oracle-bone inscriptions, scholars gained the insight that the practice of divination was one of the key institutions in Shang society.<sup>10</sup> The divination usually consisted in a question, expressed 'in either alternative (A or B) or in positive and negative (A not A) modes'.<sup>11</sup> This means, for instance, that a plausible divinatory question could sound like 'will it rain or will the sun shine?' or 'will it rain or not?'. Keightley points out that these questions should be understood as spells applied to the future, which have a magical nature and had the goal to ward off any kind of issue that could affect the society.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, in Shang society the *wu* had different and diverse roles and duties beyond being a

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 First, the term *wu* (巫) appears on Shang's oracles bones only to be concretely referred to in later texts; see Michael (2015), p. 649. The term shamanism, as well as totemism, has been used to describe the folklore and popular cults described in these texts. However, the term could be misleading as it has various meanings and connotations depending on time and place. In the rest of the paper, I will mainly use the Chinese term *wu* to avoid misunderstandings. See Michael (2015) for an in-depth discussion on this debate.

7 Fulin Chao 龔福林, 'Shangdai de wu yu wushu 商代的巫與巫術' [Shang Dynasty's Shamans and Shamanesim], *Xueshu Yuekan*, 10 (1996), pp. 81–87 (p. 81).

8 Qinghua University's Manuscripts Collection from the Warring State Period (Qinghua daxue cang zhanguo zhujian san, 清華大學藏戰國竹簡三). See Xueqin (2012).

9 As the manuscript text was produced around the third century BCE, I believe that comparing it with the received literature of the same period – namely, the one written before the Qin unification in 221 BCE – could give more answers about how the concept of *wu* was depicted in said literature.

10 David N. Keightley, 'Shang Divination and Metaphysics', *Philosophy East & West*, 38 (1988), pp. 367–397 (p. 367).

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid, p. 372. For a more detailed description of the role of divination, see Keightley (1988).

diviner. As pointed out by Hopkins, the definition of the term *wu* in the *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary (說文解字) states that it should be interpreted as ‘invoker’ or ‘imprecator’.<sup>13</sup> The dictionary further provides details of what the powers of *wu* were in ancient times: they could influence supernatural beings.<sup>14</sup> The role of the imprecator was, on the one hand, to summon evil and cast curses, and on the other hand, to pray and request divinations to divine entities.<sup>15</sup> Their role can be certainly related to the diviner, who, presumably, used the aforementioned charges in their divinations to get in touch with spiritual beings.

But who or what were these spiritual and invisible beings? If approached from the perspective of the theory of totemism, different insights on Shang’s culture can be gained.<sup>16</sup> Chen Zhi remarks that a great deal of historical records show that the Shang people identified themselves with a particular bird.<sup>17</sup> Initially, historians and palaeographers labelled the Shang culture as swallow totemism. However, eventually it has been demonstrated that they worshipped a divine bird, which is tightly linked to the term *xuanniao* (玄鳥, black or mystical bird).<sup>18</sup> *Xuanniao*, according to historical and mythological narratives, is the divine bird that gave birth to the founder of Shang dynasty.<sup>19</sup> This legendary bird can be interpreted as a phoenix or crow. Noteworthy is that the term *xuan* (black, 玄), in contrast with bright or yellow (*huang*, 黃), is part of a ‘natural primitive colour system and they are the colours used for the animal sacrificed in the oracle bone inscriptions’.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the term refers to the magical/ritualistic sphere of the Shang, which can be read about in the manuscript. However, it is unclear whether it developed during the Shang or in a later period, when the myths underwent the process of historicisation mentioned above.

From an archaeological point of view, there is evidence of shamanic and totemic culture. A conspicuous number of anthropomorphic representations, called *taotie* (饕餮, devourer monster), can be found which, as Fracasso states, is the dominant symbolic and decorative motif of Shang iconography.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, numerous Shang jades show specific references to the supposed bird-cult through portraying figures that are part-man and part-bird.<sup>22</sup>

The theory of totemism discussed by Chen Zhi and elaborated in this paper is essential to understand the reading of the manuscript *Chujiu*.<sup>23</sup>

## *The Manuscript and the Figure of Yi Yin*

A modern version of the *Chujiu* was edited in 2012 by Li Xueqin, a leading scholar of the field who is associated with the Qinghua University. The manuscript, composed of fifteen bamboo slips,

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13 The *Shuowen Jiezi* is the first comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters, compiled by Xu Shen and his son Xu Chong. The dictionary was compiled during the late first century and presented to the court of Emperor An of the Han (Han Andi, 漢安帝) in 121. See L.C. Hopkins, ‘The Shaman or Chinese Wu: His Inspired Dancing and Versatile Character’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 77 (1945), pp. 3–16.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

15 Michael James Winkelmann, ‘Chinese Wu, Ritualists and Shamans: An Ethnological Analysis’, *Religions*, 14 (2023), pp. 1–34 (p. 9).

16 These theories hypothesise the existence in archaic China of tribal entities distinguished by the veneration of different totemic entities.

17 Chen Zhi ‘A Study of the Bird Cult of the Shang People’, *Monumenta Serica*, 47 (1999), pp. 127–147 (p. 128).

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, p. 129. For more about this myth, refer to Chen (1999).

20 Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle*, p. 30.

21 Riccardo Fracasso, ‘Divinazione e Religione nel tardo Periodo Shang’ [Divination and Religion of Late Shang], *La Cina 1.2: Dall’età Del Bronzo All’impero Han [China 1.2: From the Bronze Age to the Han Empire]*, ed. by Tiziana Lippiello and Maurizio Scarpari (Torino: Einaudi, 2013), pp. 547–572 (p. 571).

22 Sarah Allan, ‘When Red Pigeons Gathered on Tang’s House’: A Warring States Period Tale of Shamanic Possession and Building Construction Set at the Turn of the Xia and Shang Dynasties’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 25 (2015), pp. 419–438 (p. 432).

23 Zhi, ‘A Study of the Bird Cult’, n.p.

appears in the third edited volume of Qinghua's manuscripts series. It was buried around 300 BCE.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the text was not unearthed by scholars, but by graverobbers in a time and place unknown. The University of Qinghua came across this manuscript in June 2008 in a Hong Kong antiquaries market, alongside the other texts in the corpus.<sup>25</sup> From there, they were transported to Beijing, where they went through the editing process.<sup>26</sup>

Each bamboo strip is circa forty-five centimetres long and, originally, was supposedly tied with the other slips by three cords: at the top, in the middle and at the bottom. Although the first and second strips have broken parts at the bottom, thereby creating textual lacunae, the overall state of preservation is good. Meanwhile, the text itself is *adespota*, which means that the text does not give information about the author, but it does provide the title, which is written in the on the *verso* of the fifteenth and last strip. The original order of the strips is easily grasped, since the numbering is written on the *verso* of every strip, from 1 to 15. The text is written with the graphs of Chu (楚).<sup>27</sup>

Noteworthy is that, even though the text refers to a story that supposedly happened during the seventeenth century BCE, its language is clearly of the Warring State period, which makes us suppose that its origin could not be earlier.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the question about the manuscript's origins still needs to be addressed. However, since this question does not fall into the scope of this research, the following passages will take a close look at the characters and at the plot of the text.

To understand the figure of Yi Yin it is necessary to rely on the texts written during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, since texts from a previous era, such as oracle-bone inscriptions, do not provide enough information about the legendary *persona* of this minister of the Shang dynasty. However, since he does appear in some of the Shang's bone inscriptions, we can suppose that the idea of this character is ancient.<sup>29</sup> As Chen Hong pointed out in his essay about Yi Yin, his figure was probably popularised, mythicised, and deified starting from the establishment of the Zhou dynasty and thus, it must have already been present since the eleventh century BCE.<sup>30</sup> In these references, Yi Yin is depicted as the legendary archetype of the wise minister: his moral greatness has been highlighted by the many magical events that characterise his life, starting with his birth – it is said that Yi Yin was born from a hollowed mulberry tree.<sup>31</sup>

However, his relationship with the divinatory-magical sphere can be found in one of the earliest texts in which he is addressed. One of the ways in which Yi Yin's surname (Yi, 伊) is written on the oracle-bones is , which represents a hand holding a presumably magical staff.<sup>32</sup>

24 Allan, 'When Red Pigeons Gathered on Tang's House', p. 420.

25 Liu Guozhong discusses the process of the acquisition of all of Qinghua's manuscripts in detail. Considering provenance, he also discusses the question of fake manuscripts flooding the antiquaries markets. See Guozhong (2016), pp. 51–54.

26 The editing process (in Mandarin *zhengli* 整理) refers to the work done by the palaeographers and philologists in the recomposing the original arrangement of the bamboo slips. Usually found buried in tombs, these textual supports have lost their physical consistency and are covered in mud. The editors give the slips their original physical form and then try to rearrange their order. Furthermore, the editing process also entails codicological analysis, during which the text is read and a first understanding of it is given. For further clarification, see Andreini (2013).

27 The independent state of Chu was in the south (in nowadays Zhijiang) had regular communication with the Shang, which can suggest a strong cultural exchange. See Allan (1991), p. 26.

28 Allan, 'When Red Pigeons Gathered on Tang's House', p. 420.

29 See Chapter 3 of Marubbio's (2000) PhD dissertation concerning Yi Yin. On the one hand, we can say that Yi Yin was seen by early Chinese literature as the Shang dynasty's founding minister, as well as a man of great knowledge and virtue; on the other hand, we are not sure whether this person actually existed. In fact, trying to answer this question might be a fool's errand given that a figure that supposedly lived around the seventeenth century BCE.

30 Chen Hong 陳洪, 'Shenqihua yu shengxianhua – cong Yi Yin gushi kan xian Qin shengxian xushi moshi 神奇化與聖賢化——從伊尹故事看先秦聖賢敘事模式' [Spiritualisation and Sanctification: A Look at the Narrative Model of the Essay in Pre-Qin Literature], *Jiangsu Shifan Daxue Xuebao, Zhe Xue She Hui Ke Xue Ban*, 46 (2020), pp. 1–12 (p. 12).

31 This event is mentioned in many passages of these texts. The most complete can be found in a Lüshi Chunqiu 呂氏春秋 [Annals of Lü Buwei] chapter called 'Benwei 本味' [Fundamental Tastes]. See Buwei (2000), pp. 307–311.

32 Mayvis Lavonne Marubbio, *Yi Yin, Pious Rebel: A Study of the Founding Minister of the Shang in Early Chinese Texts* (Chicago: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 47.

## *The Text of the Chijiu*

The text takes place in a period before Tang defeats Xia Jie and establishes the Shang dynasty, and can be divided into three parts: the first part at Tang's palace, the second on the road, and the third at Xia Jie's palace.<sup>33</sup> Across these three parts, Tang and his wife Ren Huang, Xia Jie, and Yi Yin are presented as main characters. The story starts with red pigeons gathering on Tang's house. Tang shoots with a bow and arrows and hits one of them. He then commands Yi Yin to make a soup with the dead pigeon. However, it is not Tang who drinks the soup, but his wife Ren Huan and Yi Yin instead. They both acquire supernatural perception after they drink the soup: 'in a flash, there was nothing she could not see [as far as] beyond the four wildernesses. When Yi Yin received what she had left over and tasted it, in a flash, there was nothing he could not see [as far as] beyond the four seas'.<sup>34</sup>

When Tang finds out about their newly gained powers, he becomes angry and Yi Yin, frightened, flees to Xia. While asleep on the road, however, a flock of raven plots to eat him. Luckily for Yi Yin, they are stopped by a spirit raven, here interestingly called *wuniao* 巫鳥, who recognises the man and tells the other ravens that he should go to Xia, where the ruler Xia Jie has been suffering from an illness beyond cure. The spirit raven then explains that the Xia lord's illness is caused directly by the Thearch, who ordered two snakes and two white rabbits to hide in the beam of the lord's bedroom.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the Thearch ordered the earth to create two mounds beneath the bedroom. Afterward, the ravens fly away, leaving Yi Yin alone with the spirit raven, which then enters Yi Yin's throat and occupies his digestive tract.

When Yi Yin reaches the lord of Xia, he introduces himself as a celestial spirit medium (or *tianwu*, 天巫, in Chinese). To prove his shamanic identity, Yi Yin then explains the causes of Jie's illness and suggests how to cure it, namely, to demolish the room, to kill the snakes as well as the rabbits, and to raze the mounds. The lord of Xia does what he is told, but the text gives no information whether his illness was cured by taking the measures.

### *Yi Yin as a shaman*

Yi Yin shows his magical or shamanic power three times. At the beginning of the story, he makes a soup that allows him to expand his perception to see everything happening in the world. The second time, he interacts with the spirit raven in his sleep and learns about the causes of Xia Jie's illness afterwards. Lastly, Yi Yin embodies the qualities of a *wu* when he meets Xia Jie and instructs him on how to cure his illness.

As Sarah Allan argues, the birds can convey either the meaning of 'immortality' or 'longevity'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the colour of the birds, red, might be also significant, which Sarah Allan suggests to be an omen that foretells the fall of the Xia dynasty and establishment of the Shang.<sup>37</sup>

According to the received literature, in the context of the establishment of the new dynasty, Yi Yin played an essential role. He is described in numerous passages as a skilful yet humble cook, who

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33 Allan, 'When Red Pigeons Gathered on Tang's House', pp. 423–426. The following paraphrase follows Allan's translation.

34 Ibid., p. 424.

35 The term translates the Chinese concept of Di (帝), that here can be interpreted as the Heaven's will. Xia Jie's illness is a clear sign that he has lost the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming, 天命), meaning that he Heaven has revoked his right to rule. For further details, see Allan (2007); Chen (2002); Pankenier (1995).

36 Allan, 'When Red Pigeons Gathered on Tang's House', p. 434.

37 Ibid.

was elevated to the position of minister thanks to his moral integrity.<sup>38</sup> This quality helped Tang to end Xia Jie's tyranny. Furthermore, Yi Yin was a cook (*pao*, 庖), as well as a master of ceremonies (*zai*, 宰).<sup>39</sup> According to Roel Sterckx, these two roles were often held by the same person. He states that '[c]hief ministers sometimes acted symbolically as chief cooks during feasts and banquets and, vice versa, cooks or stewards performed roles as ritual specialists'.<sup>40</sup> This gives insight to how the figure of Yi Yin might have been perceived during the Zhou dynasty. As part of the historicisation of ancient myths, he might have gone through a process of spiritualisation (to borrow Chen Hong's word) that turned him into the cook minister that we know from the received literature.<sup>41</sup>

The passage about the red soup is a reference to the chapter of *Lüshi Chuqiu*, Fundamental Tastes (*Benwei* 本味). In this chapter, we see Yi Yin engaged in an extensive monologue concerning the greatest tastes that a cook can harmonise in the kitchen. As Marubbio describes, Yi Yin

takes Tang on a veritable 'spirit journey' to mythical lands in search of herbs which will ensure immortality, water which flows from the mountains where the gods dwell, or fish which fly from pole to pole. ... It is clear that this account is not a manual for use in the royal kitchens, but rather a pattern for ritual communication with the spirits.<sup>42</sup>

It is precisely here that the role of the cook and that of the master of ceremonies, if not that of the shaman (*wu* 巫), collimate. We might then suppose that the red bird used by Yi Yin fell into one of these mystical ingredients; thus, confirming the narrative that describes Yi Yin as a *wu*.

In the second scene, when Yi Yin falls asleep on the road and has a fateful encounter with the spirit raven, there is a correlation with an ode called *Wuniao* in the *Shijing* (詩經) collection of poems.<sup>43</sup> The first line of this poem refers to the *wuniao* as a spiritual creature, who receives the command of Heaven to descend into the world and give birth to the first ancestor of the Shang.<sup>44</sup> According to the myth, the mystical bird descended into the world and caused the miraculous pregnancy of Jian Di, who gave birth to Xie, the first Shang ancestor.<sup>45</sup> Jian Di becomes pregnant after swallowing a mystical bird's egg. We might assume that Jian Di's interaction with the *xuanniao* is a reflection of her shamanic nature. Interestingly, she was the mythical Emperor Diku's (帝嚳) consort. In fact, in early Chinese literature, 'wu are at times shown to have vital positions in the royal courts next to the supreme rulers, charged with responsibilities vital to the well-being of the court and the country'.<sup>46</sup> We might think that the myth is implicitly saying that she served in the role of *wu* for her ruler Diku. If this is what the myth is actually referring to, we can draw a parallel between this story and Yi Yin's encounter with the *wuniao*. Yi Yin is reached by the mystical bird, which enters his body through the throat, similarly to Jian Di who swallows the bird's egg.

The allusion to the act of swallowing can be seen as a reference to the anthropomorphic figure of the *taotie* (devourer monster) on some Shang tripods. *Taotie* are animal mask-like beings without a body that devour humans can be considered as the Chinese representation of the initiation theme of the

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38 Marubbio, Yi Yin, Pious Rebel, p. 93.

39 In antiquity, those known as *zai* were not only governmental officials, but also often held the role of butcher/cook in their ruler's court. This figure used to be pivotal also during sacrificial ceremonies and rituals. See Sterckx (2005) for more information.

40 Roel Sterckx, 'Food and Philosophy in Early China', *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 34–61 (p. 42).

41 Hong, 'Shenqihua yu shengxianhua', n.p.

42 Marubbio, Yi Yin, Pious Rebel, p. 98.

43 The Book of Odes is the oldest collection of Chinese poems, dating from the eleventh to the seventh century BCE. Here, the Ode is in fact called *Wuniao* and can be found in the collection of poems entitled *Sacrificial Odes of Shang* (Shang song 商頌).

44 The Chinese verse reads 'Tian ming wuniao jiang er sheng Shang 天命巫鳥降而生商' [The Heaven commanded the mystical bird to descend [into the world] and give birth to the Shang].

45 Fracasso, 'Divinazione e Religione', in *La Cina 1.2*, ed. by Lippiello and Scarpari, p. 571.

46 Michael, Thomas, 'Shamanism Theory and the Early Chinese "Wu"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 83 (2015), pp. 649–696 (p. 650).

swallowing by a protective animal.<sup>47</sup> In the case of the text of *Chijiu*, however, it is Yi Yin who swallows the bird and not vice versa. As highlighted by Sarah Allan, the story presents a case of possession of Yi Yin by a spirit, which is an occurrence closely tied to *wu*.<sup>48</sup> What we learn from the manuscript 'is consistent with what we already know about Chu culture'.<sup>49</sup> The act of spirit possession symbolises the power of the imprecator, of the invoker, who can summon spirits and communicate with them. Thus, we might suppose that whoever composed the story in the manuscript in the third century BCE wanted to label Yi Yin as someone with imprecator's powers.

Furthermore, in the last scene Yi Yin is described as a healer, who, thanks to the possession of the *wuniao*, knows perfectly how to cure Xia Jie's illness. Medical and anatomical knowledge is another feature of *wu* described in pre-Qin literature.<sup>50</sup> For instance, in the *Shan Hai Jing* (山海經), there is a list of different types of *wu*.<sup>51</sup> What is important for this conversation is that the commentary clearly states that all these different *wu* are spiritual healers (*shen yi* 神醫).<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the commentary of the *Liji* (禮記) explains that *wu* used to raise their hands over sick people to cure their illness, thus confirming their medical skills.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusions

In this paper the Qinghua bamboo manuscript *Chijiu* has been analysed to study the *wu* culture as perceived by Pre-Qin culture. In the text, I identified three passages containing elements that can be traced back to the *wu* culture: a) the moment when Yi Yin prepares a soup that allows people to perceive every happening in the world; b) the moment of the spirit possession by a Shang totemic figure, the *wuniao* (the mystical spirit raven); and c) the moment Yi Yin turns out to be a celestial spirit medium and helps the tyrant Jie to cure his illness. Thus, the figure of Yi Yin, as described in this manuscript, corresponds to the archetype of *wu*. His description follows the patterns that we find in the literature of the time, such as being the right hand of the ruler, with moral integrity, and humbleness. Furthermore, this is also close to what we already know about the Chu culture's shamanic tradition.

Overall, the founding minister of Shang dynasty Yi Yin as depicted in this text collimates with the idea of *wu* conveyed in pre-Qin literature. In early China, shamans had two main duties: summon supernatural spirits and act as their mediums, and be the healers of society and, hence, to know human's body.<sup>54</sup> In the passages of supernatural happenings summarised above the description of Yi Yin's figure correlates with the one of ashaman. This enriches the already flourishing literary tradition of pre-Qin texts concerning the Shang minister. He is not only depicted as a person of great unselfishness, but also respectful and wise.<sup>55</sup> These, according to Chao Fulin, are the three main qualities of many shamans in pre-Qin literature.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, it can be concluded that Yi Yin was seen as a shaman in pre-Qin literature. Even though his figure is still wrapped in mystery.

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47 Lü Buwei, *The Annals of Lü Buwei: Lúshì Chūnqū*, transl. by John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 376; Fracasso, 'Divinazione e Religione', in *La Cina 1.2*, ed. by Lippiello and Scarpari, p. 571.

48 Allan, 'When Red Pigeons Gathered on Tang's House', p. 432. See also footnote 11.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 433.

50 Shaoming Lian 連劭名, 'Wu Zhu kao 巫祝考' [Discussion on Shamans and Ritual Officers], *Yindu Xuekan*, 37 (2016), pp. 19–22 (p. 22).

51 *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is a classical text of which neither the author nor the time in which it was written are known to us. The text presents the mythical geography of China and the beasts that can be found in each region.

52 Lian, 'Wu Zhu kao', p. 22.

53 One of the thirteen Confucian classics, the *Classics of Rites* presents the ritual practice in Pre-Qin China.

54 Lian, 'Wu Zhu kao', p. 22.

55 See Marubio (2005) for an in-depth analysis on Yi Yin.

56 Fulin, 'Shangdai de wu yu wushu', pp. 81–82.

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*‘Images and places are media of memory, and they are important parts of Sebald’s writing. However, without readers and reading practices, the meaning of texts will not be interpreted.’*



JANE EYRE  
... of those were very tall, many were dressed in  
... of all that a surprising multitude of army that  
... in quantity, their parents as a mist morning  
... a man and carried to them; one or two  
... in spirit; the others only stared at  
... about the room, reminding me, by  
... of brevity of their movements, of a  
... birds. Some of them threw  
... positions on the tables and  
... the rest gathered on the sofas and  
... in a low but clear tone examined  
... I knew their names and  
... them now.  
... and two of her daughters,  
... some woman, and was  
... the eldest, Amy  
... like, in face and  
... white muslin dress  
... with a  
... term.

JANE EYRE  
... (at least) still black; her teeth, too, were still apparently  
... of her age; and so she was, no doubt, physically  
... ; but then there was an expression of almost  
... uncomfortable haughtiness in her bearing and almost  
... She had Roman features and a double chin,  
... appearing into a throat like a pillar and those features  
... even furrowed to me not only  
... by the same principle, in a position of almost preter-  
... natural erectness. She had, likewise, a fierce and  
... eye; it reminded me of Mrs. Reed's; she mouth  
... words in speaking; her voice was deep, and her  
... very pompous, very dogmatical—very  
... short. A crimson velvet robe—  
... some gold-wrought  
... suppose she thought) Indi-  
... Blanche and

# Ruins and Memories in W.G. Sebald's Novels

Linjie Zhang



Linjie Zhang is a PhD student at the Department of Sociology, Edinburgh. Her research interests are the public space, reading culture, sociology of literature, and forensic labs. She follows the steps of Michel Foucault and Winfried Georg Sebald to write for the gloomy lives.

**W**INFRIED GEORG SEBALD was born in Wertach, a small town in Bavaria, southern Germany, in 1944. He grew up in the shadow of World War II and the division of post-war Germany. His first novel *Vertigo* was published in 1990, followed by *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and *Austerlitz* (2001). With the release of the English versions, he was quickly praised by James Wood and Susan Sontag. An important feature of Sebald's novels is the combination of novels, memoirs, archives, travel notes, and images. Many studies argue that ruin is key to understanding Sebald's novels.<sup>1</sup> Through the ruined landscape, derelict buildings and abandoned places, he invites readers to imagine the history of narration and the history of silence, just as in reality we face the dilemma of discerning truth between official discourse and non-official discourse. In this paper, I argue that the Magic of the Book is manifest in the transmission of collective memory in novels: on the one hand, Sebald represents the neglected history through imaginative writing; more importantly, readers can relive that history in their daily life through reading practices.

## *The Meaning of Place*

The meaning of places may disappear as time goes by like the tranquil evening draws its mantle

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1 Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès, 'The Ruin as Kairos in WG Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*', *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, 43 (2012), pp. 153–162; Maxim A. Pensky, 'Three Kinds of Ruin: Heidegger, Benjamin, Sebald', *Poligrafi*, 16 (2011), pp. 65–89; Martin Schauss, 'With an Eye to Their Later Existence as Ruins: Language, Materiality, and the Ruin in the Work of WG Sebald', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63 (2021), pp. 609–627; Robin Vandevoordt, 'Ruin, Allegory, Melancholy: On the Critical Aesthetics of WG Sebald's *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*', *Transformations*, 28 (2016), pp. 1–12; Simon Ward, *Ruins and Poetics in the Works of WG Sebald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

over our ailing memories. To resist forgetting, Sebald uses writing and images to present us with a global history to recover landscapes and restore them to visibility. There are fictional parts, but because of the strong connection between his writing and history, it can stimulate readers' curiosity to explore real history.

Erosion of places can happen through war-induced physical changes, through the sheer passage of time, and through the loss of people who remember. In the post-Nazi era, although many people reflected on World War II verbally, they secretly sympathised with Hitler and the Nazis at the bottom of their hearts. They longed for a great Germany and regretted the division of Germany after the war. Sebald's father, who served in the Nazi army, also integrated into this sympathy. When faced with his son's questions, he always said 'I don't remember', just as protagonists said many times in novels. Sebald uses newspapers, archives, and images to present history that people cannot face directly. In newspapers mentioned in *The Rings of Saturn*, we can see the series of miserable historical events pump into our eyes: in Rumelia, there was a Mohammedan uprising; in South Africa, the kaffir unrest had to be suppressed; a housemaid in Whitby was burnt alive when her dress, onto which she had accidentally split paraffin, caught light at an open fire; work on the fortifications of Hong Kong, where two thousand coolies were slaving, was approaching completion<sup>2</sup>. Occasionally, Sebald mixes war memories with some tragedies that happened in peacetime, to narrow the distance between readers and history.

For readers and visitors who know the industrial cities of Germany and England, Sebald can take them back to an immersive place through his novels: whether it is postwar Germany or Britain, in the heart of some cities, not a soul was to be seen, though by now it was almost a quarter to six. One might have supposed that the city had long since been deserted and was left now as a necropolis or mausoleum<sup>3</sup>. Like Sebald writes in *The Rings of Saturn*: "Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable".<sup>4</sup> Metaphors are a key component of novels, which can be a mysterious gift and has its seat deep in the reader's soul. Readers can escape from their daily repetition and busyness through reading, and discover the reality that is hidden by fast-paced life which may be a bit cruel. Good books not only affirm the unavoidable heaviness and bitterness in life, such as the extreme and all-encompassing oppression of characters suffered in their homeland, but also compensate readers for the limits of understanding of the history they have never experienced.

In *The Emigrants*, painter Ferber said that 'Germany is a country frozen in the past, destroyed, a curiously extraterritorial place, inhabited by people whose faces are both lovely and dreadful'.<sup>5</sup> Various unfortunate experiences in Germany influenced Ferber's feelings, language, behaviour, and thoughts. As Griswold said, the place is particularistic, emotion-laden, and bound up with memory<sup>6</sup>. Memories of their home country haunt Jewish emigrants wherever they come and they will never forget them. Following different characters' journals in Germany, France, and Britain, real history is revealed on paper through those indescribable and ineffable memories.

### *The History of Civilisation is also a History of Trauma*

Through the narrator's voice, Sebald expresses to the reader 'I write and think once more of our

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2 Winfried Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 114.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

5 Winfried Georg Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 181.

6 Wendy Griswold, *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 9.

history, which is but a long account of calamities.'

Readers can find the natural environment and global history in Sebald's novels, which are often ignored by novels on World War II, such as *Schindler's List* (Thomas Keneally, 1982) and *Black Dogs* (Ian McEwan, 1992). The Holocaust, the Jewish identity of emigrants, and the history of World War II are Sebald's focus, but he also cares about the sufferings occurring in distant countries - East Asia. Starting from the history of the Jews and Germany, during the character's travels, Sebald turned his attention to continental Europe and the United Kingdom and then established connections with China and Latin America. Images about China, like the Chinese objects in Johannes Vermeer's paintings, are integrated into global history. Chinese memory of the ruins of Yuan Ming Yuan is often filled with righteous indignation, and more and more voices of 'bringing the collections plundered during the colonial period back to the motherland' appear on social media. Sebald describes the history of Yuan Ming Yuan in a voice that is very consistent with the imagination of Chinese readers. Why did those soldiers destroy Yuan Ming Yuan? The reason given by the novel is that this earthly paradise immediately annihilated any notion of the Chinese as an inferior and uncivilised race which knew nothing but the rule of force, privation, and the abnegation of their own desires. China is a multi-ethnic country, so inevitably, territorial disputes and ethnic conflicts have never completely disappeared. The Sino-Japanese War and the Tibetan issue are very sensitive in China. In *The Rings of Saturn*, when Sebald mentions the history of 'the secession movements of the Moslem population of the Shensi, Yunnan and Kansu valley regions, in the course of which between six and ten million people were made homeless or killed',<sup>7</sup> affected by censorship, 'Moslem' described in the English version was translated into 'people' in the Chinese version. While there are some differences, the real history does partly overlap with the description in *The Rings of Saturn*: in 1917 residents' worst nightmare became reality when the Sichuan army battled the Yunnan army and later the Guizhou army on the streets of Chengdu. Many innocent civilians were killed and injured and thousands became refugees when part of the city was destroyed and countless homes ruined<sup>8</sup>. Covering up the history that caused trauma does not comfort the victims, nor does it lessen the guilt of survivors. It is the unspeakable parts of history that arouse the curiosity of readers around the world.

When reflecting on the history of World War II, the emphasis may not be on delving into the reasons why it happened, but on the damage it caused. In *The Emigrants*, all four characters cut off their connection with their Jewish identity by committing suicide. Before that, they all lost contact with the real world and became addicted to gardening. Mr. Selwyn, a character in *The Emigrants*, said: 'The years of the second war, and the decades after, were a blinding, bad time for me, about which I could not say a thing even if I wanted to. ... Since then, almost my only companions have been plants and animals'.<sup>9</sup> We do not know why Mr Selwyn, as a doctor, gave up his practice and patients and served his last tie with the real world. Sebald does not show us the cruelty experienced by any of the Jewish emigrants during World War II. We can only glimpse the extent of the world that made them desperate through their decision to no longer concern themselves with what goes on in the so-called real world. Only plants and animals were their companions, no people. As readers, we cannot empathise with the survivors who harbour feelings of shame and guilt; we can only imagine, or reproduce, the real history through archives or memoirs. Sebald's focus on flora and fauna is related to a documentary work, *On the Natural History of Destruction*. It is not only the Jews who bear the burden of history but also nature and German civilians. In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald mentions that the

7 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 146.

8 Di Wang, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 231.

9 Sebald, *The Emigrants*, p. 21.

Allied bombing of Germany caused the death of 600,000 civilians.

Readers and reading practices play an important role in the distribution of books, as De Certeau says: a text has meaning only through its readers. From the perspective of cultural sociology, we can find reading involves placing the experience and agency of readers at the centre of the analysis. Social actors, irrespective of their social position, can and do leave their situations when they read and because they read<sup>10</sup>. Through his participants' discussions of W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, Smith argues the book's ethics aim at preventing the dead from being forgotten<sup>11</sup>. From the interpretation of Sebald's novels, readers can find the connection between history and their everyday life. Through the window of the books, they can catch a gentle wind bringing history to them.

### *Images as Witness*

Sebald uses a variety of images, such as ruined places and personal objects, to solidify memories and express his atone for the Holocaust in the novels.

This map of the ruined village, Bard, in the fire, is just one of the images in Sebald's novels.



The combination of pictures and text gives the work an archival dimension. Sebald uses the timelessness of pictures to realise his desire: to repair the past, rescue the time that has passed and is passing, and express his sense of mourning for lost history and life, for decayed nature and cities. Pictures are scattered among the text from time to time, which diverts the readers' attention, blocks the reading rhythm, slows down the movement of thinking, and intrigues readers to think.

Readers may think the description as follows is absurd: in a spirit of adventure, disregarding his hunger and weariness and the objections of the Capitaine, Beyle, a character in *Vertigo*, set forth for the Emporium, where that evening, as he knew from several public notices, *Il Marrimonio Segreto* was being performed<sup>12</sup>. In 1800, Napoleonic Wars raged when Beyle arrived at Ivrea, a bivouac. The first thing he did was go to the theatre to watch a musical. This should be a daily leisure activity for ordinary people, but it was a luxury during wartime. Sebald makes it come true in *Vertigo*.

10 M. A. Thumala Olave, 'Reading Matters: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Reading', in *The Cultural Sociology of Reading: The Meanings of Reading and Books Across the World*, ed. by M. A. Thumala Olave (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 20.

11 Daniel Smith, 'Reading, Novels and the Ethics of Sociability: Taking Simmel to an Independent English Bookshop', in *The Cultural Sociology of Reading: The Meanings of Reading and Books Across the World*, ed. by M. A. Thumala Olave (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 361–384.

12 Winfried Georg Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 9.

Image and photography should not be a consumer product but a way of preserving memory, which is the consensus of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and John Berger. Just like the name of Aby Warburg's book, *Mnemosyne*, is composed of nearly a thousand images. Although Ferit Orhan Pamuk does not use images in his novels, there are a large number of photographs in the Museum of Innocence established by him in Istanbul.



For many readers, visiting the Museum of Innocence is like going on a pilgrimage, and experiencing the objects and photos has become an important way to understand Pamuk's novel of the same name. In Sebald's novels, the narrators and those subjects of investigation are gradually alienated from their mother tongue with the memory of their childhood in Germany falling into oblivion, which is a heartbreaking process. Not even photos can preserve memories and histories: The more images I gathered from the past, the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had happened in this or that way, for nothing about it could be called normal: most of it was absurd, and if not absurd, then appalling<sup>13</sup>. But even so, readers can still explore history through photos and see what the world looked like when it happened in the past. Sebald's intention came true. Many readers followed the footsteps of Sebald's characters, experienced the places in the book, and posted photos on social media. We can find some places in the real world unchanged compared to the photos in Sebald's novels. Someone even made a documentary, *Patience (After Sebald)*, following the journeys in *The Rings of Saturn*.

Different from the above authors and artists mentioned, Sebald uses images to mourn lost history through the connection between individual experience and national identity. There are different kinds of images in Sebald's novels, including the Litzmannstadt ghetto that was established in 1940 in the Polish industrial centre of Lidz, a sinking battleship, an assassin being apprehended, photos of

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13 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, p. 212.

immigrants, etc. Sebald's reflections on the history of World War II and national identity are based on the writing of people who might not be remembered by history. His books are about the fate of being uprooted from home, about expelled, lonely, and lost individuals, and about people who have been eliminated by history. Assmann (2017) points out that in the 19th century, nation-state identity was based on art and historical classics<sup>14</sup>, but today, the educated class of citizens no longer exists. This is also an issue reflected in Sebald's novel. He tries to preserve the reflection on the war through images and writing. The immigrants who have experienced the war in his novels cannot completely separate their personal experience from national identity, so they feel pain and unease. Regardless of whether readers can truly understand Sebald's original intention, the existence of these novels at least provides a possibility that the object worthy of recognition and reflection is not only the history of trauma under national discourse, but more importantly, personal experiences, which confront the judgement proposed by Foucault: man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea<sup>15</sup>.

## Conclusion

Contrary to Sebald, Primo Levi writes about survivors' true memories of their experience in the concentration camp. A cruel coincidence is that after he left those testimonies, he jumped off a building and ended his life as if only the ending of 'death' could truly present the pain of those who have experienced the history of World War II. The restrained and detailed narrative in novels and memoirs is a kind of escape, and the authors and the objects of their memories cannot get real comfort from it. Levi reveals the hidden aspects of Sebald's novels: the deception of human memory, the Nazi methods of breaking the will of prisoners, the peculiar language of the concentration camps, and the nature of violence. At the same time, he reflects on the grey areas of morality and the flaws of human nature and presents the intricate truths and facts in that extreme environment at the cost of life.

Sebald is not only popular in the German and English-speaking world but according to the data from Douban, a Chinese version of Goodreads, almost ten thousand readers have read *The Rings of Saturn*. However, the works on Sebald's writing in English pay little attention to how the Chinese-speaking world understands Sebald and the history of the Holocaust, which deviates from the history described in his novels. Sebald's writing on ruins fills voids that are ignored by official documentaries or forgotten by people in history. Through the memory of ruins, Sebald presents the characters' inner obsession with identity and the seduction of culture in German history. The dying embers from the bottom of the characters' hearts provide an imaginative perspective for readers to reflect upon traumatic history.

Images and places are media of memory, and they are important parts of Sebald's writing. However, without readers and reading practices, the meaning of texts will not be interpreted. Sebald's novels not only present the forgotten, concealed, and suppressed history, but also present the specific and subtle individual experiences in history. He recreates the postwar lives of ordinary immigrants and provides the possibility to lead readers to trace the connections between their own lives and cruel history.

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14 Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

15 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 387.

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lurch from the common gaze, and left the vulgar to imagine (if they could) the full majesty of justice.

There were only a couple of women in the dock, who were looking to their adjoining friends, while the clerk read some depositions to a couple of policemen and a man in plain clothes who leaned over the table. A jailer stood reclining against the dock-rail, tapping his nose listlessly with a large key, except when he repressed an unfeeling touchy to conversation among the ladies, by proclaiming silence; or looked stowily up to bid some woman "Take that baby out," when the gravity of justice was disturbed by foible cries, half-smothered in the mother's shawl, from some scraggy infant. The room smelt stale and blackened; the walls were dirt-discoloured; and the ceiling and a dusty clock above the dock—the only thing present, that seemed to go on as it ought; for depravity, or poverty, or an habitual acquaintance with both, had left a taint on all the minute matter, hardly less unpleasant than the thick greasy soot on every inanimate object that frowned upon it.

Noah looked eagerly about him for the Dodger; but although there were several women who would have done very well for that dissipated character's mother or sister, and more than one man who might be supposed to bear a strong resemblance to his father, totally at all answering the description given him of Mr. Dawkins was to be seen. He waited in a state of much impatience and uncertainty until the women, being committed for trial, went clattering out; and then one quickly relieved by the appearance of another prisoner who he felt at once could be no other than the object of his visit.

It was indeed Mr. Dawkins, who, shuffling into the office with his big coat sleeves tucked up as usual, his left hand in his pocket, and his right

At this point, the Dodger, with a show of being very particular with a view to proceedings to be had thereafter, desired the jailer to communicate "the names of those two files as was on the bench." Which so tickled the spectators, that they laughed almost as heartily as Master Bates could have done if he had heard the request.

"Situate there!" cried the jailer.  
"What is that?" inquired one of the magistrates.  
"A pick-pocketing case, your worship!"  
"Has the boy ever been here before?"  
"He ought to have been a many times," replied the jailer. "He has been pretty well everywhere else. I know his well, your worship."  
"Oh! you know me, do you?" cried the Artful, making a note of the statement. "Very good. That's a case of defalcation of character, my way."  
Here there was another laugh, and another cry of silence.

"Now then, where are the witnesses?" said the clerk.  
"Ah! that's right," added the Dodger. "Where are they? I should like to see 'em."

The wish was immediately gratified, for a policeman stepped forward who had seen the prisoner about the pocket of an unknown gentleman in a crowd, and indeed acted a headstrong part therefrom, which, being a very old one, he deliberately put back again, after trying it on his own countenance. For this reason, he took the Dodger into custody so soon as he could get near him, and the said Dodger, being searched, had upon his person a silver snuff-box, with the owner's name engraved upon the lid. This gentleman had been discovered on reference to the Court Lists, and being then and there present, swore that the snuff-box was his, and that he had missed it on the previous day, the moment he had descended himself from the

*‘In the post-apocalyptic world, language is no longer associated with human exceptionalism and any derivative forms of injustice. Instead, [it] is reconceptualised as a creative and communicative medium that fuels the development of subjectivity and the promotion of ethical social relations.’*



# Narrative Construction after the Apocalypse: Reinventing Subjectivity and Social Relations in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

Lina Katsorchi

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Stavroula Anastasia (Lina) Katsorchi is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of English Language and Literature, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. In her free time, she is Book Review Editor of the *Journal of Posthumanism*, and an amateur poet.

**L**IFE IN THE western hemisphere of the twenty-first century would be impossible to describe without using the terms 'capitalism', 'neoliberalism', and 'technology'. Their embeddedness is so profound that already in 1989 Francis Fukuyama characterised the neoliberal capitalist system as the ultimate form of human governance, defining it as 'the end of history' since there are no better feasible alternatives that can make further progression possible.<sup>1</sup> His theorisation gave rise to extremist interpretations which identify the end of the world with the end of capitalism. Yet today, the expanding popularity of artificial intelligence alongside developing technologies of human enhancement run parallel to escalating manifestations of environmental decline, which are already giving rise to images of human and nonhuman suffering, as well as to grotesque visions of the future; images and visions which once would only be encountered in fiction. It is often said that art imitates life, but life also imitates art. Thus, the rapid expansion of science fiction literature, particularly with an ecological focus, can largely be attributed to the global ecological emergency and the ostensible inescapability of capitalism. At the same time, these conditions fuel the literary imagination further, engendering fictions of an ecodystopic and often corpocratic future, namely dark and ecologically devastated worlds dominated by capitalist-driven corporations. One such work is Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, whose main premises demonstrate that the end of the world and the end of capitalism do not refer to the same occurrence.

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1 Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp. 3–18.

Although published more than a decade ago, the first instalment of the *Maddaddam* trilogy remains relevant to this day. To understand this, one may look no further than the novel's preoccupation with corporate power, ecological degradation, overpopulation, online exploitation and violence, and, of course, the unbridled advancement of bioengineering beyond any ethical consideration. Atwood herself defines it as 'a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians ... it invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent'.<sup>2</sup> This 'presentness' of the novel, namely its closeness to contemporary reality, provides a fruitful ground upon which one may examine life today with the purpose of rethinking subjectivity and social relations between human and nonhuman others, and imagining an ethical post-capitalist future. Catalyst for this conception is the process of narrative construction, as enacted by Atwood's protagonist Snowman, and its function as a site for change. With its roots in critical posthumanism, the present paper analyses the development of the self as manifested before and after the apocalyptic disaster in the novel, and as reimaged after the formation of a bond between Snowman and the humanoid Crakers. More specifically, narrative construction is approached as a tool which uncovers the potential of the (posthuman) self, both individually and collectively, and plants the seeds for ethical social relations within a mediated ecosystem. Ultimately, the narrative emerges as a site that facilitates subject development and ethical connections, or in Donna Haraway's words 'becoming-with' others, thereby paving the way for an inclusive posthuman future.<sup>3</sup>

The philosophical background of critical posthumanism is twofold. First, it underscores the ability for subjectivity to develop across different mediums, such as digital spaces and social practices, constituted by relationality and interactive encounters. Second, it stresses the vitality, agency, and active involvement of nonhuman and technological others, like animals and robots (AI) respectively. More generally, critical posthumanism challenges assumptions about the unchanging nature of the human and life altogether, promoting instead the concepts of multiplicity, fluidity, and relationality. Taking contemporary technological domination into account, posthuman theory prioritises performativity over inherent permanence, proposing that bodies are constructed through cultural practices and interactions, and continuously evolve.<sup>4</sup> Its ultimate goal is 'an expanded, relational self' realised between nature and culture, shaped by technology, and opposed to capitalist ideology.<sup>5</sup> As such, it constitutes a useful tool in the rethinking of subjectivity and social relations within an ecodystopic capitalist context.

The events of *Oryx and Crake* unfold in two timelines: the pre-apocalyptic past and the post-apocalyptic present. The story in narrated through the eyes of Snowman, who seems to be the last human on earth after a deadly virus has wiped out humanity. The present of the novel unravels in an undefined post-apocalyptic and ecologically devastated world, which is primarily dominated by genetically engineered species, like pigoons, rakunks, wolvogs, and the human-like Crakers. The readers learn about the past through Snowman's flashbacks. Once a boy called Jimmy, Snowman grew up in a corpocratic society where business thrived on biomedicine, such as pharmaceutical enhancement, and bioengineering, like the production of hybrid animals, viruses, and germs, for which the corporations then manufactured and sold medicines. The population was divided into two social classes: the high classes, who lived in prosperity and comfort, employed and safe in the Compounds, and the plebs, who lived in the pleeblands dipped in poverty, crime, and disease. Jimmy's

2 Margaret Atwood, *Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983–2005* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005), p. 287.

3 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 3.

4 Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (eds.), *Posthuman Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 17–19.

5 Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 688.

parents were both geneticists working at a biomedical corporation until his mother Sharon eventually quit, left her family, and joined the resistance, disillusioned with the corporation's (lack of) ethical conduct. While being raised by his father and his new girlfriend, Jimmy met the odd but genius science student Glenn, with whom he soon became friends. They spent a lot of time together playing online video games, where Glenn earned his nickname Crake, smoking skunkweed, and surfing the dark web, often watching live executions and fetishistic pornography. It was while watching child pornography that Jimmy first encountered a girl, later identified as Oryx, with whom he became enamoured. After high school, Crake got into the distinguished Watson-Crick Institute and became a bioengineer, immediately promoted to a promising career at the corporation RejoovenEsense. Jimmy, however, joined the lowly Martha Graham Academy as a student of the humanities before getting a petty job at the advertising company AnooYoo. Crake's prominent position at RejoovenEsense gave him the opportunity to work on the Paradise project, part of which was his design of the Crakers. These peaceful and good-natured humanoids have fixed breeding seasons (hence a controlled population without sexual aggression), and lack all the features that make humans vicious, intolerably abundant, and harmful for the planet. Hired as a teacher to the Crakers and as his romantic partner, Crake introduced Jimmy to Oryx, who seems to be the grown girl with whom Jimmy had become enamoured. The love triangle between them is inescapable. Seemingly unaware, however, Crake trusted Jimmy with the advertisement of his achievement, the BlyssPluss pill, which would improve the health and sexual stamina of its users; yet secretly the pill would also sterilise them in an attempt to deal with overpopulation. Once distributed, however, the pill spreads a lethal and very contagious virus that leads to the extermination of humankind. Jimmy confronts Crake, who has killed Oryx in front of him, deliberately prompting Jimmy to shoot him dead. Made immune to the disease in advance, Jimmy has watched the world crumble, with his only company now being the Crakers. In the post-apocalyptic present, Jimmy renames himself the Abominable Snowman and becomes teacher to the Crakers, who serve him meals and listen to his stories attentively. During an expedition to the ruins of RejoovenEsense for supplies, Snowman comes face to face with his trauma, escapes hungry pigeons, and returns to the Crakers, only to find that they have seen three human survivors camping nearby. The story ends as Snowman tracks down the humans and wonders whether he should join or destroy them.

Atwood's novel presents two extremes: one world that is completely dominated and exploited by humans, and one that is (almost) empty of humans and their culture altogether. This is not to suggest that human extinction is the answer to contemporary socio-political and ecological crises. Rather, it shows that finding a middle ground is paramount in the active pursuit of change. The symbol as well as the catalyst for change in *Oryx and Crake* is no other than the protagonist himself, indicated also by his name swap. This can be inferred from Snowman's flashbacks which show that he, as a young man, indulged in all the superficial mind-numbing luxuries and pleasures of Compound life. His submission ran parallel to the almost complete debasement of the humanities in the pre-apocalyptic society. Being literary-minded yet unable to express his passion, Jimmy is forced to deaden his empathy and imagination. His seemingly static subjectivity, however, is dramatically unsettled in the post-apocalyptic present, indicated by his decision to change his name to the Abominable Snowman. By deeming himself abominable as well as a 'goon, buffoon, poltroon', Snowman covertly admits his complicity to Crake's plan of destroying humanity.<sup>67</sup> Having established himself as a fool, it is easier for him to eventually confess that 'he had shut things out', and during his expedition even more directly:

6 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2004), p. 260.

7 Carol Osborne, 'Mythmaking in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*', in *Once upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood's Writings*, ed. by Sarah A. Appleton (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), p. 33.

'Crake is still there, still in possession, still the ruler of his own domain, however dark that bubble of light has now become. *Darker than dark, and some of that darkness is Snowman's. He helped with it*'.<sup>89</sup> Yet Snowman's expression of guilt and despair runs in tandem with his maturity and intention to change. His expedition to the Paradise Compound thus emerges as an attempt to make peace with the past, exorcise the haunting memories, and finally move on. Howells approaches Snowman's therapeutic journey as a shift from feelings of self-victimising helplessness to responsibility and acceptance, paving the way to transcendence.<sup>10</sup>

But what pushed Snowman towards change? Was it just the horror of human extinction? Although shock is definitely a factor, it is Snowman's narration of the past that provides a medium for processing trauma and for subject development. It is established early on in the novel that Jimmy/Snowman is a lover of words, representing the humanities, unlike Crake, who is science-oriented. In the pre-apocalyptic past, bioscience is promoted at the expense of the humanities, which are reduced to propaganda production and manipulative advertising. However, in the post-apocalyptic present, the humanities regain their value. Art and the imagination are reinstated at the centre of human subjectivity but also of ethical social relations. Snowman is the pioneer of the rebirth of the humanities. His creativity does not stop at his personal history, however. Rather, his narrative can be divided into two segments: first, his personal narrative, as he 'retells his own story to himself, and consequently to the reader', and second, a type of posthumanist mythmaking in the form of a cultural narrative, designed as a backstory and a source of world knowledge for the humanoid Crakers.<sup>11</sup> These two narratives are interconnected, enabling each other in a relational and complementary manner.

After ontologically restyling himself as the Abominable Snowman, Atwood's protagonist further reclaims his agency in the post-apocalyptic world by actively creating an origin story for the Crakers. Satirising pre-apocalyptic grand narratives and traditions like the Christian religion, Snowman constructs a new system where Oryx and Crake are deities, creators of the world and of all that is in it:

In the beginning there was chaos ... In the chaos, everything was mixed together ... There were too many people, and so the people were all mixed up with the dirt ... The people in the chaos were full of chaos themselves, and the chaos made them do bad things. They were killing other people all the time. And they were eating up all the Children of Oryx, against the wishes of Oryx and Crake. Every day they were eating them up. They were killing them and killing them, and eating them and eating them. They ate them even when they weren't hungry ... And Oryx had only one desire – she wanted the people to be happy, and to be at peace, and to stop eating up her children. But the people couldn't be happy, because of the chaos. And then Oryx said to Crake, Let us get rid of the chaos. And so Crake took the chaos, and he poured it away. There. Empty. And this is how Crake did the Great Rearrangement and made the Great Emptiness.<sup>12</sup>

This is only a small part of all the stories Snowman tells the Crakers. Other parts include repetition and chanting by Crakers, who accompany Snowman's narration as a chorus. The orality of the narrative links it with preliterate societies, where tales and legends were inextricable parts of history, passed on orally from generation to generation. Origin stories in the form of myths provided the foundations for

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8 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 156.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 280.

10 Carol Ann Howells, 'Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Visions: The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake', in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, 1st edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 172.

11 Osborne, 'Mythmaking in Margaret Atwood', in *Once upon a Time*, p. 27.

12 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, pp. 82-83.

societies, giving them coherence. Similarly, the Crakers consider Snowman's narration a true retelling of the past and accept it as their history. Snowman's cultural narrative can thus be conceptualised as mythmaking, and consequently as a new posthumanist grand narrative.

The humanoid Crakers are portrayed as curious but peaceful, hungry for knowledge yet pure in their pursuit of meaning and knowledge of themselves and the world. Snowman's narrative fulfils their need for security, stability, and structure, yet it also contributes to their evolution. Crake had altered the Crakers' brain so that they could never develop any of the foul human characteristics responsible for the devastation of the planet. As a result, 'racism, hierarchy, love, sexuality, [and] harmful symbolisms such as kingdoms, icons, gods, and money' would be biologically as well as cognitively unattainable for them.<sup>13</sup> However, it is demonstrated throughout the novel that the Crakers no longer comply with Crake's regulations, primarily due to their interaction with and the narration of Snowman. Instead, they appear to have developed a capacity for symbolic thinking, art, and imagination. For instance, they create their own myth about Snowman:

Snowman was once a bird but he's forgotten how to fly and the rest of his feathers fell out, and so he is cold and he needs a second skin, and he has to wrap himself up. No: he's cold because he eats fish, and fish are cold. No: he wraps himself up because he's missing his man thing, and he doesn't want us to see. That's why he won't go swimming. Snowman has wrinkles because he once lived underwater and it wrinkled up his skin. Snowman is sad because the others like him flew away over the sea, and now he is all alone.<sup>14</sup>

The most striking manifestation of their development, however, is their creation of a 'grotesque-looking figure, a scarecrowlike effigy' while Snowman is away on his expedition.<sup>15</sup> The Crakers are chanting and playing music with instruments they designed themselves with hubcaps, metal rods, and bottles banged with a spoon.<sup>16</sup> Once they realise that Snowman returned, they welcome him joyfully and explain their predicament, which greatly resembles a prayer. They created a 'picture' of him and chanted 'Snowman' in the hope that he would hear them and come back. What comes into play here is the Crakers' agential capacity, which actively unfolds through their development. Crake's intended determinism collapses, giving way to a relational view of posthuman subjectivity, bred out of dynamic interactions with Snowman as well as the narrative's function as a site for change.

The interpersonal aspect of narrative simultaneously evokes a sense of purpose in Snowman himself. His intention 'to define himself as storyteller' and as 'mythmaker' directly contradicts his role as an advertiser in the pre-apocalyptic past.<sup>17</sup> Propaganda cedes to creativity, manipulation to communication, and political interest to interconnectedness and relationality. In the post-apocalyptic world, language is no longer associated with human exceptionalism and any derivative forms of injustice. Instead, language is reconceptualised as a creative and communicative medium that fuels the development of subjectivity and the promotion of ethical social relations, by bridging, for example, the distance between Snowman and the Crakers. At first, the humanoids undoubtedly relieve Jimmy's loneliness while also guaranteeing his safety from predators. Yet, they also function as a reminder of his blind submission and unconscious complicity in Crake's scheme. This complication hinders the realisation of the full potential of their relationship. It is through his personal narrative that Snowman re-examines and ultimately reconstructs past events, ascribing meaning onto them in the same way that he ascribes meaning onto the Crakers' life. Additionally, it motivates him to embark on a journey

13 Jayne Glover, 'Human/Nature: Ecological Philosophy in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx* and Crake', *English Studies in Africa*, 52 (2009), pp. 50–62 (p. 54).

14 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, p. 7.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 301.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 302.

17 Osborne, 'Mythmaking in Margaret Atwood', in *Once upon a Time*, p. 27.

to RejoovenEsense and face his past traumatic experience. As a result, he returns with a renewed sense of purpose and identity, which additionally leads to a reconfiguration of his behaviour towards the humanoids, unleashing his empathy and building up towards a more symbiotic future with them. Osborne contends that Atwood's way of emphasising this emancipation of the social relations between Snowman and the Crakers is by beginning the novel's first and final chapters with the same words but omitting the reference to 'various barricades' in the latter.<sup>18</sup>

Art and relationality thus emerge as instigators, propelling Atwood's protagonist to take action both symbolically and physically, by creating his personal narrative and going on his therapeutic journey respectively. These acts by extension link the development of posthuman subjectivity and ethical social relations alike with narrative construction, in as much as it results in the protagonist's respect for other forms of life, like the Crakers, thereby paving the way for a more ethical and inclusive posthuman future. Following the premises of critical posthumanism, this narrative becomes a space where dynamic entanglements may unravel temporally, as a creative and active reconstruction of the past and the self accordingly, and interpersonally, through relational encounters with multiple others, human, nonhuman, and posthuman alike. At the same time, the development of Snowman and the Crakers demonstrates that narrative promotes agency, empathy, and communication, and it is thus a catalyst in creation of an ethical posthuman future and the pursuit of 'becoming-with' others.

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18 Atwood, Oryx and Crake, p. 35.

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*‘People’s relation to the classic can differ significantly: attachment, identification or allegiance are one version, with detachment and indifference as their opposite. Despite divergence, however, the classic remains authoritative.’*

# The Attraction of the Classic: Divergent Reading Experiences and the Perceived Authority of the Allegory of the Cave

Damianos Tzoupis

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Damianos Tzoupis is a PhD student of Socio-Cultural studies at the University of Edinburgh, with a background in Greek language, literature, and the classics. He is currently studying the ways Greek university students read, experience, and appropriate ancient Greek texts in the context of contemporary, crisis-inflicted Greece. His interests lie in classics, sociology of reading, cultural heritage, and nationalism.

**T**HE PAPER DISCUSSES experiences of contemporary Greek lay readers with ancient classical texts. The question of 'Classics' has been discussed extensively, particularly regarding their value amid late modern cultures and canon debates. Classics are canonical texts that have undergone long processes of legitimation, travelled across spatiotemporal and cultural contexts, and attained significant cultural authority.<sup>1</sup> However, despite their consecration, they often elicit responses of resistance from readers who might find them controversial or simply irrelevant. Given that ancient Classics hold a prominent position in Greek culture, I address this issue by specifically exploring Greek readers' experiences.

Authoritative texts often generate strong responses, like attachment or enchantment. Enchantment has been described as immersion in a text: abandoning oneself and being absorbed by it, becoming part of a 'plenitude of meanings'.<sup>2</sup> In her later work, Rita Felski revisited immersive experiences and discussed 'attachment' as being 'affected or moved', being 'tied' to an artwork: experiencing passion and compassion; forging ethical, emotional, intellectual, or political bonds.<sup>3</sup> Such experiences are particularly relevant for Classics because of the classical texts' perceived 'singularity'.<sup>4</sup> Classical texts arguably convey something unique and universal, thus attaining quasi-sacred status: they communicate timeless, worthwhile ideas, models, and morals; consequently, they

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1 Álvaro Santana-Acuña, *Ascent to Glory: How One Hundred Years of Solitude Was Written and Became a Global Classic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

2 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), p. 70.

3 Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 1.

4 Günter Leyboldt, 'Singularity and the Literary Market', *New Literary History*, 45 (2014), pp. 71–88.

become inspiring and offer readers an experience of ‘fullness’.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Classics resemble cultural attractors:<sup>6</sup> they communicate forms, values, and ideas that attract people with their perceived importance. Their attraction is even stronger considering that Classics have survived time and circulate in multiple contexts. Such diachronic presence fuels their monumentality: they become memory sites and cultural heritage, facilitating the circulation and sedimentation of meanings and continuously inspiring discussion over ideas and values.<sup>7</sup> In addition, and of special interest here, Classics have secured sacredness in the context of national cultural imaginaries. Regarding antiquity’s texts and their reception in Greece, these are notably perceived as idealised heritage within a narrative of national continuity. Antiquity constitutes a model and ideal axis upon which Greek identity relies, and simultaneously a resource for reflection upon modern Greekness.<sup>8</sup> Classics can be considered achievements of a culture that is the nation’s ‘ideal self’, which people try to appropriate and display.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, their reception can feed nationalist discourses with nostalgia or salvation narratives about some instructive golden age.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, Classics’ potential to elicit strong responses is associated with their status as national heritage-to-be-curated, as sacred monuments reappropriated by nationalism: they inspire reverence and demand respect.<sup>11</sup>

It is true that today Classics have managed to retain their sacredness and people trust them as sources of wisdom and normative ‘cultural grammars’: readers might still treat them as legitimate resources of universal values, humanism, and models of life or the self.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, nationalism is on the rise worldwide, thus accentuating attitudes of veneration or the mobilisation of the past in defence of the nation. As far as Greece is concerned, particularly because of the socio-economic crisis, debates around the past and its role today have attracted attention, with the hope to answer questions about the social, cultural, and moral conditions and dilemmas of the present (e.g., what might be ‘wrong’ with the nation’s culture) and find inspiration for the future.<sup>13</sup> However, the Classics have been contested. Their status has been endangered mainly in the contexts of postmodernism and delegitimisation of tradition, while multiculturalism and representational politics challenge biased, exclusionary Western canons.<sup>14</sup> In this context, the problem I am exploring concerns the experience and appreciation of classical texts within a framework of tensions between singularity and legitimacy on one side, and contested status on the other.

To address this question, I embarked upon a study of lay reading and focused on how university

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5 Leyboldt, ‘Singularity’, pp. 75-76.

6 The idea of polarization and forces of attraction in culture was explored by: Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, transl. by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 13-14.

7 Ann Rigney, ‘The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts Between Monumentality and Morphing’, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, vol. VIII (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 345-354.

8 Gerasimos Kouzelis, ‘Ο λόγος για τα υποκείμενα του έθνους: μια κοινωνιολογική προσέγγιση’ [Discourse on the Subjects of Nation: A Sociological Approach], in “Τί είν’ ή πατρίδα μας”: Εθνοκεντρισμός στην Εκπαίδευση [“What is our homeland?”: Ethnocentrism in Education], ed. by Anna Fragoudaki and Thaleia Dragona (Athens: Alexandria Publications, 1997), pp. 106-142; Re-Imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture, ed. by Dimitris Tziouvas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

9 Michael Herzfeld, ‘Towards an Ethnographic Phenomenology of the Greek Spirit’, *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 16 (2001), pp. 13-26; Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology through the Looking-Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Hara Stratoudaki, ‘Ελληνική Εθνική Ταυτότητα: Σημάνσεις Και Σημασιοδοτήσεις’ [Greek National Identity: Significations and Meaning Attribution], *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 142 (2014), pp. 3-39 (pp. 9-11).

10 Anthony D. Smith, ‘Legends and Landscapes’, in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Berlin: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 174-208.

11 Eleana Yalouri, ‘The Aesthetics of Sacredness’, in *The Acropolis: Global Fame, Local Claim* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 137-186.

12 Charles Altieri, ‘An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon’, *Critical Inquiry*, 10 (1983), pp. 37-60; Eric Adler, *The Battle of the Classics: How A Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

13 Dimitris Tziouvas, *Greece in Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Austerity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

14 John Guillory, ‘Canonical and Noncanonical: The Current Debate’ in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 3-82; Alan R. How, *Restoring the Classic in Sociology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

students from Greece responded to a particular text, Plato's allegory of the Cave. In fact, the student population is of particular interest, because of their special relationship with educational institutions (school, academia) that play a major role in reproducing discourses around ancient texts' classicalness. My project employed qualitative methods, comprising an introductory interview with each participant, a solicited diary, and a follow-up interview. In this paper, I discuss two rich yet contrasting cases regarding how people relate to a text and respond to its classical status. My intention was to thus achieve 'multivocality'<sup>15</sup> and identify certain common patterns despite diversity. In the end, the cases will reveal experiences of people which are not generalizable but still theoretically significant, since they sensitise us to the range of possibilities of people's experiences.<sup>16</sup> People's relation to the Classics, I argue, can differ significantly: attachment, identification, or allegiance are one version, with detachment and indifference as their opposite. Despite divergence, however, the Classics remains authoritative, with readers referring to its persistent relevance and cultural prominence.

### *Attachment*

My first case is about attachment. Dimitris is a 22-year-old undergraduate student in communication, media, and culture studies. During the introductory interview, he presented himself as an avid reader, amateur poet, and very interested in antiquity and archaeology. From the start, then, Dimitris revealed certain dispositions, experiences, and feelings that contribute to his positive prejudice and mood (i.e., pre-orientation)<sup>17</sup> regarding ancient Classics. Dimitris mentioned he loved antiquity ever since he was a child (he lived close to archaeological sites and heard stories about them) and has always appreciated ancient monuments: he considered them relaxing, an escape from the present, 'stabilisers that reduce tension' in a fast-moving world. However, seeking refuge in the past has always involved enchantment and immersion. In fact, Dimitris sees objects from the past as containing 'energy':

An offering to a god ... conceals something. It conceals people's pain, their anxieties, fears, hopes ... Objects carry a weight, which different generations experience differently ... It's the so-called vibrations; vibrations are everywhere, in human organisms, in objects. Emotions live in a place, in a thing.

And this energy (whatever its content) is communicated from the object to people: 'An object ... carries the experiences we have created; these experiences we later reflect and recall, through our own memories and dispositions ... The object itself is lifeless. Yet human pain is totally real'. His 'theory' about how we receive past heritage applies to Classics as well. As he says, texts are 'the written source through which to communicate with our ancestors'. It is about accessing the past to learn people's 'mistakes, strategies, their ways of handling things'. Drawing heavily on nationalist narratives, Dimitris underscores that Classics are of our 'ancestors'. Their importance for national imagery adds to their meaningfulness: they link past and modern Greece with familial bonds.<sup>18</sup> In addition, their perceived universality reinforces their importance:

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15 Jeff Todd Titon, 'Textual Analysis or Thick Description', in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2012), pp. 75–85.

16 This methodological point was raised by Sanna Talja, 'Analyzing Qualitative Interview Data: The Discourse Analytic Method', *Library and Information Science Research*, 21 (1999), pp. 459–477 (p. 471).

17 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. edn (London/New York: Continuum, 2004); Felski, *Hooked*, pp. 49–50.

18 Anna Fragoudaki, 'Οι Πολιτικές Συνέπειες Της Ανωστορικής Παρουσίασης Του Ελληνικού Έθνους' *The Political Consequences of the Ahistorical Presentation of the Greek Nation*, in "Τί Είναι ή Πατρίδα Μας": Εθνοκεντρισμός Στην Εκπαίδευση [*What Is Our Homeland?*]: *Ethnocentrism in Education*, ed. by Anna Fragoudaki and Thaleia Dragona (Athens: Alexandria Publications, 1997), pp. 143–198 (pp. 144–46).

They promote universal values .... Antigone, for instance, can be considered classical because it inspires, it creates..., it modifies our way of thinking today .... The classic is a milestone, a beacon enabling the interpretation of a new age...

Such universalising tropes (i.e., Classics as enlightening human condition) are connected to Dimitris's conviction that Classics are nationally relevant: they provide blueprints, grammars, inspiration for contemporary Greek contexts: 'Our society has failed in very basic aspects. A person without stable basis can't do anything. I don't support reverence towards our ancestors; rather it's about being inspired and making something new'.

Our first interview prepared me for Dimitris's special reading of the Cave. His response was indeed characterised by attachment to the past. During our second interview, he described his approach to reading and said he focused on the text alone, leaving aside authorial intentions:

The author's intentions are analysed on the basis of the society, history, and contexts of a specific locality. But there are things we experience [in the text], universal values that exist as such, even if they come from different places and periods...

Dimitris believes that the ancient text holds universal and timeless meanings which can be reappropriated at different times. The text enables dialogue with the past and, consequently, readers can draw on past knowledge and experiences and apply them into new contexts. As he said, 'you must decontextualise the text to understand it. The context is a point of reference, yes, but it prevents you from opening your mind and finding commonalities, finding what fits with what [today].'

Dimitris's urge to link past and present led to reappropriations of the allegory to address contemporary personal and social concerns. For example, in both his diary and the interview, Dimitris argued passionately that the text is a timeless allegory about power structures and the oppression and violence exercised by elites upon others (especially upon informed individuals wishing to change the status quo). To support this, he referred to contemporary examples, for instance, how the Greek political party system works. Nevertheless, the most telling example is his interpretation of the Cave as fable about philosophers' 'morals', 'virtue', and 'responsibility'. Dimitris initially treated the Cave as narrative of self-awakening and enlightenment: the philosopher starts seeing things correctly, learns how to go beyond routine perception and unlocks the full potential of their mind. Then, self-awakening is associated with helping others: enlightened individuals reach an ideal point where they have both the necessary intellectual skills and the moral quality and willingness to introduce others to knowledge and self-awakening. In this regard, Dimitris considered the Cave a narrative about the ideal person, who is capable of 'acceptance of responsibility and desire to impart knowledge to people'. Throughout his account, this particular interpretation was portrayed as the universal and most relevant part of the story.

His interpretation is theoretically significant because it reveals strong emotional attachment. Reading the classic did not simply involve explicating its content and reflecting on it abstractly. Dimitris was deeply moved, and this resulted in creative, emotional, and self-expressive reading. A first indication is Dimitris's own poem, included in the diary, about the moral and virtuous philosopher. Entitled '*Hymn to the light*', the poem contrasts the enlightened philosopher with less moral and virtuous ones. Dimitris seems totally absorbed by the text: he responds lyrically and creatively, reappropriating textual themes (e.g., image of light, responsibility of philosophers) to communicate personal ideas about responsibility and fulfilment. Such profound impact by the text is echoed in other comments as well. Indicatively, Dimitris confesses that philosophy (and its value) 'is not about reading a text but about experiencing it!'. In his diary, he mentions that the text was 'overwhelming', that he felt like a 'little kid' confronting the darkness, even that the text 'awakened his inner self.' In short, he repeatedly underscores that the allegory possessed him and generated intense responses: he entered a

vivid process of reflecting upon his own thinking and connection to the world.

Dimitris's case indicates a relation to the classic characterised by emotional engagement and conviction that it is timeless and bridges past and present. His aesthetic experience is typical of discourses around Classics' universality and value,<sup>19</sup> and also echoes nationalist attitudes around antiquity as source of salvation narratives,<sup>20</sup> or around cultural continuity between different generations.<sup>21</sup>

## *Detachment*

Nonetheless, it is always possible to relate to classicalness differently. In her thirties, Lena is a dental care professional pursuing a master's in health promotion among elderly people. She is an amateur writer and enjoys reading, but her relationship with antiquity is quite weak when compared to Dimitris. The introductory interview helped to identify her cultural tastes and attitude towards the Classics. Lena reads literature (popular genres like crime fiction), but mostly prefers 'true stories' (she referred, for instance, to true crime and biographies) and 'practical' books (e.g., about health). She thus admitted to a more 'utilitarian' reading<sup>22</sup> that accommodates practical needs of everyday life, that provides knowledge with direct application to life. As she said emphatically, 'it's a constructive pastime. You gain something, it's knowledge! You can only benefit from knowledge ..., from specific knowledge!'

Lena's emphasis on practicality gives important context for her relationship with the past (e.g., history, cultural products of the past). When she talked about history books, for example, she said they offer no particular benefit: 'Knowing something that happened, say, during World War I doesn't help me today! What is beneficial, though, is knowing about the stomachache I have.'

Her relation to antiquity is mediated specifically by this preference for practicality: 'Let's say I go see some monument. Okay, so what? It doesn't offer something, it doesn't act on me, it's not intriguing, it's not fulfilling!' And even though she did accept that antiquity might be admirable and worthy of study, she did not feel uncomfortable with her lack of knowledge, did not consider it an indispensable qualification for life: '[Knowing about it] doesn't express me. ... I don't care if someone says I don't know something... It's okay. I wasn't born to know everything. I know what feels important to me!'

For Lena, to engage with a practice or cultural object, one should be invested in and profit from it. Regarding Classics, she feels detached from them and struggles to identify. In this regard, reading a classic would probably involve her negative mood (i.e., she would be negatively pre-oriented; for example, she mentions boredom), and the possibility of carefully engaging with its meanings would be suspended.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, such extreme feelings help us understand a specific dimension of reading. Lena, through her utilitarian stance, seems to adopt an attitude that engages with artworks instrumentally, seeking usefulness, profit, or benefits in certain domains: it is as if cultural products help one be more efficient, productive, or solve problems. Perhaps Lena's attitude is indicative of a tendency (or discourse) in modern, capitalist societies to centre on the practical and depreciate

19 See Santana-Acuña, 'Indexing a Classic', in *Ascent to Glory*, pp. 229–253. Also see Leyppoldt, 'Singularity and the Literary Market', regarding 'charismatic trust' in singular texts.

20 Smith, 'Legends and Landscapes', in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, pp. 174–208.

21 Cf. Fragoudaki, 'Οι Πολιτικές Συνέπειες Της Αισιοτικής Παρουσίασης Του Ελληνικού Έθνους' [The Political Consequences of the Aistorical Presentation of the Greek Nation]. The article discusses aistorical discourses around Greekness.

22 Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Reading* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), p. 309.

23 Hans Robert Jauss, for instance, discussed this suspension as ironic identification, in: *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutic*, transl. by Michael Shaw, vol. III (Chicago: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 158. Also cf. Anna Poletti, Judith Seaboyer, and Rosanne Kennedy, 'The Affects of Not Reading: Hating Characters, Being Bored, Feeling Stupid', *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 15 (2016), pp. 231–247.

whatever does not offer skills/resources to master the world.<sup>24</sup> For some scholars, this type of literacy practice has already affected even the ways we read and evaluate the role of Classics, in all domains and disciplines, in terms of usefulness and knowledge production.<sup>25</sup>

This reflects in how Lena reacts to the allegory. Her initial impression was that the Cave felt boring since it was 'beyond' her field of interests. Lena found its content unattractive because it did not offer new, practical knowledge regarding personal interests and needs. Moreover, her detachment was reinforced by the unnecessarily complex structure of the text: 'It was tiring... It wanted to reach a conclusion but started from a completely different place. ... In fact, the whole point was in the last page! ... It could have said so earlier!'

Lena thought the text intended to propose a model for education, but in the process raised all kinds of topics. She thus observed a lack of cohesion and unity that was frustrating: the text failed from a practical perspective because of its ineffective form.

Lena's comments indicate that the consecrated classic did not lead her to immersion or engagement with some 'fullness;' she instead experienced detachment and negative feelings. Nevertheless, Lena's experience remains complex. Despite negative impressions, she did accept that the text's contents are meaningful, and relevant. To me it was obvious (from both her diary and interview) that Lena agreed with Plato's ideas, especially about the corrupted society and the enlightened individual. She also noted that her dislike did not mean she could not 'discern' important ideas or that the text was bad, indicating that personal judgement and appreciation of content are different things. One might argue that Lena's reluctance to devalue the text is due to the fact that in interviews people are likely to say more acceptable and 'honorable' things,<sup>26</sup> for example, not challenging Classics' established legitimacy. Although true, there are probably additional reasons for that. While discussing her negative impressions, Lena mentioned emphatically: 'Obviously, Plato had his reasons for writing that way. Who am I to judge?'. And afterwards: 'I'm not competent enough to judge!'. Mentioning worth and competence is significant. Firstly, it implies the idea of expertise and informed opinion that make value judgments more or less worthy: since Lena is not an expert, her opinion counts less. Secondly, there is an implicit recognition of the Cave's value: the text was designed by a skilful author, with certain intentions, and has attained certain value throughout time; by extension, it demands certain respect (especially when the reader has no special knowledge). In fact, I am suggesting that Lena's confession of unworthiness elevates the worth and status of the text itself – as if artworks can be experienced as something bigger than ourselves, something we might feel incapable of grasping.<sup>27</sup>

Lena's case showed that Classics – however consecrated and singular– do not necessarily elicit attachment; instead, they can feel distant. However, their value might still be left unchallenged: the text retains its sacredness, often making readers feel unworthy or dominated.

## Conclusion

The two contrasting cases do not exhaust the range of possible reading responses. However,

24 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, transl. by James C. Wagner (London: Polity Press, 2019). Their critiques of instrumental rationality are particularly significant in this regard.

25 Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Sociology and Discourse: The Centrality of the Classics', in *Structure and Meaning: Relinking Classical Sociology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 8–67; Adler, *The Battle of the Classics*.

26 Allison Pugh, 'What Good Are Interviews for Thinking about Culture?: Demystifying Interpretive Analysis', *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 1 (2013), pp. 42–68 (p. 50).

27 Hartmut Rosa, 'Vertical Axes of Resonance', in *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), pp. 258–307 (esp. Part 3, 'The Power of Art').

identifying their similarities and differences was important. The cases revealed readers who engaged differently with a consecrated philosophical text: attachment and detachment are affective possibilities in such encounters. What remained constant, however, was the classic's perceived authority: the belief that the text provides significant knowledge and grammars to make sense of contemporary contexts, and the intensely felt influence of its sacredness. This empirical observation is theoretically important because it illuminates the status of Classics in the midst of canon debates: despite readers' different needs, desires or feelings, the classic's cultural force of attraction, its charisma, remains strong. In the case of Greece, in particular, findings illuminate the complex landscape of meanings around the reception of national cultural heritage: with rapid cultural changes (e.g., regarding people's interests and tastes) and the passing of time, Classics might appear distant or strange; yet their consecrated status renders them impactful cultural objects, central to our understanding of today's cultural identities and people's attitudes towards established (nationalist) discourses around an idealised past.

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*‘This practice of reading is one more example of how books can act as bearers of care meaningfully tied to contexts where care becomes a necessity in an inhumane and unjust society.’*



# On Care and Agency: Examining the Revolutionary Reading, Writing, and Book Sharing Experiences in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2007)

Nicky Karamanidou

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Niki Grigoria Karamanidou is an independent scholar and EFL teacher focused on literature-based education. She has received a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature and a Master's degree in English and American studies, both from the Aristotle university of Thessaloniki.

**H**OW CAN THE horrors of war and trauma be conveyed articulately to a reading audience? Can a book help the reader visualise potential ways to deal with this trauma through a caring framework? This paper argues that Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* (2007) masterfully addresses such issues of social injustice, trauma, and loss by underlining the transformative power of books to become an inspiration as well as a basis for active resistance.

Set in World War II Nazi Germany, the story follows the life of 13-year-old Liesel Merminger. Liesel is taken along with her younger brother away from their communist mother to be placed in a foster family, upon her mother's insistence. When her brother does not survive the trip, Liesel has to face the loss of her family alone, as she initially struggles to settle in the Hubermann household. More specifically, Liesel has to face her strict foster mother Rosa Hubermann, the poverty the family goes through, and most importantly the poisonous Nazi propaganda that has affected the young German generation. Nevertheless, Liesel manages to find more than one ally in the face of her caring foster father Hans Hubermann, Max Vandenburg, a young Jew on the run from the Nazi authorities, as well as her school friend Rudy Steiner. It is in this context that the paper examines the reading, book sharing, and journal writing practices enacted between these characters under the prism of care theory. Virginia Held discusses in her seminal work *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global* that 'care is needed in such contexts of justice as the streets and the courts, where persons should be treated

humanely'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, care theory is found to be especially relevant in Zusak's novel as a valuable tool that can examine the caring relations which are forged between Liesel and the other characters in a context of extreme social injustice, fear, and inhumanity. Furthermore, care theory is utilised so as to underline the importance of these caring relations as sources of agency and active resistance against the rhetoric of hate and violence that Nazi propaganda promotes.

Finally, ever-present in this interplay between humanity and inhumanity, trauma and care, is the humorous omniscient narrator of the novel; none other than Death. Death becomes skillfully and well-distanced, the witness of these caring relations, as he observes Liesel as 'one of those perpetual survivors, an expert at being left behind'.<sup>2</sup> Death admits that 'I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry... [e]ach one an attempt ... to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it', as he directly addresses the reader.<sup>3</sup>

### *Book Reading, Book Sharing and Caring Relations*

From the very first chapters of the novel, it becomes apparent to the reader that books and reading can indeed become invaluable in times of great sadness and despair. This is portrayed by Death describing the importance of Liesel's first stolen book, *The Gravedigger's Handbook*. Retrieved by the cemetery where her brother has been buried, this handbook keeps Liesel solace despite its macabre connotations. The omnipotent narrator explains that 'it didn't really matter what that book was about. It was what it meant that was more important ... 1. The last time she saw her brother ... 2. The last time she saw her mother'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, mortifying though it might be to any other person, in the case of Liesel this book functions as a testimony of the people she has lost, as well as a mobile locus of remembrance that she can always carry with her. Furthermore, as Aliona Yarova stresses, '[t]he Grave Digger's Handbook with its trivialised burial procedure helps her to cope with the traumatic memory of her brother's grave', as its crude and practical take on death can distract Liesel from the pain she is experiencing.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the second thing that becomes obvious to the reader is the fact that, despite her many hardships, Liesel is more than lucky to be placed under the protection of the caring Hubermann family. Death vividly describes how 'those first few months were definitely the hardest [as] [e]very night Liesel would nightmare. Her brother's face. She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets', tortured by the loss of her young brother.<sup>6</sup> However, Death proceeds to acknowledge that 'the only good to come out of those nightmares was that it brought Hans Hubermann, her new papa, into the room to soothe her [as] he came in every night and sat with her'; this act constitutes a predominant instance of care.<sup>7</sup> During this stressful situation, Hans Hubermann's initial manifestation of care towards Liesel flourishes. This intensifies when Hans realises that Liesel has trouble keeping up at school. He makes it his mission to comfort and help Liesel improve in her reading. Upon discovering the stolen handbook, Hans does not reprimand the young girl but instead he asks her if she wants to read it together, and when she responds positively, he encouragingly

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1 Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 15.

2 Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (London: Penguin, 2018), 15.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

5 Aliona Yarova, 'Haunted by Humans: Inverting the Reality of the Holocaust in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*', *Papers*, 24 (2016), pp. 54–81 (p. 76).

6 Zusak, *The Book Thief*, p. 43.

7 *Ibid.*

asserts '[w]e'd better read it then'.<sup>8</sup> Held argues that 'the central focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility'.<sup>9</sup> This is indeed the case with Hans Hubermann, as he makes it his priority to meet the needs of Liesel and to be a supportive fatherly figure, even though he is 'not such a good reader [him]self', as he admits.<sup>10</sup> Death further describes the strengthening of the bond between Liesel and Hans, considering that 'over the next few weeks and into summer, the midnight class began at the end of each nightmare' when Liesel needed consolation the most.<sup>11</sup>

The primary event that signals change inside the Hubermann household, and the formation of a new caring relation that will transform Liesel, is the appearance of Max Vandenburg. Interestingly, Death reveals that Max is the son of Hans Hubermann's friend, Eric Vandenburg, and that they fought together in World War I where Eric left his last breath.<sup>12</sup> The narrator describes rather meaningfully the predicament of Max's condition as he comments that Liesel's 'brother died in her arms ... [yet] anything was better than being a Jew' in Nazi Germany.<sup>13</sup> Hans is highly aware of the danger of concealing Max when he instructs Liesel not to tell a word to any of her friends, as there is a great possibility that the Nazis will 'drag that man up there away and maybe Mama and me too—and we will never, ever come back'.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Hans's decision to provide Max with shelter, setting at risk his own life as well as his family's, constitutes an indicative manifestation of care and unselfishness.

As far as Liesel and Max's acquaintance is concerned, their friendship begins to bloom on the event of Liesel's birthday in the form of a book-sharing practice. Distressed that he has nothing to give her, Max proceeds in the following days to create a thirteen-page booklet named *The Standover Man*, where he describes his anxieties and fears, and upon finishing it, he gifts it to Liesel. In this autobiographical booklet, Max discusses how 'one night after [his] usual nightmare ... [Liesel] said "Tell me what you dream of" and so [he] did'.<sup>15</sup> He further addresses Liesel as he admits in the booklet that 'Now I think we are friends this girl and me. On her birthday it was she who gave a gift—to me', whereby Max refers to the hug Liesel gave him during her birthday; a physical manifestation of care.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, it can be argued that Max's act to offer this autobiographical piece of work to Liesel, whereby he bares his soul to her, functions as an extremely significant expression of care. Furthermore, the specific booklet becomes the means to bring comfort to both Max and Liesel, in that it enables them to share and acknowledge their trauma, namely Max's trauma of having to abandon his family and Liesel's trauma of losing her brother and mother.

An equally important manifestation of care takes place when Max gets sick in the cold basement where he is being concealed. As Max is struggling to recover from fever, Liesel stays dutifully by his side, and when Hans suggests that perhaps some reading may help the patient, 'from that day on, Liesel read[s] *The Whistler* aloud to Max as he occupie[s] her bed' where he has been placed in order to recover.<sup>17</sup> This practice of reading is one more example of how books can act as bearers of care, meaningfully tied to contexts where care becomes a necessity in an inhumane and unjust society. Andrea Ritivoi stresses in her work on empathy that '[i]f narratives can trigger empathic responses, they could be used to promote a compassionate politics that encourages us to understand extreme

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8 Ibid, p. 68.

9 Held, *The Ethics of Care*, p. 10.

10 Zusak, *The Book Thief*, p. 69.

11 Ibid, p. 73.

12 Ibid, p. 179.

13 Ibid, p. 165.

14 Ibid, p. 206.

15 Ibid, p. 237.

16 Ibid, p. 239.

17 Ibid, p. 317.

experiences that we might have not had the misfortune to encounter'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this section has discussed how practices such as book reading and book sharing can actually invoke empathetic responses and create compassion for the marginalised Other in an inhumane political system. More specifically, it has been argued that Hans' determination to help Liesel with her reading has enabled him to attain a better idea of Liesel's degree of trauma. Furthermore, Max's illustrated booklet has facilitated both the formation of a caring relation as well as triggered the empathetic response of Liesel who, upon reading the autobiographical booklet, has acquired a better understanding of Max's predicament.

### *Creative Autobiographical Writing and Book Theft as Acts of Resistance*

As far as agency is concerned, Max's autobiographical piece of writing, which is gifted to Liesel as an expression of a caring relation, is also equally important in promoting change and inspiring active resistance against Nazi propaganda. More specifically, Max's illustrated booklet is highly significant in terms of both construction and context, as Max takes the initiative to create this work in Hubermann's gloomy basement from the pages of Hitler's most propagandistic work. Death describes in great detail how Max 'had cut out a collection of pages from *Mein Kampf* and painted over them in white', obliterating in this way its propagandistic content.<sup>19</sup> He further narrates how Max 'hung them up with pegs on some string, from one end of the basement to the other', a rather significant scene whereby Max reverses the spatial restriction he is facing hiding from the Nazi, as he is now using the cold, dark basement in its entirety, in order to create his own narrative.<sup>20</sup> Death vividly describes that Max 'formulated the words in his head until he could recount them with no error. Only then ... did he begin to write the story. It was

done with a small, black paintbrush. *The Standover Man*. When he finished, he used a knife to pierce the pages and tie them with a string. The result was a thirteen-page booklet'.<sup>21</sup> This symbolic transformation of Hitler's rhetoric of hate and violence, into an autobiographical piece of writing, expresses Max's feelings and hope for the future now that he has met the Hubermann family. It constitutes a highly revolutionary practice in that it resists the Nazi propagandistic narrative.

Furthermore, Max successfully undertakes bringing forward his own narrative as an oppressed Jew in Nazi Germany, as he symbolically reclaims his right to voice the injustice he is experiencing. In this context, Max's practice of offering the illustrated booklet to Liesel, who is a young German vulnerable to the daily propaganda of the Hitler Youth, marks his conscious effort to educate the young girl and make her aware of the inhuman practices that a whole group is faced with. Held stresses the importance of emotions such 'as sympathy, empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness [which] are seen as the kind of moral emotions that need to be cultivated'.<sup>22</sup> Max's effort to help Liesel cultivate this kind of empathy can be regarded as a profound act of resistance against Nazi rhetoric, considering that it aims to prevent Liesel's transformation into one of his oppressors. Held further underlines that '[e]ven anger may be a component of the moral indignation that should be felt when people are treated unjustly or inhumanely'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Max successfully manages to make Liesel understand his

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18 Andrea Ritivoi, 'Reading Stories, Reading (Others') Lives: Empathy, Intersubjectivity, and Narrative Understanding', *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 8 (2016), pp. 51-75 (pp. 52-53).

19 Zusak, *The Book Thief*, p. 226.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.

22 Held, *The Ethics of Care*, p. 10.

23 *Ibid.*

predicament even though she does not face this kind of discrimination, as well as to make her feel a rightful indignation for the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime.

Another illustrative practice of active resistance is bravely enacted by Liesel, as the young German takes up stealing books which are ready to be consumed from the building pyres of the Nazi authorities. The symbolic act of book burning, which Liesel actively resists, is presented in Zusak's book as the ultimate collapse of ideological freedom and expression; as the Nazi officer even makes a speech encouraging the excited crowd to 'put an end to the disease which has been spread through Germany for the last twenty years', referring to the books by Jewish authors.<sup>24</sup> Death does not resist here the temptation to satirise the Nazi officer by explaining to the reader that the man 'was performing now what is called as *Schreierei* – a consummate exhibition of passionate shouting – warning the crowd to be watchful, to be vigilant, to seek out and destroy the vicious machinations plotting to infect the motherland with its deplorable ways'.<sup>25</sup> Death's humorous criticism of the paranoid and hateful speech that is taking place before the book burning underlines his condemnation and discontent of the violation of the literary works, which are going to be destroyed along with the rich ideas they carry.

Hillerbrand stresses that 'book burning is the epitome of censorship; it is the end of discourse, the end also of the exchange of ideas of ideas. It is the deathblow to the free mind'.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, Liesel's effort to save a book from such a fate illustrates the degree of her agency. Before the act of the book saving, Liesel admits to her foster father that she hates Hitler for taking away her communist mother.<sup>27</sup> In this light, Death's narration of the moment that Liesel steals her first book from such a pyre is highly significant, as it marks her strong will to challenge the unjust society she lives in. The omniscient narrator vividly describes how Liesel 'latched onto the closest of the books. It was blue and burnt at the edges but otherwise unhurt ... By the time she made it back to Papa and Wolfgang Edel, the book was starting to burn her. It seemed to be igniting'.<sup>28</sup> Liesel's determination to save the book from the fire becomes apparent from the fact that even though the book is burning her skin and great danger awaits her if her theft is revealed, the young character still refuses to give it up.

Finally, Liesel's autobiographical journal named 'The Book Thief' can be regarded as an interesting manifestation of agency and active resistance as the girl proceeds to create her own narrative and to present her own experience as a teenager in Nazi Germany, who fights daily to preserve her humanity in a cruel unjust society. The reader learns about the existence of this work by Death shortly before the narrator recounts the bomb raid that kills the Hubermann family and almost all of Liesel's beloved ones, except for Liesel herself. Death describes how the girl 'every night ... made her way down to the basement ... For hours she wrote attempting each night to complete ten pages of her life'.<sup>29</sup> Liesel's concern with the power of books and especially the power of language and narrative, as well as the struggle to create an accurate testimony of her experiences and feelings, becomes apparent in the way she finishes her autobiographical work as she admits that 'I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right'.<sup>30</sup> The bomb raid that takes place afterwards is what buries this work under the ashes and debris, and what forces Liesel to face the horror of losing her loved ones once again, except for Max with whom she is reunited at the end of the war when the man escapes from the concentration camp he had been placed at. However, the autobiographical work is symbolically reunited with its creator when Death visits an elderly Liesel in Sydney as the time has come to take her

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24 Zusak, *The Book Thief*, p. 114.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Hans J. Hillerbrand, 'On Book Burnings and Book Burners: Reflections on the Power (and Powerlessness) of Ideas', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74 (2006), pp. 593–614 (p. 606).

27 Zusak, *The Book Thief*, p. 119.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 124–125.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 515.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 517.

away from this world. The omnipotent narrator who has saved the journal from the debris returns it back to its owner, admitting to the book thief and to the reader who is directly addressed, the fact that 'I am haunted by humans'.<sup>31</sup>

## *Conclusion*

This paper has addressed the fundamental role of books in bringing about social change as well as their potential to create a framework for caring relations which are driven by the shared values of respect, agency, and active resistance against the rhetoric of hate and violence promoted by authoritative regimes. More specifically, the paper has investigated the importance of book sharing and book reading practices as scaffolds for the formation of caring relations that can support marginalised people and act as coping mechanisms against the horrors they experience, as the caring relations of Liesel Meminger with Hans Hubermann and Max Vanderburg have illustrated. Moreover, the paper has underlined the significance of books and autobiographical narratives which enable writers to present their own testimony contrary to dominant propagandistic narratives, as Max and Liesel's autobiographical works have shown. Finally, the act of book burning has been examined as an indicative form of censorship that aims to eradicate any freedom of thought and expression. Overall, this paper has highlighted the possibility to combat the alienating forces of war and death through what can best be described as the magic of the book.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 538.

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*‘If flaps, pop ups and interactive elements such as those employed in Epitome do affect our ability to remember, or to place importance on certain information, then the potential is there for them to be used for magical purposes including misdirection and deception.’*



# Pop-up books, Magic, and Health

John Kilburn

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John Kilburn is a lecturer in Illustration at the University of Plymouth, UK. He is interested in the importance and potential of authorial illustration practice within collaborative and interdisciplinary research.

I AM AN ILLUSTRATOR and book maker whose research focuses on authorial illustration practice in the context of health. I like to experiment with paper engineering; that is the manipulation of paper or card to create sculptural objects, moving mechanisms and, most commonly, pop-up books. In this article, I intend to playfully explore qualities of pop-ups that may be seen as ‘magical’ and how these ‘magical’ qualities allow further understanding of pop-books in the context of health.

Pop-up and movable books have long established links to health and the occult relating to how information is communicated and received, as well as the materials, methods and cognitive processes involved in designing, crafting, and reading. Contemporary examples of pop-up illustrated anatomy or health education books are commonplace.

Making pop-up books is challenging; when making a pop-up or movable book, you are constantly challenged by the material constraints –for your book to effectively *pop-up*, *fold-down*, or *spin around* you must be careful with the materials you use to make it.<sup>1</sup> If the paper you use is too thin the device may rip or tear, if it is too thick it may catch or obstruct its own movement. Typically, a pop-up book is a cohesive whole – they are usually held together with glue, but some dynamic examples are held together with thread or elastic. Pop-up books may have parts which can be completely removed and replaced or that are designed to be torn out. Although continuous, some pop-up books do have parts that disappear and reappear somewhere else. Parts can be seen to magically pass through each other.

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1 It is a well-known fact that it is much harder to get a pop-up book to fold down than it is to pop-up!

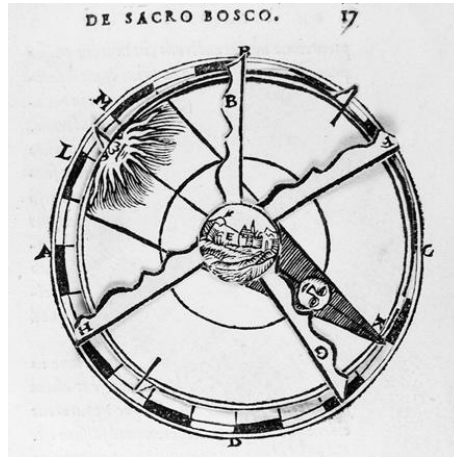


Fig. 1. A sixteenth-century volvelle from a sixteenth-century edition of Sacrobosco's *De Sphaera* in the Whipple Collection.<sup>2</sup>

Early movable books often included concentric rotating devices or pointers called 'volvelles', sometimes referred to as wheel charts, and these were typically used to make mathematical or occult astrological calculations. In Robbins' *Medical Manuscripts in Middle English*, the author describes several mediaeval medical manuscripts that employed the use of volvelles and paper constructions.<sup>3</sup> The 'most important element in the mediaeval attitude to sickness was prognosis, i.e., the astrological determination of the possibility of effecting a cure and the most favourable times for treatment'. Prognosticatory manuscripts containing a volvelle could be used by a doctor to make precise astrological prognosis that would relate to the prevailing medical wisdom of the time, such as the four humours and phlebotomy, bloodletting, and unlucky days when treatment would be ineffective. In the sixteenth century 'profane, blasphemous, and heretical texts' using volvelles and flaps were produced; 'Occult tradition encompassing alchemy, astrology began to blur with classical and religious imagery' and in some cases, when they worked too well 'moving parts became suspected of magic' and were even suppressed by the Inquisition.<sup>4,5</sup>

2 Wikimedia Commons, 'Sacrobosco Lunar eclipse', <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sacrobosco\\_Lunar\\_eclipse.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sacrobosco_Lunar_eclipse.jpg)> (5 June, 2024).

3 R. H. Robbins, 'Medical Manuscripts in Middle English', *Speculum*, 45 (1970), pp. 393-415.

4 Suzanne Karr, 'Constructions Both Sacred and Profane: Serpents, Angels, and Pointing Fingers in Renaissance Books with Moving Parts', *The Yale University Library Gazette*, 78 (2004), pp. 101-127.

5 Luckily, this is not something modern creators need to worry about, and nowadays volvelles are widely used in contemporary pop-up books for a broad range of creative purposes.

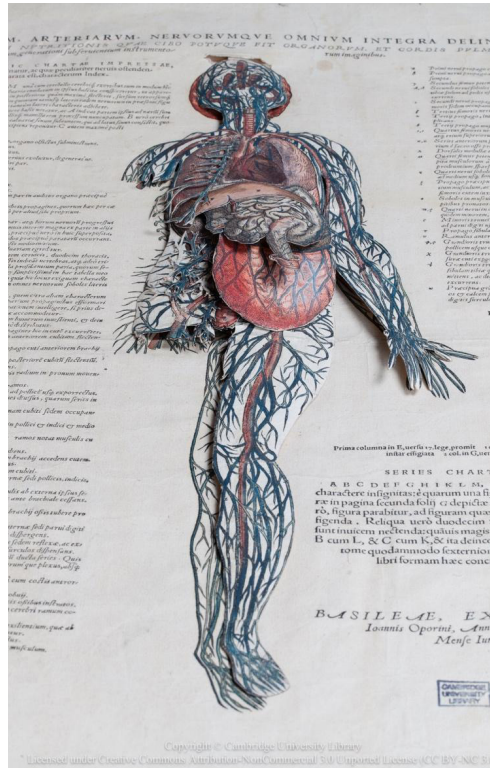


Fig. 2. A page from *De Humani Corporis Fabrica, Epitome* by Andreas Vesalius.<sup>6</sup>

In 1543, Andreas Vesalius, a Dutchman, published *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* ('On the fabric of the human body') and a condensed, more affordable book, *Epitome*. These books were aimed at students of anatomy and attempted to detail all the parts of the human body. The students were required to cut out anatomical parts from *Epitome* and paste them together as an aid for memorising and understanding the complexities of the human body.<sup>7</sup> It also included illustrated flaps that could be lifted and made to pop-up. In *Lifting the flaps on information: purpose and play in non-fiction texts* by Vivienne Smith, the author discusses a variety of flap books.<sup>8</sup> Key to her analysis is what the act of physically engaging with a flap predisposes the reader to think. For example, the reader may be predisposed to think 'Wow!' rather than 'So what?'. The reader may be predisposed to a state of deep play – a state of curiosity and wonder where ideas are nurtured, the reader may be predisposed to accept what is revealed as indisputable fact, or, alternatively, they can be led to answers that are

6 University of Cambridge Digital Library, 'De humani corporis fabrica. Epitome (CCF.46.36)', <<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PR-CCF-00046-00036/33>> (5 June, 2024).

7 It is clearly beneficial to health if the person treating you knows their stuff.

8 Vivienne Smith, 'Lifting the Flaps on Information: Purpose and Play in Non-Fiction Texts', *Reading*, 37 (2003), pp. 116-122.

indeterminate or lead to further layers of discovery/possibilities.<sup>9</sup> Mnemonic illusions are widely used in magic, and magicians are adept at presenting themselves as highly skilled masters of memory. You can train memory and use tricks to remember patterns or specific data. Magicians often create memory illusions by capitalising on the physical limitations of memory, which is often incomplete and subjective. If flaps, pop ups and interactive elements such as those employed in *Epitome* do affect our ability to remember, or to place importance on certain information, then the potential is there for them to be used for magical purposes including misdirection and deception.



Fig. 3. A pop-up monster.<sup>10</sup>

Pop-up devices create physical spaces and require you to explore the material landscape of the book; because of this, reading a pop-up book can be an immersive and magical experience. Drawings or text can be hidden within these spaces and structures, behind flaps or revealed using pull tabs or wheels. These spaces offer potential for non-linear engagement and the holes, gaps and gutters provide plenty of opportunities for additional narratives, sub plots or conspiracy. When engrossed in a story or immersive space we may temporarily, willingly, suspend our disbelief to allow ourselves to fully appreciate the illusion. Penn, of the magician double act Penn & Teller, notably describes magic as the ‘unwilling suspension of disbelief’.<sup>11</sup> This is when the illusion is so impressive, so mind-

9 Studies have shown that in such a state, a patient reading a pop-up book may be suitably distracted from pressing matters to alleviate anxiety about an upcoming procedure or examination.

10 John Kilburn, ‘Pop-up Monsters’, <<https://johndkilburn.com/Monster-Pop-ups>> (5 June, 2024).

11 Gustav Kuhn, *Experiencing the Impossible: The Science of Magic* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2019), p. 15.

boggling, that we cannot make any sense of how it works or how it has been done – it must be magic!<sup>12</sup> The unknown or magical may be scary, and in extreme cases, curiosity, wonder and amusement may turn to fear. Combine all of this with the WOW or startle effect of a particularly impressive pop-up and you can see why this artform can also be used for darker purposes. Pop-up books used to induce or amplify anxiety include *The Babadook* book from the horror movie *The Babadook*, *The Pop-up Book of Terrifying Things* (from CBS TV show *EVIL*) and *The Pop-Up Book of Phobias*. The cinematic notion of the startle effect is described by Baird as a disturbing intrusion into the viewer's immediate space.<sup>13</sup> The pop up can make this a physical reality... Whereas any book has the potential to cause harm if you throw it hard enough at someone, a pop-up book has the potential for real violence. A pop-up book can appear magically animated and alive – it can bite, scratch, pierce or penetrate. It has the potential to breach the fourth wall – the ultimate jump scares perhaps.



Fig. 4. A reputedly anthropodermic copy of Hans Holbein's Dance of Death woodcuts.<sup>14</sup>

12 Paper engineering experts who create highly complicated and impressive pop-up books are often referred to as pop-up wizards.

13 Robert Baird, 'The Startle Effect: Implications for Spectator Cognition and Media Theory', *Film Quarterly*, 53 (2000), pp. 12–24.

14 Hans Holbein, *Dance of Death*, (London: Leonard Smithers, 1895).  
Image: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The magical materiality of books can also have a darker edge. Anthropodermic books bound in human skin do exist, although I have not found reliable records of any that are linked to magic such as the infamous, imaginary grimoire from 80s horror movie *The Evil Dead*. Perhaps the closest are human skin bound versions of *The Danse Macabre* held at the John Hay Library in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Esoteric publishers and practising witches have been known to use goat and toad leather to bind limited editions of books exploring magical practice.

If we return to the pop-up book, here is a thing that is simultaneously a book and *something other than a book*. It's very *being* puts us in a condition of 'affective absurdity' and pushes us towards a playful, or potentially magical state.<sup>16</sup> There are many similarities between theories of magic and theories of humour and at the centre of both there is always irony, an opposing quality that seems impossible or at least opposed to our natural understanding of the order of things. Further beneath lurks absurdity and the human condition which continue to offer magic a foothold in everyday life. The further the book goes from our understanding of what a book is, or what it is possible for a book to be, the more magical it appears. In the context of health, we can see why these qualities have been used by artists and book makers throughout history to such good effect.

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<sup>15</sup> I was delighted to find that of the other two books in the anthropodermic collection, one is a copy of the previously mentioned *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica*.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Veatch, 'Humor is Affective Absurdity', <<https://tomveatch.com/else/humor/paper/node2.html>> (5 June, 2024).

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*‘What Moby-Dick does so brilliantly is sketch in hazy contours that ineffable, indescribable America – the whiteness of a whale that cannot be fathomed.’*



# Speaking Resonantly Across the Great Divide of Time; or, Viewing History Through the Lens of Prophecy on the Quest for the Great American Novel

Jo ten Bolscher

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Jo ten Bolscher is a student of English Language and Culture and recent Law graduate at Leiden University. They are currently publishing papers on American literature and popular culture studies. Their interests lie in the socio-cultural dimensions of contemporary and American literature.

**M**OBY-DICK, HERMAN Melville's thick and complex epic which touches on themes that range from the Biblical to the encyclopaedic, has beguiled generations of scholars and Americans alike. From the moment of its revival in the 1920s to the present day, there has been an endless parade of declarations as to its status as the GAN – the Great American Novel.<sup>1</sup> This notion, a work that reflects, encompasses or entirely embodies a nation, refuses to truly die despite critical re-examination.<sup>2</sup> Does this book represent a whole country? Can it? Regardless, there is something within *Moby-Dick* that has caused these recurring comparisons – of which none might be so enduring as its supposed ability to predict the future. A tale of a doomed voyage chasing a near-mythical beast has been seen as a 'proleptic anticipation' that 'is astonishing in the exactness of its contours' of America's war in Vietnam – a war that started over a century after *Moby-Dick* was first published.<sup>3</sup> While it may appear strange to talk as if literature were like tea leaves from which we may divine the future, history provides a long lineage of precisely that – all the way back to the Bible, whose Old Testament was rearranged and interpreted so as to form a hidden prophecy of the arrival of Christ.<sup>4</sup> This long tradition of reading into texts far

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1 Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 358.

2 Lawrence Buell, 'The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel: *Moby-Dick* as Test Case', *American Literary History*, 20 (2008), p. 279.

3 William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 267.

4 The Bible: Authorized King James Version, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 324.

more than what may appear on the page therefore strongly informs the tenor of criticism surrounding works of supposed national import – such as the quixotic quest for the Great American Novel. Yet it would be far too simple to dismiss such readings as nothing more than mere flights of fancy, and a critical investigation of what, precisely, causes ideas of prophecy to repeatedly resurface throughout the centuries may reveal what lies beneath the veil of critique.

### *Moby-Dick and the Great American Novel*

In the wake of the American colonies' independence a movement to solidify a unique and uniquely American canon of literature quickly sprung up, in many ways a reflection of the desire to build a nation out of disparate states and people.<sup>5</sup> From these early efforts to create such a canon then arose discussions of a work that the whole nation could uphold as singularly American, in much the same way Rome had the *Aeneid* or Spain had *Don Quixote*.<sup>6</sup> While many authors have produced works explicitly with the aim of encompassing America and the list of contenders continues to grow and shift to this day, most serious examinations of the idea tend to cluster a handful of hopefuls together. Works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Great Gatsby* and – indeed – *Moby-Dick* are, therefore, seen as both masterpieces in their own rights and (and perhaps more importantly) as in some way fundamentally American.<sup>7</sup> For a novel to be 'The Great American Novel', for a work of art to be American, is a notion so fuzzy and vague it might seem meaningless. But as Lawrence Buell notes in his 2008 article 'The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel', the very fact that this idea has remained so popular, so controversial, so eminently relevant that generations of authors have both attempted to pen and discredit the idea in some way proves that it is real – or, at the very least, real enough to warrant academic study.<sup>8</sup>

Gaining cultural cache towards the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, ideas of a Great American Novel emerged from a profound insecurity regarding the state of the American literary scene. This insecurity manifested itself in the shape of a perceived need for a singular work – in lieu of a canon that, according to observers of the time, had yet to emerge.<sup>9</sup> This chimaera, as Buell puts it in his 2014 book *The Great American Novel*, remains ephemeral to this day – largely bound up in the curious tenor of GAN discourse, as if 'the GAN is a plural disguised as a singular – a horizon to be grasped at'; 'the expectation of something momentous perpetually waiting to be born'.<sup>10</sup> In charting a four-part, all-encompassing history of the Great American Novel, and thereby in some sense a history of American fiction, Buell cites a text critical of the idea of the GAN which, in a half-ironic manner, lays out nine supposed parameters for a 'GAN aspirant'. The last reads: "It has to reference *Moby-Dick* as the Great American Novel".<sup>11</sup> The 'persistent desire' for 'defining fictionalisation of national life' through 'reading "the national" through ... putative touchstone narratives' is underscored, as Buell wrote just a few lines earlier, 'whenever some random journalist compares Lyndon Johnson or George W. Bush to Captain Ahab stalking the whale'.<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not *Moby-Dick* can be seen as *the* GAN, its position as a novel that in some way captures a core aspect of America is indisputable. While the so-called 'Melville Revival' had its heyday

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5 Buell, *Dream of the Great American Novel*, p. 10.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

8 Buell, 'The Unkillable Dream', p. 133.

9 Buell, *Dream of the Great American Novel*, pp. 24-29.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

12 *Ibid.*

in the twentieth century, one can still easily find thinkpieces and articles discussing the continued importance of the novel to the modern day. Take an article published in *The Guardian* in 2019, titled 'Subversive, queer and terrifyingly relevant: six reasons why *Moby-Dick* is the novel for our times', which touches all the most important GAN-touchstones: from its popularity amongst author, critic and public alike to the myriad media comparisons of Donald Trump to Captain Ahab.<sup>13</sup> As the title of the article suggests, however, the author also believes that the novel is 'relevant', and therefore worthy of reading today – to which end they write the following: 'But it is *Moby-Dick*'s premonitory brilliance that continues to make it relevant.'<sup>14</sup> 'Melville predicts', he goes on to write, various things from climate change to neoliberal capitalism.<sup>15</sup> There is nary any reflection on this use of language – this equivalence between relevance, importance and predictive power – and for good reason. This idea that the continued relevance of a text is somehow tied to its ability to predict the future – the notion of prediction itself – can be found in earlier critical reflections of *Moby-Dick*.

### *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*

William V. Spanos' 1991 work, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, fully engages in this sort of prophetic rhetoric. Written amidst the aftershocks of the Cold War and the deconstruction of the idea of literary canons themselves, Spanos makes a long and profound meditation on the nature of *Moby-Dick* as a revolutionary text in relation to the histories of interpretation. First deconstructing earlier receptions of *Moby-Dick* as representative of views of the emerging American literary canon at the time, Spanos recasts the novel in the light of the destruction of Vietnam.

Early rejections of *Moby-Dick* saw its lack of cohesion and what he terms an 'errant' narrative as a rejection of the Protestant ethos that dominated nineteenth century America, something early critics were unable to reconcile with their begrudging admission of 'genius' found within the novel.<sup>16</sup> During the 'Melville Revival' of the 1920s, this rejection of was re-appropriated in a humanist light, re-reading the narrative of Ishmael and Ahab as one of self-reliance, the triumph of individualism in the face of autocracy, and therefore that of 'American' values.<sup>17</sup> Spanos argues that this re-appropriation was a type of censorship even more insidious than the earlier outright rejections: by accommodating the 'errant' narrative and re-shaping it in the mould of humanist and individualist values of the time, the novel once again becomes obscured and effectively censored.<sup>18</sup> This humanist reading, Spanos argues, continued throughout and past the end of the Cold War, with Ishmael being identified with the 'liberal', 'individual freedom' and Ahab with the apparently self-destructive 'absolute freedom' espoused by Communists.<sup>19</sup>

In Spanos' own reading of the novel, however, the *Pequod*'s eventual destruction at the hand of *Moby-Dick* is a 'proleptic anticipation of the "postmodern" destruction of the American errand in Vietnam, right down to its racist overtones [that] is astonishing in the exactness of its contours'.<sup>20</sup> More than just the physical, political and cultural destruction that the war entailed, it also heralded the destruction of the entire *ontological* underpinnings of the American endeavour – the senseless

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13 Philip Hoare, 'Subversive, Queer and Terrifyingly Relevant: Six Reasons Why *Moby-Dick* is the Novel for Our Times,' *The Guardian*, 30 July, 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/30/subversive-queer-and-terrifyingly-relevant-six-reasons-why-moby-dick-is-the-novel-for-our-times>> (6 April, 2024).

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, p. 12.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

brutality that accomplished nothing, forming, according to Spanos, an epochal break with earlier justifications of violence.

In other words, ... the “fulfillment” of the promissary [sic] logic informing the American cultural identity in the violence of Vietnam was a decisive rupture in the dominant discourse of hegemony, one that once and for all foreclosed (theoretically, at least) its recuperation by the perennial appeal to the repressive hypothesis, to the argument that any violence perpetrated by America is always accidental, always the consequence of a lapse from or betrayal of its subsuming truth principles, rather than the necessary effect of its “American” (onto)logic.<sup>21</sup>

The importance of Spanos’ argument in relation to his appeal to prophecy cannot be understated. One can see within the language Spanos’ view of America as upon a linear albeit circular path, one that is *necessary* and therefore in some fundamental sense predetermined. This idea of destiny, therefore, permeates the language with which he discusses *Moby-Dick* as ‘proleptic’ and even ‘prophetic’ – somewhat ironically, considering the depth at which he discusses the fallacies of earlier critics in reading *Moby-Dick* as a simple, biblical ‘prophecy/fulfillment’ narrative.<sup>22</sup> Even as Spanos seems to recognize the cyclical rather than circular nature of American history – the way that many ‘Vietnams’ have come and gone – he still seems to posit this war as in some way singular, and therefore the arc from Revolution to Vietnam as a (super)linear narrative along which American history plays out:

The founding American Adamic principles ... as the base to the liberal democratic/republican/capitalist superstructure of the American polis ... [are] precisely, in short, the very epistemic order that America’s intervention in Vietnam and its brutal conduct of the war decisively broke and delegitimized.<sup>23</sup>

From here, then, the references to prophecy and a sense of predetermined self-collapse of the American empire themselves collapse into one: for if American history can be seen as, at its core, a large yet singular circle, then why wouldn’t it be possible for a novelist in the nineteenth century to ‘anticipate’ the essentially foretold fall of the empire?

### ***A Brief History of Prophetic Literature***

This idea of a large circle destined to someday close – or a circle from history that has closed in the present day – can be found throughout history. Perhaps most famous would be the work described as foundational to the English language itself – the Bible.<sup>24</sup> While the aforementioned critical examinations of *Moby-Dick* have taken place entirely outside of the confines of the novel and within the depths of American literary criticism, the Bible experienced a far more hands-on, as it were, critical re-evaluation process until its current incarnation that settled in the first half of the first millennium.

Although the Bible has undergone innumerable iterations over the millennia in which it was written, one clear piece of editorialising can be seen in the order of the books of the Old Testament. As

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>24</sup> Isabel Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 1.

Isabel Rivers writes in the chapter 'Biblical Exegesis and Typology', the writers of the New Testament themselves believed the Old Testament to effectively form a prophecy of the arrival of Jesus Christ: from Jonah's escape after three days prefiguring Christ's resurrection to the Israelite forty-year wanderings mirroring Christ's forty-day fast.<sup>25</sup> Over the centuries, these increasingly intricate readings of the Bible developed into the so-called 'fourfold exegetical method', whereby the Bible as a whole could be understood in four discreet senses, from literal to, in some sense, prefiguring or symbolising the life of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

This method of Biblical exegesis overlaps neatly with a specific view of history, one that Rivers contrasts with a 'classical' view of history.<sup>27</sup> From roughly the fourth to the fourteenth centuries, Christian historiography reigned, bringing with it an idea of history directed 'by beneficent Providence', in a 'linear pattern: God's promises are fulfilled'.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the preceding classical views of history, history has 'a beginning, a central point and an end' – 'events will not recur endlessly'.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that the prophetic reading of the Bible most closely hewn by the most dogmatic elements of the Church – which experienced a large rupture during the humanist Renaissance, but also a revival in the Protestant reformation – cannot be seen as merely coincidental. A view of history that views events as linear, even if they might in some way be circular, naturally lends itself to a reading of history as one of constant allusions towards this inevitable end. Yet as the Protestant reformation raged and the tenets of *sola fide, sola scriptura* began to take hold, the classic fourfold exegesis began to fall out of favour. As Rivers notes, 'For Luther, since the Old Testament is a book about Christ, *the typological is the literal meaning*' [my emphasis].<sup>30</sup> To the Protestants, 'the Bible is ... only the record of God's acts in the past and the promise of his acts in the future,' i.e. both history and prediction rolled into one Truth.<sup>31</sup>

Rivers claims that the humanism of the Renaissance heralded the end of the Christian views of history as linear and the beginning of a 'return' to a more classical, recursive view of history, especially with regards to national and military histories.<sup>32</sup> However, while humanists eschewed the beginning-to-end narrative of the Bible, the linear nature of history itself never came into doubt. Instead of a line pointing towards Rapture, humanists marked the beginning of a view of history as one of a line pointing vaguely upwards: as time moved forward, so did we make *progress*. This idea of progress is nowadays so commonplace that most rarely question it – whether or not people actually see things as getting better, the idea that things should be getting better has become universal. In essence, humanists took the classical recursive view of history and instead pasted it *atop* a linear, now progressive view of history, the result of which is our modern conception of history.

This conception of progress, therefore, maintains the idea of history as existing upon a line. Far from freeing history from the shackles of linearity, modernity has simply allowed cyclical, messy narratives to be slotted within a singular, ever-expanding yet predetermined history; bound by the same force, critics play out hermeneutics within the pages of our novels and histories – the prolepses, or prophecies, of today.

### *On Naming and Prophecy*

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25 Ibid., p. 140.

26 Ibid., p. 141.

27 Ibid., p. 55.

28 Ibid., p. 56.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 142.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 57.

It is in the chapter ‘*Moby-Dick* and the Vietnam War’ that Spanos fully articulates his ‘proleptic’ view of *Moby-Dick*, and to this end critically examines passages from the novel.<sup>33</sup> One of passages that he notes as ‘speak[ing] resonantly across the great divide of time’<sup>34</sup> is the following:

Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*.<sup>35</sup>

Spanos convincingly links this excerpt to the concept of naming rendering something assailable – He cites a different passage in ‘The Whiteness of the Whale’:

Here was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me.<sup>36</sup>

It is precisely the monomania with which Ahab seeks to *name* and *assail* this ineffable (incomprehensible, incorporeal, ungraspable) whiteness of the whale – a practice he terms a ‘*self-destructive compulsion*’, one that America succumbed to in Vietnam – that causes Spanos to once more reach for the words ‘proleptic anticipation’.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned earlier, Spanos reads atop this passage ‘not, to extend a resonant motif in Michel Foucault, simply a genealogy, a “history of [Melville’s] present”: [*Moby-Dick*] is also a history of the American future’.<sup>38</sup> What rings true about Spanos’ critique, of course, is the manner in which namable entails graspable, *assailable* – yet is it right for, when a novel touches upon a perhaps underdiscussed truth, to immediately grasp for the language of prophecy?

What *Moby-Dick* does so brilliantly is sketch in hazy contours that ineffable, indescribable America – the whiteness of a whale that cannot be fathomed. It is that very sketch, however, that in some way names and therefore renders the very concept of America assailable by the forces of critique. Recalling Buell’s book on the Great American Novel, Spanos eventually makes the same argument in regard to *Moby-Dick* as many others do, and although they argue towards different ends, they inevitably grasp towards the same means. It’s true that *Moby-Dick* contains themes of environmentalism and the dangers of capitalism – just as it is true that *Moby-Dick* portrays the eventual self-destruction of an ‘errand’ founded upon principles of Adamic America. What isn’t true, of course, is that these themes or sketches *themselves* form a complete whole, form something that can be assailed, as Buell and Spanos seek to do alike.

That which lies behind the language of prophecy in critique, then, is that common material that binds the readings of *Moby-Dick* as Great American Novel, or proleptic anticipation of Vietnam, or, indeed, the Bible as a promise of God’s future acts. Within the work lies something that resonates: perhaps an adage, an attitude, an insight – which then is seen as not just speaking across time, but

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33 Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, pp. 166–179.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 277.

35 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1988), p. 184.

36 Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, p. 185.

37 Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, p. 270.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 278.

ahead of it: pre-empting that which is to come. The assumption that this belies is the idea that history can be preempted: that history is a line, and therefore that moments, ideas, countries, concepts can be seen as dots along that line. This, in turn, demands a type of critique that not only analyses and engages but seeks to capture, note, name, *assail*. It is this capturing that is the vehicle that transforms resonance to prophecy by way of naming, assailing and reducing. All these elements are inextricably linked: a linear view of history demands a view of events as reducible and therefore capturable; a view of events as capturable naturally lends itself to placing them into a line. It is not the novels that predict, but the critics – it is the critics that, by virtue of their own gazes, capture, assail, reduce, in service of history; in service of prophecy.

### ***Conclusion***

Embedded within these notions of prophecy is a view of history that fundamentally demands nations, ideas, concepts to be reduced to dots in service of being placed upon a line; whether this line heads towards rapture, up to Progress or down to destruction matters not. What *Moby-Dick* does is sketch, however faintly, the contours of a nation that cannot be grasped; what a linear view of history invites, however, is a type of critique that names, captures and files away. This impulse – or rather necessity – can be seen in all types of critique, from Biblical hermeneutics to modern-day Great American Novel discourse. It is no wonder, then, that secular critics recognize the substance of their critique – filing and situating upon a line – by repeatedly naming resonance prophecy.

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*‘That being said, what sets visual novels apart from traditional novels is how they play on the senses to have readers enter the immersion process.’*



# Immersion in Visual Novels

Stijn Bekker



Stijn Bekker is a student at the MA Book and Digital Media Studies, which followed a BA International Studies where he specialised in East Asia. He spends part of his free time as a freelance English-to-Dutch translator of video games.

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**R**EADING BOOKS IS one of those experiences that can be truly magical. One moment, readers might be at home in a small apartment; the next, they are on a grand fantastical adventure. And of course, this captive experience is not beholden to paper codices, but is elicited by other members of the book family as well. Audiobooks are well-known, but there is a relative that is often overlooked, one with a distinct way of accomplishing immersion – visual novels.

Simply put, visual novels are pieces of software that contain a digital picture book with sound elements (e.g. music or voice acting), on occasion making a choice to steer the direction of the story along the way. It is understandable that some would have doubts about how much visual novels resemble books, and so this article will first defend them as at least being a part of the book ecosystem. It will then explain how visual novels immerse readers in their narratives.

## *Visual Novels as Books*

Visual novels project text on a screen while music plays on the background and the reader is shown images of the characters and location, with clicking the mouse or pressing a button on keyboard or controller advancing the text. While they may be overlooked in discussions about modern reading due to their origin in the world of video games rather than traditional paper books, visual novels undoubtedly offer a distinctive reading experience that deserves recognition.

The introduction already gave a few base elements, but for a more complete image some details need to be added. To begin with the visual properties, backgrounds are not necessarily static, and neither are the images of characters (also called sprites). Both can change according to what is

required for a scene. A character gets mad? The sprite changes from base sprite to angry sprite. The sun is setting? Transition of a bright park during the day to a park under the red glow of evening. It begins to rain? Raindrops fall from the top to the bottom of the screen. However, do keep in mind that these are just examples and that every creator has their own way of dealing with the challenge of representing the various dynamics of scenes. Not all visual novels will have the luxury of a wide variety of different sprites or animated weather effects. For instance, *The Light at the End of the Ocean* (the visual novel from figure 1), has a limited number of sprites and has a less dynamic presentation than a title like *Crystalline*, which uses Live2D. This, Live2D, is a technology to display characters with 3D models instead of 2D drawings. Although this is designed to lend them an extra sense of liveliness that is hard to capture in stills (see figure 2 for an attempted showcase nonetheless), Live2D also takes a lot of money and skills on part of the creator or creative team, and is consequently far from standard.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from *The Light at the End of the Ocean*.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Jane Titor, *The Light at the End of the Ocean* (2020), Windows, macOS, Linux.



Fig. 2. Screenshot from Crystalline.<sup>2</sup>

The music can be timed on certain moments, making it a valuable part in the creative toolkit to give visual novels a certain emotional charge. Soundtracks are not as specific as in movies since different readers have different speeds at which they read and therefore how quickly they click through a visual novel's text. Nevertheless, due to the programming process, a visual novel's soundtrack has a stronger particularity or precision than a reader playing music of their own choice whilst reading a book. Moreover, the function of sound is not always restricted to music. Depending on creative insight and (budgetary) resources, visual novels can also have sound effects to give the rain extra impact or even voice actors reading the writing dialogue. Finally, in a similar way to audiobooks, adding voice acting to visual novels is supposed to give readers a better feeling for the characters' emotions. However, as opposed to the standard audio book, every character has their own voice actor. This means that readers get an even better idea of the characters' literal voices and how they speak.

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<sup>2</sup> PixelFade, Crystalline (2018), Windows, macOS.



Fig. 3. screenshot from Aquadine.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, text is the primary way for storytelling in visual novels. It is presented through a textbox, which often appears at the bottom of the screen, where readers read dialogue, inner thoughts, and descriptions of any kind. The level of details with which descriptions or thoughts are relayed to readers depends on the visual novel: there are as many writing styles as there are writers. Additionally, it is possible that writers choose to lean on the audiovisual properties of visual novels to carry the plot in a certain way, and, for example, have background images do a part of describing their environments. After all, a picture can be worth more than a thousand words. On the other hand, the majority of the storytelling will always occur through written text. Firstly, budgets are finite, and with that the opportunities of writers to collaborate with their co-developers. Not every little detail of a mess hall can be visualised, and since the vast majority of visual novels are two-dimensional there is no space through which to let 3D character models move. In other words, written text will always be needed for complete visual novel stories. Secondly, even voice acting cannot do more for readers than dialogue: everything that is not said out loud by characters will have to be read by readers themselves. Moreover, this only even applies to those visual novels where every line of dialogue is covered by a voice actor. This not always being the case is shown by Aquadine, in which only loose words and noises receive the voice treatment. For example, when the reader moves to the screen captured in figure 3, a voice clip from the male character saying 'Hmm...' plays. Finally there is the way some visual novels have readers make choices. Visual novels without any reader influence are called 'kinetic visual novels', but non-kinetic visual novels allow readers to exert influence on the direction of the story (see figure 4). These choices are presented through text in the middle of the screen, and are either actions or dialogue options. Of course, visual novels are pre-written therefore their choices do not give readers true freedom; readers are not released in a sandbox to do and say whatever they want. What non-kinetic visual novels are

<sup>3</sup> SoftColors, Aquadine (2021), Windows, macOS, Linux.

doing, is give readers the illusion that they can direct the story, no matter how lightly that may be in practice.



Fig. 4. screenshot from *The Light at the End of the Ocean*.<sup>4</sup>

But are visual novels books? A good starting point to answer this question is an article by Kovač and his colleagues. According to them, the hierarchy of the books consists of multiple layers, but with the core being the printed book. This printed book has a certain length, places emphasis on text, follows the boundaries of the paper codex, has a certain information architecture (like page numbers), and facilitates deep reading.<sup>5</sup> The more a sub-medium deviates from this core, the lower they are in the book hierarchy. Visual novels do not have the information architecture of print books, but as far as the rest is concerned are akin to eBooks. To begin with, the length of visual novels can be as long and short as that of eBooks since like eBooks, it is dependent on the writer's or writers' creativity. There are also no reasons to assume that readers are less critical about visual novels than eBooks, meaning that the level of reading and reflection can as of yet theoretically speaking be equally deep. And while it is possible that the communicative possibilities of devices carrying visual novels (desktop computers, laptops, smartphones, and videogame consoles) and the multimodality of the visual novel experience distract readers, the reading of visual novels demands constant attention. As opposed to videogames that are playable as little more than background noise, think of someone playing *Candy Crush Saga* while they are enjoying a lunch break and talking with a friend at the same time, it is impossible to read visual novels without complete attention. Why? Because visual novels place heavy emphasis on written text.

The heavy emphasis on written text was already apparent from any visual novel interactivity always stemming from text, as well as the role of text in telling the story. Images can take over part

<sup>4</sup> Jane Titor, *The Light at the End of the Ocean*.

<sup>5</sup> Miha Kovač et al., 'What is a Book?', *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 35 (2019), pp. 313–326 (pp. 324–325).

of the written text's duties in setting the scene and voiced dialogue could make written dialogue superfluous, but there is always more than can be visualised or dubbed by actors. Written text is and will remain a necessity for visual novels. Take the written text out of visual novels and little would be left, while creators could remove everything else and readers would still be left with a product they could reasonably enjoy the majority of on its own. Granted, the reading experience would be different since in such a hypothetical case readers would no longer be reading a visual novel, but it does show what the visual novel core is. Written text alone does not make a visual novel, but it is absolutely essential nonetheless. The fact that additional budget is required in order to compensate for the (intentional) lack of written text exposes that seeing and hearing information is a nice bonus, a bonus that means a visual novel is a visual novel instead of pure digital text, provides further credence to that argument. That being said, what sets visual novels apart from traditional novels is how they play on the senses to have readers enter the immersion process.

### *Immersion*

Oxford defines immersion both as being absorbed in something *and* 'the action of ... plunging into water',<sup>6</sup> and as identified by Mauger, 'deep immersion' happens when a player is so immersed they stop actively registering interface-based interaction.<sup>7</sup> In book terms the latter would mean not being actively aware of turning a page, while for visual novels it means not registering keystrokes, button presses, or mouse clicks. To accomplish any level of immersion for visual novels, two things are needed: sound and visuals, and characters and story. A third point, interactivity, is the basis for an optional extra immersive layer.

### *Sensory Immersion*

The first component, sensory immersion, encompasses sounds and visuals, as classified by Ermi and Mäyrä and consists of soundtrack, sound effects, voice acting, and images.<sup>8</sup> As opposed to visuals, Engman, Langkoski, and Collins concur, sound fills the room and through this continuity between the space on-screen and the room in real life it blurs the line between the spaces and establishes a sense of presence and place.<sup>9, 10</sup> Following the line of Collins arguing that we feel what we hear<sup>11</sup> and Klimmt and others demonstrating in their 2019 study that music is an audio element with strong influence on a player's emotions,<sup>12</sup> it is safe to say the soundtrack is a vital tool for immersion. When Cadet and Chainay performed a quantitative study on the link between emotion and sense of presence for people using head-mounted displays (HMDs), they concluded in part that the more emotional an experience,

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6 Oxford English Dictionary, 'Immersion, noun', <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91885>> (14 October, 2022).

7 Vincent Mauger, 'Interface', in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 29–38 (p. 37).

8 Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, 'Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion', in *Proceedings of the 2005 DiGRA International Conference* (Vancouver: Digital Games Research Association, 2005), pp. 1–15 (p. 7).

9 Inger Ekman and Peter Langkoski, 'Hair-Raising Entertainment: Emotions, Sound, and Structure in Silent Hill 2 and Fatal Frame', in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. by Bernard Perron (Jefferson/London: McFarland & Company, 2009), pp. 181–199 (pp. 187–188).

10 Karen Collins, 'Being in the Game', in *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), pp. 39–58 (p. 45).

11 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

12 Christoph Klimmt et al., 'Effects of Soundtrack Music on the Video Game Experience', *Media Psychology*, 22 (2019), pp. 689–713 (p. 705).

the stronger a sense of presence becomes, but also that this link that ‘might be more crucial with a weakly immersive device’.<sup>13</sup> In other words, emotion’s role, and by extension the role of soundtracks, in engendering immersion is vital for visual novels too, even if they are typically played on non-HMDs.

At the same time, Jørgensen contends, sound effects contribute to immersion ‘by creating an illusion of the game world as an actual space’.<sup>14</sup> For instance, when in a kitchen, hearing a knife hitting a cutting board will make a player more readily accept that they are, in fact, in an environment in which food is currently being prepared. Were that sound not there, the space would feel empty and thus, knowing that the kitchen is supposed to be in use, immersion would be weaker.

Completing the soundscape is voice acting. Most people have voices, meaning that the lack of spoken words in games in which conversations clearly happen lead to a potentially less immersive experience. In contrast, voice acting, by infusing otherwise plain lines with emotional context and backstory, draws readers in by connecting sensory and imaginative immersion (which will be detailed later), as Ward explains in his interview with Ridgway, *BioShock*’s audio lead.<sup>15</sup> Ward does not show how that connection works, but Collins offers a solid hypothesis when discussing the function of sound in games and mirror-neuronal responses: ‘when we hear a sound, our brain responds as if we are ... experiencing the action that is creating the sound’.<sup>16</sup> This mirror-neuronal principle can make up for poor facial data too, a classic weak spot of games according to Ward,<sup>17</sup> making voice acting an optional, yet important tool for visual novels, given that there are usually only a few character portraits conveying characters’ emotions.

As is to be expected, visuals are important for visual novels too. The literature is certain on visuals in games with first-person and third-person perspectives on fully explorable 3D environments,<sup>18</sup> with Collins once again drawing on mirror-neuron principles to explain that ‘we interpret [third-person] actions to our own first-person terms’,<sup>19</sup> but the influence of showing flat character designs and snapshots of 2D environments as backgrounds is unresearched. However, knowing what characters and rooms look like should contribute to sensory immersion due to removing player need to lean on visual imagination and giving them a defined digital reality. In particular, unique artwork in the form of CGs (computer graphics, detailed artwork displayed instead of the usual background and sprites) pull players into events by offering them highly detailed views on situations from new angles.

## *Imaginative Immersion*

The second component, characters and story, is called imaginative immersion by Ermi and Mäyrä<sup>20</sup> and following Haggis-Burridge’s own classification can be subdivided in spatial immersion (a connection with a place), empathic immersion (a connection with the characters), and narrative immersion (‘What happens next?’).<sup>21</sup> There is no immersion if there is no world to be immersed in,

13 Lénaïc B. Cadet and Hanna Chainay, ‘Memory of Virtual Experiences: Role of Immersion, Emotion and Sense of Presence’, *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 144 (2020), pp. 1–13 (p. 11).

14 Kristine Jørgensen, ‘On the Functional Aspects of Computer Game Audio’, in *Proceedings of the Audio Mostly Conference 2006* (St. Pölten: Audio Mostly, 2006), pp. 1–5 (p. 3).

15 Mark Ward, ‘Voice, Videogames, and the Technologies of Immersion’, in *VOICE: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, ed. by Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leeuwen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 267–279 (pp. 271–272).

16 Collins, ‘Being in the Game’, pp. 39–40.

17 Ward, ‘Voice, Videogames’, p. 272.

18 Allison McMahan, ‘Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games’, in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 67–86 (p. 71).

19 Collins, ‘Being in the Game’, p. 53.

20 Ermi and Mäyrä, ‘Fundamental Components’, p. 8.

21 Mata Haggis-Burridge, ‘Four Categories for Meaningful Discussion of Immersion in Video Games’, *ResearchGate* (2020), pp. 1–15 (p. 12).

characters are the vehicles through which a player can imagine themselves into a new place,<sup>22</sup> and wanting to know what happens next provides a powerful motivator to keep reading. Narrative immerses players and partially satisfies their needs, Borman and Greitemeyer discovered,<sup>23</sup> thereby, to use Gerrig's metaphor, transporting players to another world.<sup>24</sup> Therrien claims that realistic plot and characters continue the illusion of immersion,<sup>25</sup> but a well-written plot should be able to immerse a player in any world anyway, regardless of realism. Crucially, these principles apply even to non-role-playing games<sup>26</sup> and games with choice rewind mechanics.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly enough, and perhaps counterintuitively, Tu, Tunggal, and Brown conclude that character-based games may be more imaginatively immersive than games in which players control a virtual representation of themselves, since 'the player may be more likely to immerse herself into the character and subsequently role-play as that character'.<sup>28</sup> They specify that character-based games give players context to latch onto,<sup>29</sup> which could be a well-defined place in the world and an emotional or character arc. In avatar-based games however, the player character cannot be as intertwined with the story and world, and neither is it easy for them to grow and feel. After all, designers have to make these games in such a way that everyone can imagine themselves as the avatar and considering that every player is different, it is near impossible to take all those possibilities into account.

### *Challenge-based immersion or interactivity*

The third component, interactivity, is also known as challenge-based immersion in Ermi and Mäyrä's classification<sup>30</sup> or systems immersion in Haggis-Burridge's,<sup>31</sup> and out of all components is the most directly associated with games. Despite this, it does not equal gameplay: whereas gameplay is defined by Landay as connecting 'the system, the medium, [and] the user' through 'immersion and agency' (i.e. what a player does),<sup>32</sup> interactivity is the base-level concept of being able to be played with. And players can play using any number of skills, ranging from 'motor skills [to] mental skills'.<sup>33</sup> In other words, interactivity is not necessarily a physical matter (e.g. a fighting game requiring precise controller inputs), but can refer to 'decision-making',<sup>34</sup> like making dialogue choices, and mystery solving as well. Making choices is, as said before, not an inherent part of visual novels. Even the kinetic ones are still visual novels and can be just as immersive as visual novels with choices if done well. However, the argument here is that in choice-based visual novels, it is an element of their

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22 Ermi and Mäyrä, 'Fundamental Components', p. 8.

23 Daniel Borman and Tobias Greitemeyer, 'Immersed in Virtual Worlds and Minds: Effects of In-Game Storytelling on Immersion, Need Satisfaction, and Affective Theory of Mind', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6 (2015), pp. 646–652 (p. 650).

24 Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), cited in Marie-Laure Ryan, 'The Text as World: Theories of Immersion', in *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 94–95.

25 Carl Therrien, 'Immersion', in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 444–452 (p. 454).

26 Ermi and Mäyrä, 'Fundamental Components', p. 8.

27 Erica Kleinman, Karina Caro, and Jichen Zhu, 'From Immersion to Metagaming: Understanding Rewind Mechanics in Interactive Storytelling', *Entertainment Computing*, 33 (2020), pp. 1–17 (p. 2).

28 Carmen Tu, Jesaya Tunggal, and Steven Brown, 'Character Immersion in Video Games as a Form of Acting', *Psychology of Popular Media*, 12 (2022), pp. 405–413 (p. 411).

29 *Ibid.*

30 Ermi and Mäyrä, 'Fundamental Components', p. 8.

31 Haggis-Burridge, 'Four Categories', p. 2.

32 Lori Landay, 'Interactivity', in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 173–184 (p. 174).

33 Ermi and Mäyrä, 'Fundamental Components', p. 8.

34 Haggis-Burridge, 'Four Categories', p. 4.

immersivity. Although interactivity may lead some to see these visual novels as videogames, it needs to be considered that even the choose-your-own-adventure books had limited interactivity; this kind of interactivity is not inherently incompatible with books and can be an excellent challenge-based way to involve readers in a story by making them feel like they are a part of it. Moreover, the reading needed for reading in general is a skill<sup>35</sup> and therefore challenging all the same, choices or not. In his examination of challenging activities, Csikszentmihaly argues that reading involves ‘literacy, ... the ability to translate words into images, to empathise with fictional characters, to recognise historical and cultural contexts, to anticipate turns of the plot, criticise and evaluate the author’s style, and so on’.<sup>36</sup> The more evocative and engaging a visual novel’s writing, the more immersive it is. Visual novels are obviously not the only immersive written stories, but reading is the primary way through which readers engage with the visual novel sub-medium, and without it there would be significantly less immersion.

## Conclusion

Visual novels are part of the book hierarchy. The term ‘novel’ is integral to their classification, and written text serves as the primary mode of engagement for readers; if the written text would be removed from a visual novel there would be little left, whereas if all the other elements would be removed readers would still get most of it. Written text alone does not make a visual novel, but it is vital.

Immersion is a state in which all the components discussed above are interconnected and cooperate to immerse a reader in visual novels. To use party games as a contrasting example, those are focussed on facilitating playing with other people. Once playing *Werewolf*, someone may be *engrossed* in the game they are playing with their friends, but replacing the werewolves with something else would not make a significant difference; they are not *immersed* since there is no deeper layer to delve into. There are no characters to fall in love with, no lore to discover, no music to transport you to a different place and time. Instead, there is only the surface level layer of the game’s mechanics or rules. Not all components are an inherent part of visual novels, or contribute to immersion in a particular visual novel in their entirety, but all contribute to the magic of visual novels at large.

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<sup>35</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2008), p. 49.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

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*‘I have always been a booklover. And certainly, the Lord of the Rings films are nicely done, but cinema is just not my thing. My office/study is filled with books from ceiling to floor, from left to right from top to bottom. A journalist once asked me: “You must be very happy now that there will finally be a good Lord of the Rings movie.” I said: “No, there’s nothing better than the book.” He didn’t get it.’*



# Somehow It's *This Book*: a Chat With the Owner of the Tolkien Store in Leiden

Fenna Singraven & Stijn Bekker

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René van Rossenberg is a Tolkien connoisseur and collector, the owner of the Tolkien Bookstore in Leiden and general book enthusiast.

**You used to get people who'd only buy books 2 and 3 after watching the first movie since they'd already gotten that part of the story. Has the audience learned to love the books more?**

'Since the start of the Peter Jackson trilogy I get two types of customers: I get the movie fans, I get the book fans. There is some overlap, but not much. I have a few diehard book collectors I've been serving for 30 years with good editions who refused to watch the movies. That's the same argument that Christopher Tolkien had: it's the conflict with one's own imagination. A movie is something different than a book and you've got to let that go. I once read someone on the internet who said: "They have to adapt it exactly like how it is in the book." But then you'll get a 24-hour movie. And that is so boring since Tolkien was a very good writer. He easily spent 3 pages on them walking through a forest with nary a bloody thing happening, but you see every tree and hear every bird. That's not doable for movies, that's way too boring.'

**Not all adaptations have been received equally well, so there's something about the books that's hard to capture. What is that je ne sais quoi?**

'LOTR is so popular with so many people. The book's become personal for me too. It is your story, and someone else comes along and does something with it. That's why some people didn't want to see it at all. People take it personally when something's not right. Tolkien is dead, so some fans see themselves as the guardians of the canon.'

**A lot of people have a lot of strong opinions about Tolkien's books. As you said, it really is their book. They're being pulled by something, and Tolkien is rather unique in that aspect. There aren't many authors with a similar such stature.**

'What makes the fantasy genre fantasy? That you get a completely made-up world where magic works whilst feeling very realistic; it could happen. That's how magic becomes acceptable, that elves exist, etc. And when you then read the timeline, you discover that Middle-Earth

has known hundreds, thousands of years of history. There is an entire historical background contained in a book called the *Silmarillion* that describes it all.

He is also just a very good writer. 1400 pages pass by in a flash. Or rather, I'm not a fast reader, so it took me a month. At some point it got so bad that when I approached the end of the book, I even started to read slower because I didn't want it to end. If at breakfast I read that Gandalf fell to his death at the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, that day I could not concentrate at school at all. Like: "Gandalf cannot be dead, right? That's impossible. How will they go on now, oh that poor Frodo! Gandalf, there's no way!" And then running back home to continue reading... Of course, that annoying Tolkien takes multiple chapters before he tells us what happened with Gandalf! And when he returns: relief! "Aaah, Gandalf is back."

**Before Tolkien, fantasy was fairy tales or rewritten myths. He was the first who codified the fantasy genre as we know it today, right?**

'He was the first, yes. People before him took existing mythologies and retold them. They were a tad difficult and not really accessible. Often philosophical too, carrying an intentional meaning like mythology does too. They weren't adventures, let me put it that way. The entire fantasy genre didn't exist yet. I once held a lecture about how Tolkien's Dutch publisher had to market him. It was tremendously difficult since, yeah, in which category do you put it? Now it'd be fantasy, sure. But they made a big point of Tolkien being an Oxford professor, meaning it was an important book that you had to read! I think in the end they called it a modern mythology.'

**Then, is it fair to say that LOTR was meant as a kind of English mythology? Tolkien is known to have missed that.**

'Yes. Since the Arthurian legends were French, and as a real Englishman that was unacceptable! He had a large distaste for French cuisine.'

**LOTR was based on the *Silmarillion* mythology, and telling stories like that is something very human. Is there something universally human about Tolkien's stories?**

'It is remarkable to me that Tolkien is very popular in Japan. For example, there is a Japanese Tolkien Society. So, if his work is so specifically Western, how about the Japanese? On a very basic level it's about stories of friendship, self-sacrifice, and doing good. That counts for everybody, no matter who they are. It is simply a thrilling story, and it does not matter one iota where you come from. It remains a thrilling story and you can feel it.'

**Is telling stories something human?**

'The Neanderthals already told each other stories around their campfires. The essence of mythology – and religion too – is to explain the unexplainable.'

**To what degree is a passionate fandom like a religion? If there are similarities, what is then-**

'In principle, LOTR doesn't explain anything: explaining the unexplainable is not a part of it, so it does not have that religious element. The fact that some people, like those guarding the canon, are so driven does have something religious to it. You could compare that passion for a book to the passion or faith of a devout believer.'

**But Tolkien said that 'it's just as a story'. He wrote LOTR without explicitly meaning something. Is there perhaps a reason people can dive so deeply into the story? There is no discomfort, for instance? People do take lessons from it; it is literature after all.**

'When he says "it's just as a story", I believe the man. He just wanted to tell a daring tale. That he involved all that mythology and those languages, both of which he'd already come up with, gave depth and character to the work. He was a philologist too: the languages predated the stories. He wanted to have a world where "Elen síla lúmen" omentielvo" was a normal

greeting, and so he started writing those stories. Those things were very important to him.'

**And in turn, books like Tolkien's are an important part of your life. What is the 'magic of the book' to you?**

'You read at your own pace, you paint your own mental image, it is not prescribed. Even a radio play has actor accents, but for books you must work. Not only turning those pages, but to really sit down for it with a cup of tea and spending those hours. Meanwhile, a movie is over after two, two and a half hours. And what movies can't do either: a book gives you time to process events. You can put the book away and think about how it could continue. And if it's a bad book you can, as I say, "read it with two fingers" and skim through it. I already know after one page if someone can write or not.

You bring your own perception to bear when you read those books, because you use your creativity to interpret the author's words. Of course, they send you in a certain direction, but you've got to interpret it yourself. That's why people can't agree with each other when discussing a particular book. They think it's the same book, but no! Your perception is different and that explains a lot. And that's the beauty of it.'

**But in the midst of everything else you read, Tolkien appears to be like a beacon guiding you and your interests. How so?**

'Maybe because I was twelve and this was my first love. As a boy I already read my dad's war novels about Stalingrad and Leningrad (which comprised the vast majority of his library), and I can't remember much from these. Afterwards, I must've read thousands of books over the course of my life, most of which I can only vaguely recall either. You can reread a book and think like: "Oh yeah, have I ever read this before?" But I don't have that with LOTR! For years I never revisited it. I read it in Dutch when I was twelve and reread it for the first time at age 16 for my secondary school English class. It was useless. All scenes were still in my head, nothing had changed, and I've never had that with any other book. Neither before nor since. For some scenes I can still remember where I was when I read them. Somehow that etched its way into my mind, but it's probably a coincidence. If I would've found another well-written book it would've been that one.'

**But it was this book.**

'I hear this kind of thing when I go to the English Tolkien Society too. Many people have a similar experience. One way or another it is this book that resonated so much and stuck. But it could've been a different book, just like there are also Dickens societies.'



*Clockwise from top left: à la façon de Venise wine glassware; a bowl of dried fruit and nuts with a beschuit on top; chestnuts; quince paste; a bowl of red and white letter cookies mixed with other sweet bakes (possibly Portuguese spice cookies); oysters; and, in the center, a bowl of mixed comfits and sweets.*

# Letter cookies

Regula Ysewijn

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Regula Ysewijn is an award-winning food writer, TV judge on the Flemish version of The Great British Bake Off, photographer, and culinary historian. With her books, based on years of research, she wants to dedust history and inspire a wide audience by showing that it is beautiful.

*This recipe and the image caption on the previous page were originally published in: Regula Ysewijn, Dark Rye and Honey Cake: Festival Baking from Belgium, the Heart of the Low Countries (Sydney: Murdoch Books, 2023), 272 pages. ISBN 9781922351814.*

**I**N SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY banqueting still-life paintings from the Low Countries, you often see beautifully formed letter cookies. They are usually depicted in a light and darker reddish color. Gold and silver leaf was often laid on these cookies for the artist to play with. The letters lie there, as part of an array of festive treats, fruits, and nuts, their gilding glistening and luring us into the painting. Peter Binoit (1590–1632) painted what is the most enticing heap of letters in his work Still life with letter pastry (c. 1615, held in the Groninger Museum) and, if you look closely, they spell his name. This shows that letter cookies were a playful thing, an icebreaker to aid the dinner conversation of the well-to-do. People could look for their initials, swap them with one another, and then dip them in sweet spiced wine.

The earliest recipe for these delicate letter cookies I have discovered in a manuscript from Antwerp dated to around 1580, but, as is common with recipes this old, it is not very detailed. While the letter-shaped cookies appear very often in Netherlandic still-life paintings of the seventeenth century, they do not appear as frequently in cookery books as in the eighteenth century, and they disappear altogether in the nineteenth century. They might have vanished from cookbooks but during Saint Nicholas children still receive letter cookies. They are of course no longer embellished with gold or silver and hold a more educational function, in addition to being a treat.

As you look closely at the letters in paintings like the one by Osias Beert on page 150, the letters are clearly shaped in a mold. While I was eager to use my antique wooden letter mold for the pictures in this book, I want you to know you can shape your cookies free-form or use cookie cutters too.

This recipe is adapted from an eighteenth-century conversational cookery book called *t'Zaamenspraak tusschen een mevrouw, banket-bakker en confiturier* [Conversation between a lady, confectioner, and jam maker]. It instructs to use water, but I have interpreted this as rosewater; the

seasoning is cloves, but cinnamon is used in other recipes and far more agreeable. In many paintings, the white letters appear to have a thin layer of sugar icing, but this wasn't confirmed in any historical recipe. It could have been the artists who took some license here.

***Makes several letters***

1 ¾ cups (225 g) confectioners' sugar  
4 oz (110 g) blanched almonds  
4 Tbsp (60 g) unsalted butter, melted and cooled  
1 medium egg  
1 tsp ground cloves or cinnamon  
1 ½ cups (175 g) all-purpose flour  
rice flour, for dusting

Start the evening before you want to bake. Put the sugar, blanched almonds, and rosewater in a food processor and pulse until the mixture is coarsely chopped. Add the butter, egg, and cloves or cinnamon and pulse until you get a paste. If the mixture does not become a paste, add a splash of water; the texture depends on how much moisture your almonds have.

Finally work in the flour, bit by bit, until fully incorporated. Then remove the dough from the food processor and knead until smooth. Put the dough in an airtight container and set aside to rest overnight.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Do not use the fan setting. Knead your dough to make it supple. Dust a work surface with rice flour and roll out the dough to ½-inch thickness. Cut out or shape letters and lay them on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper.

Bake for 5–7 minutes in the middle of the oven. These cookies should be only very lightly colored.

***To make red letters***

Divide the dough in two and color one half red with a natural food coloring or a historical one, such as red saunders (a type of sandalwood, which was dissolved in alcohol to yield a natural red-brown color) or cochineal, made from dried cochineal bugs (if you think that sounds gross, remember – it could be in your red lipstick).



***Image credits***

Beert, Osias, Dishes with Oysters, Fruit, and Wine, c. 1620/1625, oil on panel, 52.9 x 73.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Ysewijn, Regula, Picture of letter cookies, 2023, photograph, originally published in *Dark Rye and Honey Cake: Festival Baking from Belgium, the Heart of the Low Countries* (Sydney: Murdoch Books, 2023)



It contains the power  
to dive into dreams,  
into new conceptions  
and walk through realities.

The power to give  
life to the dead,  
to explore the past  
and the times ahead.

Here is to the book,  
to the friend and teacher,  
to the mirror of the self,  
to the parent and preacher.

Some see wisdom and knowledge,  
some take a deeper look  
and dare to even call it  
The Magic of the Book.



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For her wisdom and care which has guided the team through the magical journey of bringing this volume to life.







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