

**“A Blur of Potentialities”: The Figure of the Trickster in the Works of Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor, Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the figure of the trickster in the works of Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor, Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark. By looking at these writers' treatment of elusive, illusive and allusive characters, the thesis argues that they each incorporated what can be read as "trickster" figures in their fiction as a means of addressing anxieties about art, society and the self.

The trickster is a character-type found in narratives from a multitude of cultures and eras, and is typically characterised by his subversive presence, his boundary-crossing and his role as a healer of predicament. While the trickster is often perceived as a universal phenomenon arising from a collective unconscious, this thesis instead focusses on writers' intentional inclusion of trickster characters in literature as a way of thinking through specific problems. Bowen, it will be shown, interpolated tricky characters drawn from myth and fairy-tale into her fiction in order to expose a perceived rift between art and academia; Taylor used the trickster to think about the construction of identity in post-war Britain; Murdoch took models from Shakespeare to create tricksters that helped her explore the ethics of writing fiction; and Spark's tricksters allowed her to conceptualise truth and lies, and good and evil.

Concentrating on four mid-century writers whose works have been seen to vary in genre and style, this thesis demonstrates that a trickster paradigm emerged in mid-twentieth-century British fiction – a period not previously associated with the trickster. Influenced by converging strands of trickery and allusion in art through the early decades of the twentieth century, notable mid-century British writers used outsider characters to probe social and artistic shifts in a landscape fractured by war and to reach for a sense of healing. By identifying such characters as trickster figures, this thesis sheds new light on patterns of subversion, healing and character in mid-century fiction. It explores the particular affinity the trickster had with women's writing, and illustrates how the trickster was important to twentieth-century concerns surrounding metafiction and the role of the reader.



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## Introduction

Narratives across a multitude of cultures have made use of “tricksters”. Usually outsiders to their milieus, these paradoxical figures regularly observe or manipulate those around them, offer shrewd insight, undermine authority and act the fool; they may be comic or tragic, and include such characters as the god Loki from Norse mythology, the fox from European folklore, many of the fools, sprites, servants and schemers from the early modern stage, the hero of the picaresque novel and the youngest son of fairy-tales. Despite apparently disparate sources and personalities, all of these characters have been viewed as tricksters due to a shared trait of introducing a subversive energy into their various fictional worlds and therefore challenging existing systems. This thesis will explore the trickster in mid-twentieth-century fiction and the ways in which he was used as a means to contemplate and potentially resolve complex concerns about art, society and the self.

In studies of anthropology, the trickster has been seen as a universal figure who seems to transcend cultures (see, for example, the works of M. P. Carroll, Lewis Hyde and Paul Radin); meanwhile, literary criticism has preferred to consider trickster characters as responses to historically or culturally specific needs (see, for instance, the works of William Dynes, Richard Hillman and Phillip Mallett) – as figures suggestive of potential change. At first glance, the trickster may appear distanced from modern society, a “culture hero” engrained in ancient myth (Boas 4), or a stock character employed by Renaissance playwrights. Indeed, Lewis Hyde has argued the notion of a modern trickster to be problematic due to the lack of necessary “sacred context” in the contemporary world (13), and Robert Storey has similarly suggested crafty servants in modern literature to be merely “reduced” versions of the tricky figures found on the classical and early modern stages (*Mimesis* 170).

Since the later decades of the twentieth century, however, criticism has begun to recognise the importance of tricksters in contemporary narratives: Rossitsa Artemis, for instance, has explored the trickster in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, and John Becker has discussed tricksterism in Franz Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist”. Paul Sheehan has proposed that Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* reimagines the traditional folk trickster, Melita Schaum has illustrated Flannery O’Connor to

have used devilish tricksters in her short fiction to explore the nature of evil, and Natalie Kononenko and Svitlana Kukharenko have heralded the protagonist of Larry Charles's 2006 film *Borat* as a trickster with roots in mythology. And yet, these studies are generally rather diverse, relating to individual works without probing possibilities of a broader artistic movement towards conceiving such figures. In contrast, the limited number of critics who have considered tricksters within a particular body of modern narrative have tended to emphasise the trickster's cultural ubiquity (see, for example, Mark Lipovetsky, Helena Bassil-Morozow and Lori Landay),<sup>1</sup> rather than questioning how writers might have deliberately drawn upon tricksters of past literature to address both social and personal concerns. In particular, the trickster has not been explored as a paradigm in British literature of the mid-twentieth century, despite the plethora of destabilising characters appearing in fiction during this time. The elusive, illusive and allusive character-type, with his suggestion of magic,<sup>2</sup> may even initially seem antithetical to the work of mid-century British writers, which often focusses on the everyday and on realism.

This thesis will argue that there was a significant rebirthing of the trickster in mid-twentieth-century British narratives, which served to complement subversive shifts in literary style in the period before, during and after the Second World War. Rather than contemplating the trickster as an archetype of the collective unconscious, as influentially suggested by the works of Jung, or as merely a literary trope used to help propel narrative, I shall be thinking of him as having provided a means for writers to address particular problems. The thesis will explore the ways in which Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor, Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark used trickster characters in their works to think through both shared and independent concerns, and will demonstrate how, by employing the trickster in this way, they were drawing upon his established role as a vessel for creativity, contradiction and healing, which, as we shall see, can be observed throughout his rich literary lineage. Viewing these writers' strange, outsider

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<sup>1</sup> Lipovetsky has suggested the startling rise of the trickster figure in Soviet and post-Soviet literature and film to have offered a way to "overcome . . . chasms and contradictions" in Soviet culture (268). Bassil-Morozow's *The Trickster in Contemporary Film* discusses the trickster in Western film as reflective of social, economic, and psychological instability. Landay's *Madcaps, Screwballs and Con-Women*, meanwhile, views the development of female tricksters in American culture as crucial to feminist movements.

<sup>2</sup> My reason for using the masculine pronoun when talking about the trickster will be discussed later in this introduction.

characters as tricksters, rather than, for instance, a mixture of con-men or -women, daydreamers and manipulators, allows crucial intertextual comparisons and enables these characters' allusive traits and transformative functions to be fully realised. Moreover, it helps reframe the importance of character and the imbrications of subversion, paradox and metafiction in mid-century literature.

This introductory chapter is concerned with defining the trickster. It traces the tropes that have been critically identified as tricksters, in order to establish the figure's core functions and the sources that will later be shown to have influenced Bowen's, Taylor's, Murdoch's and Spark's creation of such characters. I have chosen here to include specific characters from traditional narratives in order to demonstrate what is meant by the "trickster"; many of these characters, later chapters will show, were deliberately drawn upon by this thesis's four central writers. This introduction will begin with the trickster in myth, folk- and fairy-tale,<sup>3</sup> before progressing to the various later tricksters of plays and prose. Finally, it will delineate the methodology of this thesis, clarifying my choice of writers and texts, addressing the controversy surrounding "type" in literary criticism and presenting an overview of the subsequent chapters and the theories that will inform them.

### **The Trickster in Myth, Folk-Tales and Fairy-Tales**

There has been some dispute over the origin of the word "trickster" being used to think about an archetype. Landay tells us that "The term 'trickster' originates in Daniel Brinton's 1868 study of the contradictory figure of North American tales who is both fooler and fooled, heroic and base" (2). David Williams similarly attributes the coinage of this word to Brinton's 1868 *The Myths of the New World* (7), as does Robert Pelton (6), who adds that "by the end of the nineteenth century, the term had become standard" (7). And yet, Hyde, in his seminal work

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<sup>3</sup> Critics including Stith Thompson (9) and Yves Bonnefoy (249) have noted the difficulty of differentiating between myth, folk-tales and fairy-tales: all have an oral tradition and may deal with magical happenings. Within this thesis, I will be considering "myth" as a narrative that, as S. Thompson suggests, takes place in "a world supposed to have preceded the present order. . . . [Which] tells of sacred beings and of semi-divine heroes and of the origins of all things" (9), and which, as Maria Nikolajeva stipulates, was once believed to be true ("Fantasy Literature" 183). Meanwhile, the term "folk-tales" will mainly be used to discuss tales that are more "concerned with the fate of individuals" than "the collective fate of the universe" (Bonnefoy 249), and which may often have a moral message. "Fairy-tales" I am considering as types of folk-tale, which have been popularly transcribed as creative narratives and thus given more of a prose style than other folk-tales. However, these definitions are not prescriptive, and there may be overlap between each of the three categories, all of which I will be placing under the broader term of "folklore".

on mythological tricksters, has contested Brinton's "commonly [being] given credit" for the term, professing to have been unable to find it in Brinton's book (355n7n) – which, upon my investigation, does appear to be devoid of the word "trickster". Hyde instead suggests Franz Boas to have been the first to use the term in an anthropological context in 1898,<sup>4</sup> thus apparently contradicting Pelton's assertion that, by this point, it was commonly used in scholarship. Hyde's theory seems the most plausible, as there do not appear to be any instances of the word in anthropology studies prior to Boas; nevertheless, the unclear origin of the term is perhaps pertinent considering the trickster's own ambiguity.

Lipovetsky has claimed that the trickster "field of research emerged only in the nineteenth century and developed exponentially in the post-war period" (27); and, certainly, despite its abstruse source, scholars of anthropology from the twentieth century onwards have analysed the trickster as an archetype in ancient tales around the world, from Amerindian oral tales to Greek mythology.<sup>5</sup> In some of these narratives, the trickster role is performed by "an old man or old chief, as among the Winnebago [tribe of Nebraska]" (R. Fox 298), but most often the trickster is an animal, as seen in Coyote of Hopi tales, Br'er Rabbit from African and Cherokee stories, the spider Anansi in Ashanti and Caribbean folklore, Sister Fox in Ukrainian tales and Reynard Fox in European fables. There are also notable trickster gods in the Greek Hermes, or the Norse Loki and Odin – the last of whom has been seen as "a trickster in the sense that he tricks and deceives those who trust him" (Davidson 5). As Robin Fox observes, "to trace all of" the trickster characters in folklore "would be a lifetime's task" (299) – considering this, this introduction will not attempt to present an index of every trickster from traditional tales.

It is vital, nonetheless, to establish the traits and functions that distinguish the trickster. Greedy, selfish, lustful, yet a compelling hero, the trickster in myth has been seen to "personify all the traits of man raised to the highest degree" (Ricketts 347): he embodies the various flaws and talents that define humanity,

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<sup>4</sup> Here, Boas speaks of the overlap in American mythology between the "culture hero" and the "sly trickster, who vaingloriously thinks himself superior to all other beings, whom he tries to deceive in all sorts of ways and who is often punished for his presumption by the superior powers of his propose victims" (4).

<sup>5</sup> The impetus behind this twentieth-century interest in the trickster may have been a sense of social fracture and a need for cultural healing, triggered by the disruption of war, as will be explored in Chapter One of this thesis.

and continually expresses them in creative ways. Within their narratives, tricksters are highly subversive presences, and often “use impersonation, disguise, theft, and deceit to expose hypocrisy and inequality, to subvert existing social systems, and to widen their sphere of power” (Landay 2). In myth and folk-tale, such subversion may be found in small animals outwitting their more obviously advantaged adversaries through tricks or, occasionally, sheer luck: seen, for instance, in Br’er Rabbit undermining Br’er Fox in Cherokee stories, or the tortoise trouncing the hare in Aesop’s famous fable. Similar subversive creatures occur in British folk-tales, although these have not previously been read as tricksters. Katharine Briggs’s collection of British folk-tales records the tale of the wren who hides in the feathers of an eagle so as to win a flying contest (128), the hedgehog who uses a doppelganger in order to outwit the Devil (116), the magpie who dupes the fox (109) and many other stories in which the smaller animal tricks the larger. And, as well as tricking others, the folkloric trickster “may also be tricked himself” (Kononenko and Kukharensko 14); notably, in British folk-tales such as “The Wolf, the Laborer, the Fox and the Cheese” the fox outsmarts the larger wolf (Briggs 125), whereas in “The Fox and the Hedgehog” (Briggs 108) and “The Fox and the Magpie” (Briggs 109), the fox is deceived by creatures smaller than himself. By moving into a position of authority – in this case, by being the physically larger animal – the trickster creates space for another to undermine him.

Such a subversive function has led Hyde to propose that “If the trickster were ever to get into power, he would stop being trickster” (13). This description does not seem relevant to trickster characters in literature, however: as will be discussed later in this chapter, Shakespearean schemers such as *The Tempest’s* Prospero and *Measure for Measure’s* Duke may be seen as tricksters through their catalytic presences, insight and manipulation, despite also being figures of authority. Furthermore, the boundary between authority and subservience is crucially obscured by the trickster, for, while he may initially appear to be the underdog, his tricks intimate a form of control and he is ultimately placed at the centre of his narrative. Indeed, a temporary spell in power is arguably a fundamental part of the trickster continuum in folklore, making him at once hegemonic and subversive, and thus illuminating his being, as Landay suggests, “a symbol of doubleness” (11). The trickster’s propensity for tricking and being

tricked also underscores him as “the embodiment of humor – all kinds of humor” (Ricketts 347): the observer alternately laughs with him and at him.

Humour is key to the folkloric trickster, and often, as Kononenko and Kukharenko have noted:

deals with the most basic of things: the body and its functions, the physical world and its rules. A typical ‘trick’ revolves around a creature’s failure to understand a law of nature; the trickster leads the victim into this state of misunderstanding, undermining the victim’s ability to make fundamental distinctions. . . . The animal trickster misleads at the most basic level, and the tricks are primitive and often centred on the body and bodily functions. (9)

The trickster twisting the natural world may be seen in the British folk story of the fox tricking the wolf into believing the moon’s reflection to be a piece of cheese (Briggs 125), while his connections to grotesque body tricks have been well-documented in anthropology studies. For instance, Hyde recounts the Amerindian tale in which Coyote throws his own eyeballs into a tree (4); Barbara Babcock-Abrahams comments on tricksters’ involvement in “scatological and coprophagous episodes which may be creative, destructive, or simply amusing” (159); Kononenko and Kukharenko describe the “fox who convinces the hungry wolf that he can snack on his own intestines” (9); and Robin Fox speaks of “the scatological side of the Trickster, along with his gluttony and lust” (300). A preoccupation with the unrepressed body is not limited to the crafty animals of myth, but may also be observed in the trickster gods – Loki, for instance, has been seen to place “himself in obscene or disgusting situations” (Davidson 9) – and in the gluttonous buffoons and unsightly trickster-villains of the early modern stage; indeed, Klaus-Peter Koepping posits there to be “two forms of action and thought that seem to designate the trickster across all cultural variations, namely, his cunning form of intelligence and the grotesqueness of the body imagery used to indicate the inversion of order” (194). These two traits seem incongruous, and exemplify the trickster’s core nature as a conciliator of antitheses: through him, cerebral power is fused with the corporeal, and intelligence with farce. Pelton has proposed that the mythological trickster merges the “human” with the “sacred” in order to conceive the contradictoriness of humanity as it “encompasses both nobility and messiness – feces, lies, and even death” (4). The trickster thus suggests the capacity for apparent opposites to co-exist and, furthermore, even to cooperate in a manner that may help conceive new cultural possibilities.



The trickster of myth and folk-tale, then, has been seen as an emblem of liminality, never wholly one thing nor the other, but always in-between. He is a shape-shifter, and his identity is highly fluid (noted by Lipovetsky 30). As Ricketts states, the trickster combines “in one personage no less than two and sometimes three or more seemingly different and contrary roles” (327), and incorporates “clownish, heroic, and sometimes even divine elements in one figure” (328). This mutability has been extensively discussed by critics during the twentieth century; Hyde, in 1998, defined tricksters of myth as “lords of in-between”, observing their ability to cross boundaries and even to “move between heaven and earth, and between the living and the dead” (6). He notes the connection between this ambiguity and the “polytheism” of primitive tribes, which did not perceive binaries of good and evil, and condemns the common confusion between the trickster and the Devil, stressing that the “trickster is amoral, not *immoral*” (10). Claude Lévi-Strauss has argued the equivocality of North American folkloric tricksters to be expressed through their being “carrion-eating animals” – those who eat meat but do not themselves hunt, thus acting as “mediators” between herbivores and carnivores, and, accordingly, between life and death (440). Laura Makarius comparably views the trickster as a “mediator” due to his magical powers which, acquired by his violation of prohibitions, mean he “transcends the human condition, without . . . attaining to the divine” (84). Meanwhile, Babcock-Abrahams suggested in 1975 that the trickster’s

expression of ambiguity and paradox, of a confusion of all customary categories . . . epitomizes the paradox of the human condition and exploits the incongruity that we are all creatures of the earth and yet not wholly creatures of the earth in that we have need of clothing and spiritual ideals.<sup>6</sup> . . . Further, he embodies the fundamental contradiction of our existence: the contradiction between the individual and society, between freedom and constraint. (160-161)

Like Pelton and Ricketts, Babcock-Abrahams highlights the trickster’s function to express paradoxes central to humanity. Crucially, the trickster demonstrates the

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<sup>6</sup> In this, Babcock-Abrahams appears to summarise the arguments of Enid Welsford, whom she mentions later in her article (154), and whose 1935 work suggested that the medieval and early modern fools – later incarnations of the trickster – depended:

upon a certain inner contradiction in the soul of every man. In the first place we are creatures of the earth, propagating our species like other animals, in need of food, clothing and shelter and of the money that procures them. Yet if we need money, are we so wholly creatures of the earth? If we need to cover our nakedness by material clothes or spiritual ideals, are we so like other animals? This incongruity is exploited by the Fool. (Welsford 318)

possibility of progress despite and even because of these paradoxes: as Ricketts explains, while “continually being buffeted about” the trickster nevertheless “has his fun and he always comes up laughing” and thus promises that man will triumph regardless of being “slow to learn from his mistakes” (347). Michael Carroll, likewise, contends that the trickster “is concerned with resolving a universal dilemma: although both ‘uncontrolled sexuality’ and ‘culture’ are desired qualities, the first would lead to the destruction of the second” (Abstract 301) – through the trickster, M. Carroll argues, these opposites are reconciled to make “human society possible” (“Lévi-Strauss” 310).

Consequently, the trickster acts as a vehicle for healing and creation in many traditional oral narratives, exemplifying the resilience of humankind and indicating the world to contain infinite potential. Hyde suggests this creativity to be key to his ambivalence: “Trickster is the creative idiot . . . the wise fool, the gray-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities. When someone’s sense of honourable behavior has left him unable to act, trickster will appear to suggest an amoral action, something right/wrong that will get life going again” (7). This role of perpetuating life, Hyde states, can be seen in the trickster god Prometheus from Greek mythology, who steals fire to give to mankind and thus furthers the development of culture (6). Arnold Krupat has delineated how the trickster of Native American oral tales “accidentally or intentionally brought it about that humans should die, [and] determined the proper number of fingers for human hands”, describing the trickster as “a character who does everything wrong, stumbling and bumbling, opportunistically and selfishly cheating and lying and fornicating, but . . . also a character who prepared the world for the people who are coming,” and as “a boundary-breaker but also an important boundary-maker; a destroyer of order and an institutor of order” (448). Ricketts, also, has noted how many myths attribute the creation of order to the trickster’s actions (327). The animal trickster’s body-tricks also act as a form of creation, though often initially destructive of a seemingly natural system: Carl Jung observed that tricksters in myth and folklore across a range of cultures frequently change sex so as to bear children, sever certain parts of their bodies in order to allow them to pursue independent tasks and make plants from other body parts (“On The Psychology” 263). As Giorgia Grilli aptly summarises:

The trickster undermines the stability, apparent comprehensibility, and structured pattern of the safely organized world because he belongs to the world of disorder. Yet, what he brings about is not, as a paradox, utter destruction: with a slip of the tongue, error or oversight on his part a new world comes into being. He is, to be precise, a creative figure, though he creates by means of subverting, of exposing contradictions, of throwing everything into question. (63)

The mythological trickster, then, is ultimately appealing through his promise of possibility, of finding a solution despite apparent setbacks and of rethinking orders that initially seem immutable.

Thus far, this introduction has focussed on scholarship surrounding the trickster gods and animals that pervade ancient tales dealing with the creation of the world. But there are also human tricksters to be found in the field of folk- and fairy-tales, a body of traditionally oral narrative which overlaps with myth but is generally less concerned with cultural genesis and more with instructing the reader or listener on how to behave. It is possible to divide these human tricksters between three categories: the subversive hero, who may be either cunning or lucky; the altruistic helper; and the wicked witch or matriarch.

The subversive hero is the fairy-tale trickster closest to the wily animals of folklore. He is the protagonist of the story, and, as the trickster animal is often ostensibly disadvantaged by his size, the subversive hero is frequently the youngest child who outdoes his or her older, stronger or wiser siblings on a quest: as D. L. Ashliman comments, in fairy-tale “it is virtually always the youngest brother who emerges victorious” (“Brothers” 141). Kononenko and Kukharenko further expand on the human folk trickster:

Although the trickster may appear foolish or naïve, he gets the best of even the most clever of men. . . . The trickster triumphs by his seeming stupidity. . . . In this group of trickster tales, the hero is often an instrument of social justice, punishing the greedy and exacting revenge for the wrongs perpetrated upon the lowly and the meek. Whether he is truly stupid, accomplishing what he does by accident, or remarkably clever, exacting justice in a way that leaves him immune to punishment, is always open to question. (9)

Kononenko and Kukharenko here touch upon a key division in subversive heroes. Shrewd tricksters can be seen in such characters as Hop o’ My Thumb, the youngest and weakest brother who cleverly saves his family from famine and

outwits an ogre (see Perrault's "Hop o' My Thumb"<sup>7</sup>), or Molly Whuppie from the Scottish fairy-tale, a youngest daughter who saves herself and her sisters by outfoxing a giant (see Jacobs's "Molly Whuppie"<sup>8</sup>). Meanwhile, serendipitous tricksters, who are foolish rather than clever but nonetheless succeed through luck, are demonstrated by characters such as Ivan the Fool, a youngest son recurring in Russian fairy-tales, whose "luck suddenly turns and he becomes an extraordinarily successful person. His luck changes not because he is wiser, but because he is still doing the most idiotic things" (Sinyavsky 38). Ivan's unexpected success thus stems from his foolishness, echoing the mythological trickster's ultimate triumph despite setbacks. Another lucky trickster may be found in "The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was", a traditional German oral tale transcribed by the Brothers Grimm. In this story, the hero's naïve lack of fear leads him inadvertently to win the hand of the princess (Grimm, "The Story"). Such characters illustrate a common theme in the trickster lineage: the undermining of conventional logic by instinct.

The heroes of fairy-tale who do not rely on trickster cunning or luck may instead succeed with the aid of a magical or crafty creature, as seen, for instance, in Grimms' "The Golden Goose". This brings us to the second type of fairy-tale trickster: the altruistic helper, a mysterious figure who usually lingers on the peripheries of the story rather than taking the role of hero, and who has been identified by Vladimir Propp as the "donor" (39). Prominent examples include the fairy godmother in "Cinderella", and Faithful John, a servant in European fairy-tale who engenders a romance between his master and a princess (Seal 73). Aarne and Thompson's classification of folk-tales includes "Supernatural Helpers" as Tale Types 500-559 (Aarne 167-201), recognising such beings as a crucial trope in folk- and fairy-tales. These shadowy aides, who are reflected in the crafty servants on the classical and early modern stages, are tricksters in their catalytic and subversive presences, using their intelligence or their magic to help the hero overcome an authoritative adversary.

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<sup>7</sup> This was first published in Charles Perrault's 1697 *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, a collection of fairy-tales transcribed from popular oral tales of "Indo-European storytelling" (Philip 11).

<sup>8</sup> "Molly Whuppie" was first published by Joseph Jacobs in his 1890 *English Fairy Tales*, a documentation of popular English fairy tales.

Finally, a maleficent trickster is found in fairy-tales' wicked matriarch. This villainous female tends to be either a witch, stepmother or both, and uses her tricks, disguises and magic in an attempt to ensnare the story's protagonist. Recognisable examples include the witch in "Hansel and Grethel" and the wicked queen in "Snow White", both of these being traditional German fairy-tales recorded by the Brothers Grimm, although Patricia Watson has traced the figure of the wicked stepmother who persecutes her stepdaughter back to ancient Greece, where the trope is "a reflection of genuine attitudes to stepmothers": "the assumptions that stepmotherly malevolence is an inevitable consequence of a woman taking on the rôle of stepmother" (207). Angela Carter intriguingly posits that "the 'cruelty' and indifference almost universally ascribed to [the stepmother] . . . may also reflect our own ambivalences towards our natural mothers" (*Angela Carter's Book* xxi). In fairy-tale, the cruel matriarchal figure is a trickster through her wiles, selfishness and – often – a grotesque body which prompts her jealousy of her stepdaughter; inevitably, however, she is duped by the hero or the magical helper, unable to maintain her position in authority. Chapter Two of this thesis will illustrate Elizabeth Bowen to have been influenced by tricksters of fairy-tale – particularly the youngest child and the wicked stepmother as appearing in Grimms' stories – and to have used them to examine the relationship between creativity and cerebral intelligence.

We have seen that the trickster has been perceived by numerous anthropologists and folklorists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as subversive, protean, destructive, paradoxical and, ultimately, creative. These studies tend to view the trickster as somehow separate from the texts in which he appears, intimating a magical movement between cultures, a figure perhaps existing within what Jung termed a "collective unconscious" ("Archetypes" 3). Contemporary literary criticism, meanwhile, tends to be more sceptical about the concept of human universals, as noted by Mark Currie (*Difference* 107) and Andy Mousley (72), preferring to think of specific texts framing human consciousness, rather than texts being the result of ubiquitous human preoccupations. Indeed, folkloric sources, if mostly lost, are nevertheless specific sources within traditional cultures, and may be considered as such. William G. Doty and William J. Hynes, who have edited a collection of essays on the trickster, acknowledge that "Accepting the global descriptor 'the trickster'" problematically implies

“assumptions about universals” (“Historical Overview” 26) and stress that “one should use [cross-cultural] comparative procedures only with great caution” (“Historical Overview” 27), suggesting that it is more prudent to consider how different societies have interpreted the trickster figure and what this might indicate specifically about these societies. Although allowing that the idea of universality offers interesting cross-cultural comparisons, then, this thesis will be focussing on the trickster as a literary ploy rather than a super-cultural archetype, believing that trickster characters are appealing to many different writers and literary periods due to their potential for subversion and healing. Consequently, I will be looking at writers’ deliberate allusions to previous trickster characters and at the culturally and personally specific reasons they have incorporated them into their works. With this in mind, I now want to turn to the tricksters found on the traditional stage and their relation to the tricksters of folklore.

### **Tricksters on the Shakespearean Stage**

Koepping has written of trickster characters appearing in “primitive mythology and in classical antiquity as well as in modern deritualized and more secular form as the fool and jester in the prankster tales of the time of the Reformation” (193) and also in “the dramas of Shakespeare” (194). In traditional theatre, trickster characters tend to be more varied, bringing subversive energy to the plays but expressing it through different personalities; as Robin Fox explains, the more literary forms of narrative that have developed since oral tales “begin to make the characteristics of the Trickster more fragmented and to assign different aspects to different characters, rather than trying to bundle them all up in one contradictory, protean roustabout” (300). This seems partly due to the characters’ diverse sources of influence: Dynes, for instance, has observed that tricksters on the Jacobean stage may have developed from “the *dolosus servus*, the crafty servant of Roman New Comedy, and the Vice of the English morality play” (366). Certainly, the tricky slave of Roman New Comedy is a marked trickster figure, more altruistic than the trickster of folklore, usually scheming to help the lovers in their quest to be together: O’Byhim has defined him as “a stock character in New Comedy who abuses the character who threatens to block the successful resolution of the play” (108). The Vice of medieval morality plays presents a far more demonic type of trickster, who “attempts to lure the Everyman hero from the

straight and narrow road of virtue onto the primrose path of dalliance and sin” and is “a conniving, comic hypocrite who delights in chicanery for its own sake and speaks directly to the audience” (Deats 6).<sup>9</sup> Critics have suggested that Shakespearean figures such as Sir John Falstaff, Claudius and Iago may be traced back to these Vice characters (Ribner 89 and 94 and Glasgow 191), permeating plays with duplicity and debauchery. Meanwhile, the commedia dell’arte, which developed in Italy from the sixteenth century, made use of tricky servants called “zanni”. These figures were more selfish than the servants of New Comedy and typically acted to mock their masters. The zanni would later influence figures in Victorian harlequinade (noted by McCormick 71, Storey, *Pierrot* 3 and M. Harrison 122) and the wicked puppet in English Punch and Judy shows (noted by Davis 93 and Forti-Lewis 148).

Clearly, there is a strong trickster legacy within theatre, apparent in numerous eras and cultures. I want particularly to look at the trickster on the Shakespearean stage, however, as Shakespeare is a highly influential playwright whose works were enduringly popular in twentieth-century Britain and who was of particular interest to Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark. While Shakespeare formed his own types of trickster, it is probable that he took inspiration from pre-existing sources – not merely from medieval morality plays and Roman New Comedy, but also from the folk-tales that were prevalent in England at the time. Julie Burton has suggested that Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* was based upon structures and themes from English folk-tales (176 and 196), while, more recently, Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf’s introduction to the 2002 collection *The Spoken Word* has demonstrated the importance of vernacular culture and oral tales in early modern Britain. Catherine Belsey, similarly, has produced an extensive study of Shakespeare’s debt to folk- and fairy-tales, including trickster tales such as “Child Rowland” and “Jack the Giant Killer” (16), in which the unlikely boy-hero triumphs. Belsey posits that the shapes of Shakespeare’s plays would have been familiar to early modern audiences due to their appropriation of folk-tales (11). Donna Woodford has commented upon the elements of “The Goose Girl in the Well”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The proclivity to break the fourth wall and address the audience is a prominent trait of the stage trickster and, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, was important to many twentieth-century writers in helping them to think through questions of writerly authority and to touch upon the metafictional.

<sup>10</sup> A traditional fairy-tale collected by the Brothers Grimm, in which the king questions his daughters on their love for him and punishes the youngest for her inability to articulate her love.

that are implicit in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (9), and Linda Woodbridge has argued that Shakespeare deliberately researched folk-tales in order to gather material for his work (17) and has demonstrated intriguing parallels between his plays and common folk-tales (8-9). Particularly striking is Woodbridge's comparison of *Cymbeline* and "Snow White":

*Cymbeline's* queen behaves like *Snow White's* in trying to poison her stepdaughter. . . . Pity inspires the commissioned murderer, like his homologue in *Snow White*, to falsify evidence . . . Belarius, Guiderius, and Arviragus, like the dwarves, come home to find Imogen in their cave. . . . As *Snow White* keeps house for the dwarves, Imogen is 'huswife' in the cave . . . When they find her in a dreamlike sleep caused (as in *Snow White*) by the Queen's potion, the brothers' response strikingly recalls the dwarves': they do not wish to bury her. (9)

Recent criticism thus indicates that folk narratives were deeply embedded in an early modern consciousness. These included tales of animal trickery – Dan Mills states that

early modern English readers likely knew the medieval bestiary tale *Reynard the Fox*, which typically depicted the clever Reynard getting into trouble and talking his way out of it. Early modern readers would have had familiarity with the quick-witted double-talking fox through readily available English versions of the Reynard tales (46).

It therefore seems highly likely that Shakespeare would have been influenced by folk-tales and the tricky characters incorporated in them.

Shakespeare's tricksters can be divided into a number of groups. There are buffoons like Sir John Falstaff and Sir Toby Belch, court jesters such as Feste, Touchstone and *King Lear's* Fool, magical servants like Puck and Ariel, scheming villains including Iago, *King Lear's* Edmund and Richard III, and omniscient manipulators such as Prospero and *Measure for Measure's* Duke. These characters are diverse – some are frivolous comedians, whereas others thrive upon tragedy – yet all are subversive outsiders with access to unconventional forms of intelligence. This distinction between different forms of Shakespearean trickster is important to this thesis. Richard Hillman's *Shakespearean Subversions* explores characters that he rather problematically terms "tricksters" in Shakespeare, but his work is more a tracing of subversive energy within the plays rather than considering trickster groupings and their relation to a literary lineage. Certainly, characters such as Rosalind, Viola, Mercutio and Petrucio may partake in subversive tactics and temporarily trick, but they ultimately adhere



more accurately to other character-types, and to label them “tricksters” dilutes understanding of the trickster’s function. Although limiting my study of Shakespearean tricksters to the five aforementioned groups may seem schematic, I have chosen to take this approach because these stand out as the most concentrated incarnations of the trickster on the Shakespearean stage, and can thus be used as scaffolding for this thesis’s exploration of the subtler trickster characters interwoven in mid-twentieth-century literature.

### Buffoons

The buffoon, or clown, is perhaps the Shakespearean figure closest to the tricksters of myth and folk-tale. Not as harmless as his name suggests, his epitome may be seen in the character of Sir John Falstaff: according to Robert H. Bell, “Everything Shakespeare knew, loved, and distrusted about clowns goes into Falstaff” (19). Like those folkloric animals, he is primarily a boundary-crosser – a trait immediately evident in his appearing in multiple plays and genres, namely the two histories of *Henry IV* and the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. His boundary-crossing is further evinced by his blurring of social status: Falstaff’s knighthood and his eloquence with language seem incongruous with his roguish behaviour, underscoring his being a vessel for contradiction. He also conflates different identities, imitating both King Henry and Prince Hal in a single scene of *Henry IV, Part One* (2.4.392-465), in a piece of role-play that simultaneously establishes a metatheatrical performance-within-a-performance, shows Falstaff’s disregard for authority and flaunts the trickster’s shape-shifting ability: “[Falstaff] resists being tied down to any single identity and instead continually reinvents himself” (Grady 147). His fluidity of identity is further shown in the way that he “sports several names and a host of epithets: Sir John, Falstaff, Jack, . . . et cetera” (Bell 37). His first line in this play asks Hal “what time of day is it, lad?” (1.2.1), displaying a vagueness in relation to human systems; and, accordingly, Falstaff laughingly skews “normal” orders and engenders confusion throughout his plays, as is seen early in *Henry IV, Part One*, where he claims that Prince Hal has corrupted him (1.2.91-97) whereas it is demonstrably he who has corrupted Hal. Later in this play, his lies about his encounter with “rogues” are grossly exaggerated as he embellishes his past in order to entertain his listeners (2.4.159-226), arrogantly commandeering the narrative and essentially acting to undermine the efforts of the playwright. Indeed, T. Walter Herbert has observed

that the name “Fall-staff” may be interpreted as an ironic parallel to “Shake-spear” (1-11), which perhaps emphasises Falstaff’s position as slightly outside the world of the play. It is also notable that Falstaff’s words of “banish plump Jack, and banish all the world” (2.4.465) may intimate that the knight encompasses all of the play’s characters in the same way that the playwright does.

Bell has identified a supernatural element to the character: “Falstaff, as if blessed by supernatural or magical forces, wields potent powers. . . . [He has] access to a neverland beyond the mundane world. . . . In imagination and through language, Falstaff moves nimbly between real and fantastic, sublime and ridiculous” (19). Falstaff certainly abides by a different set of rules to that of the rest of the cast, even alluding to an immortality in the battle scene at the end of *Henry IV, Part One*, where he pretends to have been killed (4.4.74), before effectively returning from the dead (4.4.110). Enid Welsford, a highly influential critic of Shakespeare whose writing in the mid-twentieth century would have been available to Bowen, Taylor, Murdoch and Spark, describes how fools and buffoons, such as Falstaff, reassure the audience that “blows are always harmless, that the victim is never hurt, above all that Death himself is a hoax” (315): a sentiment evocative of the mythological trickster’s promising the resilience of mankind.

Dynes tells us that, at the end of a Jacobean play, “The trickster may be expelled or subsumed back into society” (384). Drawing from Dynes’s theory, it can be argued that Falstaff, at different points, experiences both these treatments. At the end of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he is forgiven and welcomed at the feast (5.5.168-170), an occurrence which Northrop Frye has described as “a fundamental principle of comedy at work. The tendency of the comic society to include rather than exclude is the reason for the traditional importance of the parasite, who has no reason to be at the final festival but is nevertheless there” (166). Meanwhile, in the final scene of *Henry IV, Part Two*, Falstaff visits Hal – now King – expecting to be rewarded by his old friend, but is turned away with nothing, to return to his shady taverns and brothels (5.5.50-73). In this history play, then, Falstaff, like the trickster of folklore, is fated to inhabit the margins of society, a space that facilitates his rebellious creativity.

Yet, as well as being an outsider within the realm of the play, Falstaff also tests the fabric of the fiction itself by standing between the audience and the

characters, threatening to break through the artificial and enter the real. Welsford proposes that clownish characters act “as an intermediary between the stage and the auditorium” (xii), and Bell elaborates that “Falstaff regularly soliloquizes or directly addresses the audience . . . [and] plays to two audiences: the one within fiction and the one outside of the fiction” (38). The buffoon, like all of Shakespeare’s tricksters, thus exemplifies a sense of doubleness, existing within the narrative but also showing awareness of the world beyond the fourth wall: he is “simultaneously actor and role, spectator and spectacle, observer and observed” – this is a description Bell uses in relation to the “motley fool” (28), but may be applied to every type of Shakespearean trickster. Bell, although repeatedly using the term “trickster” in his work on Shakespearean fools to describe characters that are duplicitous and manipulative (45, 75, 103 and 111), does not offer a definition for the “trickster”, nor address this figure’s existence as a narrative type.

Chiming with the mythological trickster’s physical excesses, Falstaff is old, fat and lecherous, and has been associated with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “grotesque body” (Grover-Friedlander 81 and Pfister 175). Also like the animal trickster, he both tricks and is tricked: for instance, in *Henry IV, Part One*, Falstaff’s friends don disguises and rob him so as to hear him lie about it later (2.2.100-109), which Bell has called “a game of trick the trickster” (45). Likewise, the imbroglio of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* begins with Falstaff plotting to woo the wealthy Mistresses Page and Ford simultaneously, a scheme which backfires when both women repeatedly trick Falstaff. At the end of the play, Falstaff accepts the joke that has been played upon him, begrudgingly telling the women: “Well, I am your theme. You have the start of me” (5.5.159-160); like the animal trickster of myth, he embodies different levels of comedy, so that we laugh at him and with him. Notably, Ricketts describes the mythological trickster as one who “meets a human need directly, by enabling men to endure the burden of the failures of their lives in self-forgetful laughter. . . . They laugh at him until they are laughing at themselves. He endures their ridicule like a suffering saviour, and in the end he saves them, through their laughter” (347-348); Welsford, meanwhile, has

suggested the fool figure<sup>11</sup> in culture and literature to have a similarly cathartic function:

if the fool is 'he who gets slapped', the most successful fool is 'he who is none the worse for his slapping', and this introduces a new and more interesting factor into the comic situation. The fool is now no longer a mere safety-valve for the suppressed instincts of the bully, he provides a subtler balm for the fears and wounds of those afflicted with the inferiority complex, the greater part of humanity . . . . It is all very well to laugh at the buffeted simpleton; we too are subject to the blows of fate, and of people stronger and wiser than ourselves, in fact we *are* the silly Clown, the helpless Fool. (314-315)

Thus, much as the folkloric trickster confirms that life is a game, rogues as might be found in Shakespeare convince us "that wasted affection, thwarted ambition, latent guilt are mere delusions to be laughed away" (Welsford 318). Later in this thesis, it shall be demonstrated that buffoons such as a Falstaff would provide a model for Iris Murdoch's character Otto in her novel *The Italian Girl*, and also for the character of Tom in Elizabeth Taylor's *Palladian*.

### Court Jesters

In close propinquity to the buffoon is the figure of the court jester. While the buffoon may be recognised as a "natural" fool, the court jester is often labelled an "artificial" fool due to the fact that he dresses in motley and acts idiotically in order to entertain (Ghose 95, Corrigan 143 and Halio 7): he is "a sophisticated courtly performer" (Bell 12). As with the trickster heroes of folk-tales, then, it is difficult to discern whether the court jester is truly foolish or cleverly mimicking the natural fool. The latter is perhaps most likely, as the main function of this character-type is to provide insightful commentary on the actions of the other characters, often underscoring characters' follies to the audience but using self-consciously foolish statements to obscure his wisdom. His observations are prescient but typically ignored by the other characters. Consequently, the court jester in Shakespeare has been promulgated as the "wise fool" (see, for instance, Duthie 73), establishing a paradox which echoes the contradictory folkloric tricksters. The character may appear mad, but ultimately points out truths to the audience, occupying a liminal space between audience and narrative – as Welsford

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<sup>11</sup> Welsford's study of "fools" includes the types of character considered in this introduction as buffoons and court jesters.

observes, “the fool knows the truth because he is a social outcast, and spectators see most of the game” (319).

Although the jester would have been a familiar figure in Elizabethan England as an entertainer employed at court, Welsford has noted that the court jester as a character had far more primacy in the plays of Shakespeare than in other Renaissance plays (243 and 249). Possibly this is due to Shakespeare being – as has been argued by critics such as Frances Barasch (“Shakespeare and *Commedia dell’arte*”), P. A. Skantze (257-270) and Benedikt Höttemann – drawn to the flourishing *commedia dell’arte*, which had the motley Harlequin prancing upon the Italian stage as one of its tricky “zanni” characters. Welsford is dismissive of Harlequin, however, stating that he did not have access to the English court fool’s “hidden source of mysterious knowledge or unworldly wisdom” (299).

Certainly, there are few character-types who parallel the Shakespearean court jester’s capacity for insight and wit. Touchstone in *As You Like It* was the first to be gifted with this verbal eloquence, which was likely because Shakespeare wrote the part for Robert Armin as opposed to Will Kempe who had previously played his fool characters: as Bart van Es tells us, “Parts written for Armin (such as Touchstone, Feste and the Fool in *Lear*) are marked by a particular linguistic fluency and, in the latter two cases, by an ability to sing” (87). Robert Hillis Goldsmith further suggests that Touchstone progresses from simpleton to sage throughout the course of the play because Shakespeare began writing with “Kempe in mind” and then changed the character to suit Armin (884) – nevertheless, it is worth noting that folly and wisdom are certainly not antithetical within the figure of the trickster, as we have previously seen.

While Welsford deems Touchstone’s name to reflect his role as “a touchstone or test of the quality of men and manners” (249), Bell posits that it “might also be an in-joke, referring to Armin’s apprenticeship as a goldsmith” (22). Drawing from Bell, then, Touchstone’s very name may echo the blurring between performer and character, reality and fiction: an innate aspect of the stage trickster. Bell also notes two further characteristics of Touchstone which seem pertinent to understanding the trickster: firstly, he tells us that Touchstone’s puns epitomize fooling “by implying contradictory possibilities” (22), and that by uttering lines with multiple meanings, the jester “fragments our perspectives, confusing our

conceptions of reality by introducing radically different, even diametrically opposed, perspectives” (23). In this, then, the court fool is displaying a doubleness of vision typical of the trickster, while also echoing the creative power of the trickster’s language, which has been explored by Gerald Vizenor in “Trickster Discourse”. Secondly, Bell highlights how Touchstone is “always plumping for physical pleasures and bodily needs, the first to say he is tired, hungry, or horny” (25), which is clearly analogous to the folkloric trickster’s carnal appetites, as well as to the Shakespearean buffoon’s physical grotesqueness.

The court jester embodies the spirit of carnival, which seems almost metonymic with comedy. Bakhtin has crucially established carnival as a period which sees the inversion of normal social hierarchies, during which a person’s “behavior, gesture, and discourse are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life, and thus from the vantage point of noncarnival life become eccentric and inappropriate” (*Problems* 123). Carnival in the early modern period existed as a means of purging unrest within the community: it was a transient period in which rebellion could be safely acted out and expunged, allowing citizens to settle contentedly back into normal hierarchies afterwards (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 9). This cycle of dissolution and restoration resonates with the disruptive trickster figure. We have seen how the trickster of myth and folklore acts subversively in order to heal mankind, create boundaries and further the progression of culture; Shakespearean tricksters, and in particular the court jester, similarly temporarily upend “normality” in order ultimately to reaffirm it.

Carnival is hinged with comedy, and the trickster himself has established roots in humour; yet, the trickster does not appear merely in Shakespeare’s comedies, but also brings his cycle of disruption and reconsolidation into the tragedies, along with his sharpness of insight. *King Lear’s Fool*, a court jester “like Touchstone and Feste, is an ‘all-licensed’ critic who sees and speaks the truth about the people around him” (Welsford 254); Welsford suggests that, while Feste’s and Touchstone’s insights simply serve to amuse and to heighten their charisma, Lear’s Fool presents disquieting questions about the barriers between madness and sense (256-257). In this play, the Fool is twinned with Lear, establishing a parallel “between someone who was fearing for his own sanity and someone who professionally pretended to be crazy, between a near-fool and a

would-be fool” (Törnqvist 30): with his typical trickster traits of subversion, artifice and ambiguity, then, the court jester here probes the distinctions between performance and true identity, blurring boundaries of the self.

### Tricky Servants

The tricky servant is perhaps the most recognisable of the early modern stage tricksters, not limited to Shakespeare. Paralleling the benevolent court jester, he or she often uses his or her wiles to aid the endeavours of the hero, as can be seen with characters such as Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*, Jonson’s Brainworm in *Every Man in His Humour* or Shakespeare’s Puck and Ariel, whose supernatural status connects them to the magical helpers of fairy-tale. Dynes has spoken of “The preponderance of villainous or egocentric tricksters” upon the Jacobean stage (376), and notes that “the altruistic trickster, a much rarer figure, most often appears as a servant or attendant who contradicts the wishes of a master in order to effect the marriage of the master’s son” (377). However, in some cases, the tricky slave might adopt a more selfish role – as seen with Jonson’s Mosca in *Volpone*. Indeed, it is debatable whether Ariel would aid Prospero through choice, were he not forced to act this way. Ultimately, tricksters’ natures throughout folklore, theatre and prose fiction, are almost always ambiguous: being figures of contradiction, they have the capacity to act both altruistically and selfishly.

Like the court fool, the tricky servant may have drawn inspiration from the zanni of the commedia dell’arte, who often exercises cunning in order to outdo his social betters (Forti-Lewis 148). The zanni will be explored in this thesis’s chapter on Iris Murdoch, but it is worth observing that his low social standing, like that of the tricky servant, provides space for subversion in the same manner that the small animal trickster outdoes his larger enemy, or the fairy-tale’s youngest son outwits his older brothers. Additionally, the figure of the zanni “suffers from the spasms of an ancestral hunger, which is his basic, everyday condition” (Forti-Lewis 148), linking him to the insatiable appetites of the animal trickster of myth. Meanwhile, the tricky servant has been traced back beyond commedia dell’arte to ancient Roman and Greek comedies (Frye 173), and the cunning helper may even be viewed in the figure of Hermes, the winged messenger from Greek mythology.

Bell has described *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* Puck as “Mercurial and protean, . . . a trickster and a shape-shifter” (16). This crafty sprite, acting on his master’s orders, is responsible for the hierarchical upheaval that takes place in the play; like the folkloric trickster, he is not above making mistakes, and his applying the love potion to the eyes of Lysander rather than the intended Demetrius instigates the play’s romantic entanglement (2.2.84). Yet, guided by Puck’s chicanery, the turmoil is eventually resolved, and, in the manner customary of comedies, the play ends with a wedding. The trickster’s mischief, radiating the spirit of carnival, has caused tensions to be purged so that peace can manifest. Furthermore, Puck, like so many of Shakespeare’s tricksters, breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience. The most obvious instance of this is in his epilogue speech: “If we shadows have offended,/ Think but this, and all is mended:/ That you have but slumbered here,/ While these visions did appear” (5.1.2275-2278). This saucy address not only allows Puck to step through the veil of fiction, but also seemingly threatens to place the audience within the sphere of fiction, making them, like Bottom, the dreamers accountable for the action – or “visions” – of the play. Puck is suggesting that the spectators have been complicit in the narrative: that they, like Shakespeare himself, have helped weave the story. Certainly, the trickster in Shakespearean theatre casts confusion over the boundaries between character, spectator and author – through Puck’s activity, we witness such roles fuse together as part of a wider communion between reality and imagination. The trickster’s illumination of such dynamics, this thesis will demonstrate, would become key to certain mid-twentieth-century writers concerned with the nature of fiction. In particular, Murdoch will be seen to have drawn upon the trope of the tricky slave as a way of probing the artificiality of fiction, while Muriel Spark will also be shown to have been influenced by cunning servant figures.

#### A Note on Doubleness

Shakespeare’s tricksters like Puck share an ability to view the narrative both from within and without, being characters in the play but also often acknowledging the audience and briefly usurping the role of playwright, displaying a double vision that chimes with the folkloric trickster’s dichotomous nature. Furthermore, many of Shakespeare’s plays contain another form of trickster doubleness. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, Puck is only one moiety of the play’s



tricksterism, acting “to supplement and contrast Bottom” (Bell 16); while Puck is the cunning servant, Bottom is a “natural” fool, innocently subversive and presenting an alternate trickster manifestation. This splitting between different types of tricksters can be seen throughout Shakespeare’s works – for instance, with Ariel and Caliban, Hal and Falstaff, Feste and Malvolio and Touchstone and Jaques – and has not been ignored by critics. Welsford comments upon the fool’s duality in *As You Like It*:

Touchstone is, as it were, the authorized commentator, but he has a rival in the person of that self-constituted critic of society, the melancholy Jaques. It is as though, the curtain which veils Arcadia having been drawn aside, two of the inhabitants separate themselves from the rest, and step forward to the front of the stage offering themselves as guides to the spectators in the auditorium. Both of them are equally ready to act as showmen, but in every other respect they are sharply contrasted: the one a sophisticated traveller, professedly intellectual, melancholy and dressed in black, the other a natural court-jester, professionally mad, merry and dressed in motley. (249)

Welsford points out that, unlike Touchstone, Jaques excludes himself from “the final comic harmony” in the same way that Feste, having triumphed over Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, is “given the last word and left in possession of the stage” (252). Therefore, if, as Dynes suggests (384), the trickster is either rejected from or absorbed into the community at the end of the play, it might be argued that Shakespeare frequently accommodates both possibilities simultaneously by assigning two characters inverse trickster roles. Bell has devoted a chapter to the doubling of Shakespeare’s fools, in which he discusses the dynamics between the two characters, observing that secondary fools such as Malvolio and Jaques “strangely resemble the fools they mock, including the jesters with whom they jostle and compete” (79), and that “Shakespearean fools . . . tend to appear in tandem, arranged and juxtaposed for dramatic effects. Twinned or sibling-like, they share traits and compete for precedence” (80). Bell connects the doubling to the fool’s self-consciousness, perceiving it as a physical representation of the figure’s ability to watch himself, to be at once spectator and performer: “the scourge of folly fools himself” (85). The sense of multiple tricksters competing with one another also seems to echo the cycle in folklore – the manner in which an animal may be a trickster in one tale, but overthrown by a (usually smaller-sized) trickster in another. Meanwhile, in Norse mythology, according to H. R. Ellis Davidson, the poem *Baldrs Draumar*, if interpreted as containing both Odin

and Loki, presents us with “a situation where two tricksters meet” (9). Similarly, productions of the commedia dell’arte had two zanni characters, a clever one who “was responsible for plot intrigues and tricks” and another who “was ignorant and naïve” (Barasch “Commedia dell’Arte” 239). Tricksters thus typically take self-awareness to the extreme, splitting in two in order to watch, to perform and to reflect their contradictory selves.

### Scheming Villains

Buffoons, court jesters and tricky servants, although often selfish, ultimately tend to be either benevolent or ambivalent forces within their plays. Cunning tricksters such as Richard III and Iago conversely function as villains, using their machinations to bring about evil. The sources of this malevolence are unclear. Joyce E. Peterson muses over the “intriguing paradox” that, while Richard III and Iago both take “the audience into complete confidence concerning their motivations and intentions toward those they manipulate and deceive, . . . [they] leave their audience with a sense of bafflement about those very motivations and intentions” (326). Like cunning servants and court jesters, these villains break the fourth wall to address the audience, manipulatively building a sense of trust with the spectators while not exposing any true motive – a convention which Stuart Hampton-Reeves claims was “inherited” from the medieval morality plays, in which the Vice, “a trickster figure who was able to move from the world of the play to the audience and back”, would “taunt and tempt the audience” (8). In Richard of *Richard III*, this convention allows the character to underscore artifice, caricature and narrative authority, as described by Mallett:

the other characters exist in a single dimension, as distant puppet-like figures for the most part at the back of the stage, while Richard exists also in an extra dimension, front of stage, where he shares with the audience his delight in his skills as a puppet-master. We watch him put on the masks as he enters the main arena of the play’s action, and remove them as he returns to comment on it. (66)

Considering the audience, puppeteering the characters and steering the plot, Iago and Richard are analogous to Shakespeare himself: as Iris Murdoch’s husband John Bayley explains, Iago’s orchestrations illuminate “how tyrannical and manipulative is the bond between the author and his creature” (*The Characters* 188). Iago’s performance spans extremes: he is repeatedly labelled “honest” by the characters around him (*Oth.* 1.3.285, 1.3.296, 2.3.7 and 2.3.173)

while revealing his duplicity to the audience; and yet, while encompassing such extremes, Iago is highly ambiguous, his motives shrouded in mystery which has puzzled prominent Shakespearean critics and philosophers such as A. C. Bradley (166), Anthony Nuttall (*Shakespeare* 283) and Richard Ratzsch (49) – critics who have felt drawn to Iago’s mutability, consenting that jealousy alone cannot wholly account for the delight the villain takes in destabilising his milieu. Iago, it seems, embodies what Hillman has described as the Shakespearean trickster’s “impulse to outrage for outrage’s sake” (47); he is a figure of chaos and yet, paradoxically, his form of chaos is one which has been carefully designed, perhaps suggestive of the manner in which artistic creativity has to conform to certain formal structures. Certainly, Iago’s and Richard’s schemes may be seen as akin to art.

Hillman suggests that Iago’s “ability to improvise” is what makes him such a compelling “trickster-figure”, his lies being “not pure invention, but the dark side of the truth that is the trickster’s stock-in-trade” (191). The figure’s prowess in matters of truth and fiction is captivating, heightened further by his creative proficiency with language – Bell calls Iago “an abusive trickster, juggler of words, punster, riddler” (111). While buffoons, crafty servants and court jesters employ physical tricks and practical jokes, Iago’s tricks are primarily psychological as he artfully tailors his lies to draw incrementally upon characters’ insecurities, his apparently depthless malice reminiscent of that of the wicked matriarchs in folk-tale.

But Iago and Richard III also share the clowning traits of other Shakespearean and folkloric tricksters, revelling, for example, in the trickster’s grotesque body. For Iago, this manifests through his vulgar metaphors and bestial imagery, as seen with his telling Brabantio that “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (Shakespeare, *Oth.* 1.1.89-90), and that “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (Shakespeare, *Oth.* 1.1.115-116); the animal motifs that pervade his speech ground Iago in the world of fable and folk-tale from which his tricksterism may partly stem. Richard III, meanwhile, is constantly defined by his physical unattractiveness, describing himself in his opening soliloquy as “deformed, unfinish’d, sent before my time / Into this breathing world” (Shakespeare, *R3* 1.1.20-21). Both these scheming villains, then, compound their tricks with images of the obscene body in a manner that

connects them with different types of trickster; as Mallett notes, Richard is a “trickster king” who “has added to his role of Machiavel the role of Jester, the (in this case) quasi-diabolical mocker of human pretensions and pieties” (67). Another parallel with the trickster of folklore is the calculating villain’s propensity for being tricked as well as tricking – for Iago finally “is caught in the web he spins for others” (Bradley 18), exposed by his wife Emilia who has discovered his knavery, while Richard III is killed at the Battle of Bosworth Field, his ambition ultimately proving to be his fatal flaw. Both of these plays end with a return to “normal” order, once the trickster’s threat of usurping conventional hierarchy has been quashed.

### Omniscient Manipulators

The final Shakespearean trickster figure is the omniscient manipulator, seen in patriarchal characters such as *The Tempest’s* Prospero and *Measure for Measure’s* Duke. It may perhaps seem excessive to identify a third trickster in *The Tempest*, alongside the twinning of Ariel and Caliban – and, in *Measure for Measure*, clowning tricksters can be found in Lucio and Pompey Bum – but the omniscient manipulator is a very different form of trickster, sharing more traits with the scheming villain or folk-tale’s wicked matriarch, despite having less evil intentions. These characters puppeteer those around them, displaying a magical or quasi-magical level of insight, and continually stage illusions and adopt disguises, using physical tricks to test the morality of others. Redolent of magicians, fusing trickery with a sense of divine judgement, such figures hold a position of authority which may initially seem incongruous with the subversive trickster. However, the omniscient manipulator stands wholly apart from society, inhabiting the trickster margins of the play, and it is this separation from the other characters that allows his disruptive presence to be felt throughout the narrative, his creative machinations with the plot establishing him as a trickster rather than mere patriarch. Indeed, the manipulator’s quasi-divine powers make him reminiscent of the trickster gods from mythology – for example, Odin, who, Davidson tells us, displays “Trickster characteristics” in that he “constantly interferes in the affairs of men, treating them like puppets to bring about the effect he desires” (3). The motives of this Shakespearean figure are also mysterious, with critics such as David Bevington (245) and Harry Berger (346) having speculated upon the ultimate impetus of the Duke’s plotting – he is, Bevington

states, a “remarkably ambiguous human being” whose actions could be viewed as either “benign” or “sadistic” (245).

Shakespearean tricksters, as has been discussed, typically draw attention to the artificiality of the play, posing questions about the nature of fiction and writerly authority – a trickster function that, as later chapters will demonstrate, would be crucial to certain twentieth-century British writers, with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark particularly using the trickster to think about writerly power.<sup>12</sup> The omniscient manipulator perhaps embodies this function to the greatest extent: planning and overseeing the plot, innately understanding the other characters, breaking the fourth wall, obscuring his motives, this figure represents the playwright in a manner that probes the relationship between writer and character. The Duke’s “pow’r divine” suggests authorial power (Shakespeare, *MM* 5.1.369), and his proficiency with disguise may intimate that he is ultimately a mask for Shakespeare. Similarly, Peter Alexander, writing in 1939, reflected that, *The Tempest* being the bard’s final play, Shakespeare may have deliberately paralleled “Prospero’s [final] renunciation of his rough magic” with “his own intention to withdraw from the theatre” (213). Although critics today tend to be sceptical of the idea that Shakespeare regarded *The Tempest* as his farewell to the theatre (noted by Maguire and Smith 132-134), this argument was widely disseminated and considered convincing in the mid-twentieth-century, and the parallel between Prospero’s magic and Shakespeare’s art would likely have influenced mid-century writers such as W. H. Auden and Iris Murdoch who, Chapter Four of this thesis will illustrate, were looking to Shakespeare to discern truths about the nature of fiction. Certainly, Prospero is arguably more playwright than player, so complicit in the narrative design that “Our level of knowledge as the audience” falls “somewhere between Prospero’s omniscience and the other characters’ naïve vulnerability” (Nostbakken 14). Thus, the omniscient manipulator, while not as immediately tricky as other character-types, is integral to thinking about the ways tricksters have been used to touch upon artistic intrigues.

It is evident that there are different forms of trickster on the Shakespearean stage. The omniscient manipulator may seem dissimilar to the buffoon, but, in

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<sup>12</sup> Murdoch, especially, will be shown to have taken figures such as the Duke and Prospero as inspiration for her own quasi-omniscient characters.

fact, Shakespeare's five groups of tricksters share traits of ambiguity, marginality, insight, physical grotesqueness and linguistic skill; they break the fourth wall, test the boundaries of fiction and challenge writerly authority, destabilise established orders and relentlessly trick those around them. Many of these functions were likely drawn from characters in earlier theatre and in folkloric narratives; Paul V. A. Williams illustrates the similarities between the early modern fool and the trickster of folk-tale and myth:

the fool and the trickster, far from having utterly separate identities, resemble each other to a marked degree. . . . Some of these similarities are based mainly on appearances; others go somewhat deeper than this, involving, for example, the chameleon-like mutations which certain fool/trickster figures indulge in as part of their function in society. The curious thing is that the fool figure in early and modern literature, the fool illuminated in medieval manuscripts, the folkloric fool, and the tribal trickster, if not exactly the same animal, all show signs of belonging to the same species. (Introduction 1)

Tricksters have thus appeared in a variety of traditional literary eras, with writers intentionally rebirthing previous tricky character-types. This sense of lineage may appear at odds with the trickster's inherent freedom and fluidity, for, as Sophie Ratcliffe has observed, "allusion . . . is also a form of obligation" (3): through his debt to a particular type, the trickster is seemingly limited. And yet, such paradoxes are key to the trickster, as is reflected in his being used by writers to address specific problems. Tricksters of myth reconcile the contradictions of being human, and tricksters of folk-tale disseminate life-lessons; meanwhile, Dynes suggests that tricksters of the Jacobean stage functioned to illuminate a paradox between traditional beliefs about "the destructive potential of greed" and a new idealisation of "individual ambition" arising from the "emergence of capitalism" (365). Trickster figures embody paradoxes, and while these paradoxes are rarely explicitly solved but rather flagged up, the trickster's suggestion that binary opposites can co-exist does allow them to dissipate anxiety, stimulating creation in place of it.

### **Punch and the Picaro**

Shakespeare's plays and their trickster figures have pervaded many different literary eras, and continued to be performed, as well as to be studied in academic institutions, throughout the twentieth century. However, there are other areas of

British theatre in which the trickster thrived, and which would likely have been familiar to writers in the middle of the twentieth century. Punch and Judy puppet shows were widespread in Britain during the Victorian era (Weltman 124) – even, as noted by Rosalind Crone (1056), featuring in J. M. Barrie’s 1896 novel *Sentimental Tommy* (397) – and are still performed today, commonly associated with seaside entertainment. The character of Punch has been seen as a relation of Pulcinella (Forti-Lewis 148), a type of zanni from commedia dell’arte, as well as of the ancient Roman clowns (Welsford 300); a sadistic figure, Punch is more wicked than ambiguous, but his flouting of authority – he typically bludgeons a policeman, a doctor and even the Devil – has led to his being labelled “clearly Trickster” by Robin Fox (300). Often dressed in jester’s motley, embodying misrule and violence, Punch seems related to earlier English stage tricksters, drawing together the demonism of the medieval Vice and the chaos of the early modern court jester. Alongside Punch and Judy, the Harlequinade of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British theatre celebrated clowns descended from commedia dell’arte: stock-characters whose presences continued to linger in the early decades of the twentieth century, as demonstrated by James Fisher, who describes how theatre director Edward Gordon Craig merged the Harlequinade with Hans Andersen’s fairy stories (31) and how Craig’s Harlequin plays influenced the character of the Fool in W. B. Yeats’s 1911 play *The Hour Glass* (33).

As well as punctuating oral tales and stage performances, the trickster can be seen as having shaped prose fiction, being central to the picaresque narratives that germinated in sixteenth-century Spain – according to Ligia Tomoiagă, “around the year 1554” (18) – and extended through Europe over the next two centuries. These stories focus on a mischievous hero of low social class – a “picaro” – relying upon his wits in order to thrive within a corrupt community. Recognisable picaros might include Miguel de Cervantes’s Sancho Panza, Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders, Charles Dickens’s Martin Chuzzlewit and, suggesting the picaresque’s influence outside Europe, Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. Like the folkloric trickster, the picaro is a subversive outsider, cunning or lucky, comedic, ambiguous and showing very little character development during the course of the narrative. Certain critics, such as Babcock-Abrahams (159) and Tomoiagă (1), have viewed the picaro as a “trickster”, with David Williams

claiming that trickster tales and picaresque narratives both aimed to satirise religion (259). Others have emphasised differences between the picaro and trickster. Darryl Dickson-Carr posits that, while the mythological trickster is a “conscious outsider”, the picaro’s tricks are designed to win him a place in the “social order” (36); similarly, Franchot Ballinger argues that, while the picaresque novel achieves humour through satire, exposing the corruption of society, trickster myths are less concerned with satire and rather present a “burlesque” type of humour, with the trickster himself being the object of laughter (24). Ultimately, Ballinger states, “the picaro may be the literary descendent of the folk tradition’s tricksters, but he is no chip off the old block; the blood line has thinned considerably” (36).

Yet, despite the picaro’s distance from tricksters of myth, he might be perceived to share many traits with the human tricksters of folk- and fairy-tales. For instance, the “youngest son” of folk-tales thwarts social conventions and expectations by outdoing his apparent betters in the same way that the picaro tricks his social superiors and exposes society’s flawed methods of judging; whereas we may laugh *at* the animal trickster of myth, we laugh *with* the youngest son and the picaro. Furthermore, Ballinger has identified “two kinds of picaro” (22): one who “might be seen as a mirror of all that is worst in his society, but that society would have us believe that his sins are all his own and therefore casts him out” (22), and one whose “adventures may result from an innocent yielding to his own roguish but not evil nature: his spontaneous authenticity places him at the margin of a society which cannot tolerate genuine innocence and which brands him therefore as an incorrigible reprobate” (23), who “is relatively blameless, perhaps even represents humanity as it was meant to be” (23). These two types of picaro seem to resonate with the “artificial” and “natural” tricksters that recur in folk-tales and on the Shakespearean stage: the cunning trickster who deliberately outwits others and the amiable fool who accidentally succeeds through luck or his creative way of thinking. At any rate, the nuances of the trickster figure through different literary eras are important in that they can help reveal distinct forms of anxiety pertinent to the writer or period. Within this thesis, then, the picaro will be considered an important component of the trickster lineage; in particular, the picaresque genre will be viewed as an influence on the trickster-hero of Murdoch’s first novel, *Under the Net*.



## Methodology

The trickster figure has thus generally been viewed by critics in two ways: as an archetypal culture hero, and, as will be the angle of this thesis, as a subversive character-type deliberately employed by writers. Despite these divided approaches, both literary and anthropological scholarship tend to stress the trickster's proclivity for solving problems and healing discord within communities, which stems from his creativity, his chaotic form of catharsis and his capacity to fuse apparent opposites. He has consequently been termed a "healer" by a number of critics, including Doty (54), Bassil-Morozow (56) and Rinda West (177), while Jung, as will be discussed later in this thesis, famously used the trickster as an archetype to help develop theories of psychoanalysis, further embedding the figure within a discourse of healing. In this thesis, I shall be exploring how four writers in the mid-twentieth century, a period of social and artistic fracture in Britain, used allusive trickster characters to think through personal, social and artistic anxieties – for, after all, tricksters are historically "vents for social frustrations" (Hynes, "Inconclusive Conclusions" 202). Their tricksters, I shall demonstrate, can be read as attempts to untangle various quandaries, to highlight problems and to conceive potential solutions; although a sense of healing is not always achieved, trickster characters in mid-century narratives frequently flag up the need for future remedying.

I have chosen to study Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor, Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark because they may be seen as loosely connected and were acquainted with each other's work, while simultaneously being diverse enough to exemplify the mid-century trickster's pervasion of different decades, genres and styles. Elizabeth Bowen was a close friend of both Elizabeth Taylor and Iris Murdoch; she also wrote the introduction to *The Observer Prize Stories: The Seraph and the Zambesi and Twenty Others*, a collection of entries from the *The Observer's* 1952 short story competition, which was won by Muriel Spark and ignited Spark's career in fiction. Bowen praised Spark's "glass-clear prose" and the "light" it emitted ("Introduction to *The Observer*" 320). Later, she orchestrated Spark's being published in America (Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen* 218). Victoria Glendinning contends that Bowen's work marks a transition in twentieth-century literary style, being "the link that connects Virginia Woolf with Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark" (*Elizabeth Bowen* 1). Conversely, Maroula Joannou has described

Bowen, Taylor and Murdoch as “very different novelists” (*Ladies* 132); indeed, while Bowen and Taylor are often seen to have been “working in the realist mode” (Hanson, “Marketing the ‘Woman Writer’” 70) and, as Chapter One will discuss, have been associated, both pejoratively and favourably, with women’s “middlebrow” writing, Murdoch’s and Spark’s works tend to be viewed as more experimental, with a self-consciousness which, especially in Spark’s case, touches upon the postmodern (see, for instance, Matthew Wickman 63-73, Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions* 81 and Miles Leeson 116). The writers had differing religious beliefs and political affiliations, which subtly affected their artistic ethos: Bowen was Protestant, Taylor atheist, Murdoch more problematically atheist, endorsing religious morals, and Spark a Catholic convert; Bowen was politically conservative, while Taylor and Murdoch both joined and left the British Communist Party and Spark, initially a Labour supporter, gradually became more “anti-establishment” (Maley 180). All four writers incorporate luminous trickster figures into their works, many of which draw from specific characters of earlier literature, but do so in ways specific to their personal styles and concerns; therefore, they demonstrate the shifting shape of the trickster in mid-century writing, and how the figure was used to address individual as well as collective anxieties.

The work of each of these four writers has recently experienced a surge in critical interest. Publications by Susan Osborn, Neil Corcoran, Eibhear Walshe and Vike Plock, amongst others, have marked a rethinking of Bowen’s importance to modernism and to mid-century writing. Plock notes that “the new field of Irish Studies [in academia] was . . . instrumental in putting Bowen onto the critical map in the 1980s and 90s” (287); certainly, over the past few decades, as Corcoran states, “the [previous] critical neglect of Bowen has ceased” (Foreword xi), and she is increasingly being established as a key figure in twentieth-century literature. Taylor, while not as critically acclaimed as Bowen, has also undergone a revival, being championed by Philip Hensher as “one of the hidden treasures of the English novel” (“The Other Liz Taylor”); in the twenty-first century, Virago Modern Classics have reprinted all of her novels with introductions by prominent contemporary writers including Hensher, Sarah Waters and Hilary Mantel, and she has been the subject of a notable 2009 biography by Nicola Beauman. I

include Murdoch as a writer whose work has always been critically revered,<sup>13</sup> and whose unique use of character seems highly relevant to thinking about the trickster. Finally, Spark, an enduringly popular writer who lived until 2006, was further popularised by Martin Stannard's ambitious 2009 biography, and has since been the subject of essay collections such as Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley's *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* and David Herman's *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*.

In selecting which specific works to explore, I have tried to remain focussed on the mid-century period: thus, this thesis looks at fictions published throughout Bowen's and Taylor's oeuvres, while its study of Murdoch's and Spark's works, which are far greater in number, is broadly limited to the earlier publications, of the 1950s through to the 1970s. Within these parameters, I have selected the texts that seem most relevant to an exploration of the trickster. As well as close reading novels and short stories, I also use historical and biographical research and archival material such as letters and diaries, to help trace the literary sources which may have influenced these writers' allusive tricksters.

My decision to focus on four female writers is also based on the fact that mid-century British women's writing, especially that which has been associated with the term "middlebrow", has, as will be discussed in Chapter One, been largely neglected by literary criticism and often treated as uncanonical. Fiction stemming from a marginalised position seems to resonate with the trickster's status as a social outsider and figure of subversion, which might suggest why the figure appears to be so prominent and deliberate within the works of my four central writers; this thesis will indicate that women's writing of the period, and in particular that of Bowen and Taylor, employed tricksters partly as a way of exploring the female voice and undermining a sense of male elitism in British writing. As David Williams points out in his study of mythical tricksters across different cultures, "living in a world that has historically been dominated by men, one aspect of the Trickster – antithesis of the status quo – would seem most naturally to belong to women" (170).

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<sup>13</sup> As recently as 2015, Chatto and Windus published Avril Horner and Anne Rowe's *Living on Paper*, a collection of several hundred previously-unpublished letters written by Murdoch, evincing a continued scholarly interest in Murdoch.

This leads into the question of the trickster's gender. There is an apparent absence of female tricksters in traditional myth (noted by Krupat 447 and Hyde 8): despite being able to change sex temporarily, these animal figures are always ultimately male, which Hyde attributes to the "fact that tricksters are ridden by lust, but their hyperactive sexuality almost never results in any offspring, the implication being that the stories are about non-procreative creativity and so get assigned to the sex that does not give birth" (8). In Shakespeare, too, such characters seem to be exclusively male, although Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* unconventionally features a cross-dressing woman in the trickster role. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly female tricksters to be found throughout traditional narratives: for instance, Landay illustrates the legendary Scheherazade's trickster status (3), Angela Carter's collection of traditional fairy-tales dedicates Part Two to stories featuring "Clever Women, [and] Resourceful Girls" (25-97) – characters who are decidedly trickster – and Ukraine has trickster folklore based around the female Sister Fox.

In fact, the past two decades have witnessed increasing scholarly interest in the female trickster: Landay, Marilyn Jurich and Ricki Stefanie Tannen have all produced monographs on the subject, while David Williams dedicates a chapter of his aforementioned book on the trickster to female characters. These critics suggest differences between female and male tricksters' functions: for example, Landay posits that female tricksters utilise a more manipulative form of trickery due to women's historical restriction to the sphere of "domesticity" (36). In this thesis, Bowen and Taylor will be shown to have used female tricksters in specific ways; Murdoch and Spark, meanwhile, tend to use male and female tricksters to convey the same concerns, without any pronounced difference between the genders, although their overall inclusion of the trickster may be viewed as part of a subversive movement in mid-century women's writing. Therefore, my choice to use the masculine pronoun when talking generally about the figure of the trickster is merely a convenience, influenced by the terminology used in the majority of trickster scholarship. The tricksters incorporated in this thesis will consist of women and men, girls and boys.

It is worth acknowledging that there is a tendency in modern criticism to view the idea of literary "types" as reductive and outdated. Valentine Cunningham, for instance, has dismissed Frye's exploration of literary models as

“pigeon-holing” (125), and similarly contends that Propp’s folkloristic morphology has a “narrowing effect” on reading (139). However, Ian Gregson, as will be discussed in Chapter One, has recently argued that postmodernist writing of the twentieth century deliberately reappropriated caricatural types as tools of satire and self-consciousness in order to challenge previous concepts of identity. Sarah Appleton Aguiar’s 2001 *The Bitch is Back*, meanwhile, has advocated the reclamation of the “bitch” archetype in studies of contemporary literature, arguably exemplifying a movement towards rethinking the importance of labels and types as potentially empowering and liberating.

Indeed, the recognition of modern literary types may be seen as indispensable in contemplating the relationship between new texts and old, illuminating ways in which traditional tropes have helped shape contemporary narratives. In *Reception Studies*, Lorna Hardwick stresses that the reception of early literary techniques by later writing demonstrates a “continuous dialogue between the past and the present”, studies of which offer “insights into the receiving society” as well as potentially allowing us to “retrieve aspects of the [historical] source which have been marginalized or forgotten” (4). Therefore, by exploring the ways in which writers of the last century rebirthed trickster types from a long-established literary tradition – by thinking about the reasons why specific figures were chosen, how the writers responded to them and how allusive characters correspond to or diverge from the original sources, as well as taking into account prominent studies of the trickster – this thesis will shed new light on the preoccupations and anxieties faced by artists in the middle of the twentieth century.

## **Chapter Overview**

Chapter One of this thesis traces the emergence of a trickster paradigm in twentieth-century British fiction. This chapter argues that numerous artistic and social strands – including a fascination with magic, trickery and the otherworldly, an allusive tendency in writing, a subversive reaction against high modernism, a reappropriation of character types, developments in psychoanalysis and an uncertainty about authority that was partly triggered by war – converged in fiction in the early half of the century, prompting a plethora of distinct trickster characters

to appear in narratives. Initially manifesting in playful figures such as Wodehouse's Jeeves and Travers's Mary Poppins, the trickster became a more sinister figure as the trauma of war compounded concerns about betrayal and accountability. The chapter considers how character has been treated in literary scholarship of the twentieth century and, by reframing the "caricature" (Gregson 4) and "fabulation" (Scholes 11) that has been seen in mid-twentieth-century British writing as part of a trickster tradition, suggests that the trickster helped impel a stylistic transition from realism to the satire and self-consciousness of postmodernism. Tricksters injected a subversive energy into "middlebrow" writing, upturned the arguably intellectual elitism of high modernism through satirical realism and the trickster's latent creativity and intuitive form of intelligence and twisted previous notions of character. Consequently, they need to be reconceived as an important component of mid-twentieth-century literature.

The subsequent chapters of this thesis are author-based, looking at the specific functions of the trickster in the works of my four chosen writers. Chapter Two argues that Elizabeth Bowen sought to flag up a perceived antithesis between art and intellectualism by including trickster characters with allusions to fairy-tales in her novels and short stories. The chapter proposes that fairy-tales, for Bowen, captured the stoicism with which she equated academic discourse while paradoxically also prompting a deeply emotional and ineffable response in the reader or listener; as such, characters reverberating with myths and fairy-tales could be used to highlight a lack of creativity in modern academia, and, furthermore, to potentially reconcile what Bowen deemed two dichotomous spheres. In underscoring a need for healing, she reached for the Grimm brothers' stories she loved, as well as the figure of the Fisher King, a fertility symbol from Arthurian legend. Bowen, I shall suggest, also considered this art/intelligence dilemma to extend to a clash between female and male modes of understanding, and expressed her consequent concerns through a different type of trickster character: the lonely ingénue.

Chapter Three shows Elizabeth Taylor using trickster pairings of children and sensitive women, who stand apart from their milieu, as a means of probing her conception of identity as something amorphous, which may pass between persons. Echoing the traditional trickster's boundary-crossing fluidity, and influenced by the paintings of Elinor Bellingham-Smith, Taylor's woman-child

pairings suggest a process of osmosis and change to be crucial in establishing a sense of personality, and, furthermore, imply the importance of writing and reading to healing the self. Taylor, we shall see, had an understanding of the traditional role of the trickster and used more typical trickster figures to help address a division between wanting to convey the depth of human nature and desiring concrete forms in fiction. Her sensuous tricksters and their attempts to represent ineffability chime with those of Bowen, a writer whom Taylor greatly admired, but Taylor's figures seem rather more self-conscious, moving towards the controlling characters we find in the novels of Iris Murdoch.

Chapter Four, then, explores Murdoch's method of representing and contemplating the nature of art through highly allusive, marginalised and manipulative characters. Murdoch's tricksters, it seems, engage in tricky magic rituals to highlight the artificiality of fiction; they also twist Shakespearean figures, suggesting Murdoch's need to flag up her artistic distance from Shakespeare – her effort to show her creations as inauthentic. Finally, likely influenced by work of W. H. Auden, her tricksters test the relationship between author, character and reader, pondering issues of characters' freedom as well as the quasi-magical meeting of minds that constitutes the experience of fiction – a preoccupation that connects with the reader-response theories that arose around the middle of the century. Of all the tricksters approached in this thesis, Murdoch's are those most freighted with a sense of anxiety: they intimate their author's struggle to think through ethical questions and to obtain artistic reassurance.

In contrast, Muriel Spark's tricksters, though similarly self-conscious and dealing with authority and artistic truth, are, it appears, used far more confidently, to convey very precise ideas rather than to help the author conceptualise them. Chapter Five argues that Spark's first novel, *The Comforters*, was intended to absolve the writer from a sense of authorial responsibility by underscoring her distance from God. Her semi-autobiographical tricksters demonstrate that Spark, rather like Bowen, discerned a crucial difference between intuition and academic knowledge, which was key to her understanding of fiction and truth and which enabled her to explore potentialities of herself and persons known to her without feeling herself to be impinging on God's narrative. Furthermore, this chapter argues, Spark embedded metafictional aspects within her puppet-like tricksters in order to "play with" them, conceiving the trickster's traditional traits of mutability

and prescience as opportunities for experiment. However, Spark's tricksters also operate on a more metaphysical level, with demonic characters allowing her to frame good and evil in their purest forms as supernatural influences and thus probe the integration of the human and the otherworldly.

This thesis's conclusion evaluates the differences and similarities in Bowen's, Taylor's, Murdoch's and Spark's treatment of trickster characters, within a broader context of thinking about the role of the trickster in mid-century British writing. The trickster, I suggest, was important in the development of twentieth-century movements towards metafiction and literary subversion, and sheds light on anxieties present in mid-century artistic circles. This conclusion uses a close reading of material by Angela Carter to consider how the trickster might have manifested in more fantastical British literature, and finally suggests areas for potential research into the tricksters – or trickster alternatives – of fiction since the mid-twentieth century.



## Chapter 1. The Emergence of a Trickster Paradigm in Twentieth-Century British Literature

### Introduction

Harley Granville Barker's 1914 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, hosted by the Savoy Theatre, London, prompted critical controversy over its unorthodox treatment of the fairy characters (noted by Dymkowski 63, Salmon 216 and Falocco 57). Barker's fairies, performed by adults rather than children, were imbued with a sense of otherworldliness: their skins were entirely painted gold, they moved "in a staccato fashion" suggestive of puppets, and their demeanours evoked "a distinctly oriental 'otherness'" at odds with the traditional image of the English fairy (McCullough 117). Barker professed that the challenge of conceiving the fairies had "inspired" the production (qtd. in Salmon 215): their supernatural presentation was crucial in conveying the play's sense of disorientation. Converse to the alien aura of the fairies, Puck was more anthropomorphised, modelled upon the Robin Goodfellow of English folklore (McCullough 117) and described by Barker as "as English as he can be" (qtd. in Dymkowski 63). Puck stood apart from his fellow sprites not only in appearance, however, but in his distance from the play's world. Drawing from the character's meta-theatrical function implicit in Shakespeare's script, Barker had Puck signal for the lights to go down and lift the curtain as it was raised, displaying "an extra-theatrical awareness . . . of the dramatic artifice of the stage machinery" which made him "a mediator between the audience and the theatrical event" (Mazer 148).

Barker's uncanny fairies and self-conscious Puck bring together distinct lines of magic and trickery that were already evident in early twentieth-century aesthetics: a fascination with fairies' relation to the human, the use of past literatures to find new ways of thinking about magical figures and a focus on the boundary between truth and artifice. This chapter will trace how various social and artistic strands converged in Britain through the first half of the twentieth century to form a trickster paradigm that was used by mid-century writers to probe literary concepts and, often, to purge anxieties. It will illustrate that both a preoccupation with the supernatural in Edwardian culture and a concern over

social mobility was gradually realised in popular fiction through subversive characters with magical overtones, who alluded to types from traditional literature. Meanwhile, the rise of Tarot in elitist circles had fuelled an interest in tropes, and certain modernist writers had begun to think about the figure of the artist as a trickster. By the 1950s, Jung's publications were promulgating allusive archetypes, including the "trickster" ("On the Psychology" 255), as vital in understanding the human psyche and healing the mind. The fracturing after-effects of war in Britain, I shall propose, ironically helped to compound these various elements into a literary trickster figure, who provided writers with a way of crystallising otherwise ineffable personal anxieties about art, society and religion. Offering a new synthesis of various complementary modes of thought at the turn of the century, and new readings of key trickster texts, this chapter will conclude by suggesting that the trickster crucially complemented the post-war shift in literary genre and character and the movement towards postmodernism's satire and self-consciousness.

### **Fusions of the Supernatural and the Human**

Barker's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reflects an artistic paradox that had run through the Victorian era and extended into the early decades of the twentieth century: the tension between a desire for the otherworldly, and a conflicting desire to recognise the human in that otherworldly. Nicola Bown has explained that many people in nineteenth-century Britain

felt oppressed by their responsibilities, fearful of the future and doubtful of the unalloyed benefits of progress. Fear, anxiety, doubt and pessimism cannot be magicked away, it is true, but they can be given an enchanted form. The Victorians dreamed of fairies, who worked a small enchantment on them, and gave them back the wonder and mystery modernity had taken away from the world. (1)

Images of fairies, Bown seems to suggest, could be applied like a balm to an increasingly urbanised world, offering a nostalgic retreat from reality; yet, Victorian portrayals of fairyland also tended to be symptomatic of real social struggles and thus inextricable from the modern world. This sense of tension is evident in the differing critical viewpoints over the role of the supernatural in Victorian art. Katherine Newey has stressed how the

widespread interest in fairies in the nineteenth century is generally held to be a response to the social, economic and environmental changes of rapid industrialization of the first half of the nineteenth century. Modernity was thought inimical to fairies, and fairy stories and fairy lore were a cultural memory of a golden age of rural – even prelapsarian – existence. (97)

Fairyland, in this view, was a magical sphere wholly separate from everyday Victorian life. However, Steven Connor has posited that “The [Victorian] ‘supernatural’ was no alternative or other world, but rather an image, annex or extension of the imposing, ceaselessly volatile real world of the nineteenth century” (258), and delineates how the “‘other world’ was envisaged as above, beyond, beneath, beside, alongside and even within this world. . . . There were gateways, doors, paths, veils, curtains” (259).

There thus seems to have been a Victorian proclivity for simultaneously projecting the real onto the supernatural and desiring a distance between modernity and fairyland. The profusion of mischievous sprites in the works of painters and illustrators such as Richard Dadd, Richard Doyle, Arthur Rackham and J. A. Fitzgerald adhere to a well-established artistic tradition of depicting fairies in human form; those in Doyle’s 1870 *Teasing a Butterfly*, for instance, lack wings, wear clothes and resemble children at play (figure 1). Sitting beneath the foxgloves, the fairies appear mischievous, clean and familiar.



Figure 1. Richard Doyle; *Teasing a Butterfly*, 1870; colour engraving; The Antiquarium, Houston; [theantiquarium.com](http://theantiquarium.com); accessed 12 Nov. 2016; [www.theantiquarium.com/item/001460/richard-doyle-teasing-a-butterfly#](http://www.theantiquarium.com/item/001460/richard-doyle-teasing-a-butterfly#)

Similarly, Joseph Noel Paton's 1847 *The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania* (figure 2), an example of what Michael Booth has recognised as a huge trend in Victorian painting of focussing on Shakespeare's "fairy plays" (35), employs a Pre-Raphaelite style to emphasise the anatomical humanness of the magical figures. At the same time, these images are rooted in ideals of innocence and courtly romance that seem antithetical to Victorian urbanization, and they often stress fairyland's otherness – as is the effect of the opulent use of light and colour in many of J. A. Fitzgerald's paintings.



Figure 2. Joseph Noel Paton; *The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania*; 1847; oil on canvas; Scottish National Gallery; photography by Antonia Reeve; [art.nationalgalleries.org](http://art.nationalgalleries.org); accessed 12 Nov. 2016; [art.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/5265/reconciliation-oberon-and-titania-1847?location%5B36063%5D=36063&search\\_set\\_offset=45](http://art.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/5265/reconciliation-oberon-and-titania-1847?location%5B36063%5D=36063&search_set_offset=45).

A similar treatment of fairies was to be found on the nineteenth-century stage. Newey notes that "In the 1830s and 1840s, the British popular theatre fell in love with fairyland. Fairies in theatre, impersonated by dancers in flesh-coloured tights and tulle dresses and wings, became fixtures of pantomime, burlesque, and extravaganza" (97). The inclusion of magical characters in such typically interactive, hyperbolic theatre forms as these suggests a wish to make the otherworldly into something tangible. During the Christmas period, London performance venues offered Victorian audiences dramatizations of fairy tales ("Things Theatrical") and pantomimes filled with "Sprites, fairies and witches"

("Multiple News Items"); fairy enchantment appears to have taken its place amidst other festive consumables. But there also seem to have been those who desired a more transcendent portrayal of the supernatural, as suggested by an 1840 review in *John Bull* of a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here, the reviewers stated that "an occasional preference of the suggestive to the actual would be more in keeping with the fairy texture of the drama", and that the performance ought to have favoured "the dim obscure" in order to "leave more to the imagination. In short, wherever possible the real and substantial should be thrown into the back-ground" ("A Midsummer Night's Dream").

Later, in the early twentieth century, as Shakespeare experienced a resurgence of popularity amongst scholars (Hinojosa 145), certain notable productions of his plays extended the tension between the human and the otherworldly by having tricky characters disturb the fourth wall between the audience and the fiction of the play. While Barker's Puck recognised the mechanics of the stage, Herbert Beerbohm Tree's 1910 production of *Henry VIII* had the Prologue delivered by the Jester. The Prologue addresses the audience directly, speaks of the play objectively and is traditionally performed by an otherwise unidentified figure. In Tree's production, the Jester "peeked out from behind the curtains at the opening of the play and came through them onto the apron for the speech" (Mazer 149): he was at once a character within the play and a witness to it. Commenting on this unconventional staging, Mazer reflects that "in it we can see the same action that Barker employed with Puck in *The Dream*. The Jester continued as a silent commentator on the action in Tree's *Henry VIII*" (149). The Shakespearean fool, as has been illustrated in this thesis's introduction, is a magical outsider consubstantial with sprites such as Puck, and this early-twentieth-century impulse to augment such tricksters' meta-theatrical functions suggests the border between the real and imaginary, between spectator and character, to have been being rethought in terms of its porousness.

The tension in much Victorian and early-twentieth-century art<sup>1</sup> surrounding the human's relation to fairyland was arguably impelled by the growth of spiritualism in the western world, originating in America before spreading to

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<sup>1</sup> The illustrations featured in Cicely Mary Barker's 1923 *Flower Fairies of the Spring* may be seen as a later example of the tendency to portray fairies as embedded in innocence and nature, while simultaneously depicting these fairies as almost identical to modern human children in appearance and pose.

Britain (Oppenheim 11), which served to reconceptualise the spiritual realm's proximity to society. Notably, modern technology, rather than evoking an artificial obverse to the transcendent, seems to have offered a means of reifying the supernatural other. Shane McCorristine proposes that the rise of "ghost seeing" in the Victorian era stemmed partially from "the uncanny nature of modern communication and notions of community" (3); he suggests that the invention of telegraph and its mysterious ability to commune with persons absent intimated new possibilities of approaching the dead (11). Spiritualism grounded the ethereal by relying heavily on physical props, from the trend for "spirit photography" (Oppenheim 297), to the incorporation of tables, pens, paper, belongings of the departed, Tarot cards and ectoplasm into séances, to the instruments invented allegedly to measure paranormal manifestations, such as the "sthenometer", purported to detect auras (Hollander 141), or the "spiritoscope", designed to help mediums contact the dead (Hazen 86). The otherworldly was, it seemed, becoming increasingly palpable, merging the fantastic with the mundane – as Marlene Tromp describes, "this Victorian faith of 'sittings', mediums, and spirit contact thrilled its practitioners and detractors alike and broke all rules of decency and decorum in spite of the fact that it was nurtured and developed in the drawing rooms of the proprietous middle classes" (21).

Yet, there were naturally those who disputed the propinquity of the human and the transcendent; indeed, alongside the excitement of spiritualism there ran an equally enthused movement to expose fraud, often executed with the air of a witch-hunt. This is evinced by the numerous news articles appearing in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, denouncing mediumship as trickery. According to an 1861 article in *Newcastle Courant*, for example, "Fraud has been repeatedly detected in some of the best authenticated examples of rapping and clairvoyance; indeed, the whole thing has become an avowed and practiced juggle" ("Spiritualism"), while an 1889 letter in *Portsmouth Evening News* declared spiritualism to be "miserable mockery and fraud", scorned "the silly set who believe table rappings and tambourine playing to be manifestations from the unseen world" and stated that "dozens of clever mediums, beginning with Kate and Maggie Fox, have confessed the whole thing to be an imposture and a sham" ("Spiritualism: A Fraud or a Revelation?"). Much of this social anxiety

seems to have arisen from a perceived overlap between images of mediumship and images of stage magic; as Leigh Wilson explains:

the tricks of entertainment magic were a dangerous mirror image of the phenomena of spiritualism, theosophy and magic ritual, suggesting that intelligences other than the discarnate could produce such marvels, and numerous individual stage magicians, and the Magic Circle itself, investigated mediums and were often involved in their exposure as frauds. (3-4)

The presence of the theatre, with its flamboyant tricks, thus threatened to undermine the credibility of the spiritualist movement. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, witnessed friction between notions of truth and stage trickery: as the otherworldly was pulled further into the human sphere, there arose a risk of its dematerialising, of its *becoming* human through being exposed as fraud. This was a tension between the real and the imagined, seemingly a precursor to Tree's and Barker's probing of the relationship between character and audience. It is important to note that the imbrications of truth and fiction in the Victorian era were complex; however, there seems to be a general consensus amongst critics that a dramatic conceptual split between truth and fiction occurred in the nineteenth century (see, for instance, Mitchell 16, Zimmerman 44, White 123 and Orr 3). Whereas, in previous centuries, historical fact had been merged with rhetoric, having had "a firmly philosophical purpose, functioning to enlighten and instruct the present" (Mitchell 15), Linda Orr argues that "It is as if history awakes in the nineteenth century surprised and even horrified to see how closely it is coupled with fiction" (3). This fresh sense of dichotomy is seen in the anxiety over borders between the real and the imaginary, which seems to have been present in British art and culture: there was a desire simultaneously to extend images of humanness beyond the terrestrial, and to excise fiction from truth.

At the start of the twentieth century, then, a preoccupation with magic was arguably attached to a sense of suspicion and concern over manipulation: as Peter Lamont observes, spiritualism "not only posed a serious challenge to accepted scientific knowledge, but also raised wider issues about authority and the nature of evidence" (920). Echoes of this Victorian legacy can be seen as late as 1920, when Frances Griffiths and Elsie Wright claimed to have captured their Cottingley Fairies on camera. The photographs showed the supposed fairies interacting with Elsie and Frances, thus appealingly eliding the human with the supernatural, while the use of the camera compounded the idea of modern

technology being used to reach the otherworldly; as Alex Owen puts it, “Cottingley was undoubtedly one of the last manifestations of a glorious Victorian and Edwardian fairy tradition, and equally a highly-publicized incident in a far broader interwar engagement with mysticism and the occult” (50). Certainly, these apparent woodland sprites drew together the popular image of the fairy and the anxiety over spiritualist fraud. The pictures, famously endorsed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his book *The Coming of the Fairies*, were scrutinised by photography experts and prompted a division amongst the press, as noted by Paul Smith (390). They evoked the potential of trickery and its concomitant paranoia, having “a theatrical quality, the air of a staged event” (Owen 64) and a proximity to the magician Harry Houdini, who was a close friend of Conan Doyle and who publicly endeavoured to debunk spiritualists (see Houdini’s *A Magician Among the Spirits*).

### **Fairy-Tales and Fantastic Tricksters**

While visual images of the supernatural were gaining popularity through paintings, stage productions and photography in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, a complementary magical genre of literature was emerging. Jack Zipes in his introduction to *Victorian Fairy Tales* has explained that the Romantic movement helped reintroduce the literary fairy-tale into nineteenth-century Britain, where it became increasingly used as a political tool to “question the so-called productive forces of progress and the Enlightenment” (xv), targeting a middle-class audience through their children; Laurence Talairach-Vielmas has similarly commented upon the revolutionary agency of numerous fairy stories written in the Victorian period (19). But Zipes also concedes that not all Victorian fairy-tales were subversive, with some, conversely, being written to reinforce traditional social structures (Introduction xxiii). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the popularity of the fairy-tale was likely further cemented by a propensity for looking back in literature. Recent publications contributing to the body of reception studies have helped illuminate this: Ann Martin’s 2006 *Red Riding Hood and the Wolf in Bed* has demonstrated there to be a clear debt to traditional fairy-tales in the works of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes, while Chris Jones’s 2006 *Strange Likeness* has argued that the poems of Ezra Pound and W. H. Auden have echoes of Old English in their



“compositional technique, range of reference, subject material, and theory of poetic language” (238). Steven Matthews, writing in 2013, has shown T. S. Eliot to have artistically engaged with early modern literature, while Sally Greene’s 1999 collection of essays on Virginia Woolf traces Renaissance influences on Woolf’s works. Lynne Walhout Hinojosa, writing in 2009, has, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, established Shakespeare to have also experienced a revival around the turn of the century, and Ratcliffe’s 2008 book *On Sympathy* shows Robert Browning’s, W. H. Auden’s and Samuel Beckett’s literary dependence on Shakespeare.

Likely encouraged by this movement for looking back, magical tales developed into novel-length works of children’s fantasy literature in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as outlined by Owen:

An explosion of interest in fairies had taken place during the first decades of the nineteenth century, and this was maintained in its various forms until well after the first World War. Fairies were part of a centuries-old British folk tradition, but the Romantic movement and European collections of traditional tales and legends influenced a nineteenth-century literary engagement with fairyland which ranged from the work of antiquarians and folklorists, involved in preserving a specifically British inheritance of ballads and folk tales, to a related fantasy literature. (50-51)

Important examples of this new form of literature include Lewis Carroll’s 1865 *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Rudyard Kipling’s 1906 *Puck of Pook’s Hill* and J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan and Wendy*, published as a play in 1904 and a novel in 1911. In each of these works, we may find elusive characters who, while being part of something magical, are also highly tricky and thus perhaps nod to the sense of social unease surrounding the supernatural. These characters tend to reach for the altruistic tricksters of traditional fairy-tales. In Carroll’s story, for example, the character of the Cheshire Cat chimes with the small animal tricksters from folklore, and, furthermore, corresponds with “Tale Type 545B” of the Aarne-Thompson classification system: the cat (or fox) as supernatural helper (Aarne 194). Aarne and Thompson recognise the eponymous character of Charles Perrault’s 1697 *Puss in Boots*, based on an earlier European fairy-tale, as an example of this tale type (Aarne 194); and, indeed, parallels may be drawn between Perrault’s cat helper and Carroll’s own feline trickster. In the earlier story, the youngest son of a miller is disappointed to inherit a cat rather than the fortune

of his siblings (1), but the cat soon proves exceedingly cunning, engineering his master's rise in fortune through a series of tricks. Louis Marin observes that:

The main character of the tale, the Cat, appears to be the Master of words in this particular sense that he is always speaking and always lying and nonetheless that at the end his deceptive words are true. Everything he said when he deceived his interlocutors finally turns out to be just as he had claimed. The most direct way of understanding this process is to consider it as magical. (54-55)

Adhering to the functions of fairy-tale tricksters, and of the fools of Renaissance dramas, Puss in Boots suggests a supernatural insight into future events. Furthermore, the manner in which his linguistic tricks ultimately engender reality alludes to the tricksters of myth and folklore, with their ability to create new worlds; the creative Puss in Boots disturbs the border between fiction and truth. In Carroll's novel, the Cheshire Cat guides Alice through Wonderland much as Perrault's cat aided his master, advising her where to go and what to expect from the upturned world around her (41-42). His words to Alice, initially nonsensical, are, like Puss in Boots's, eventually proven true: for instance, he correctly predicts that Alice will play croquet with the Queen (42), and also claims to have known that the baby would turn into a pig (43). Phyllis Stowell (7) and Maria Nikolajeva (257) have separately identified the Cheshire Cat as a trickster; Stowell writes of him as "the Trickster, an expert in appearance and disappearance who contains significant opposites . . . Illusive and ambivalent, he is a guiding spirit" (7), and Nikolajeva, whose article on fictional cats also mentions Puss in Boots as "a trickster figure" (252), has called the Cheshire Cat "a benevolent companion that acts as Alice's protector in an unfamiliar and bizarre world. The Cheshire Cat does indeed have . . . the function of the mythical guide" (257).

This identification of Carroll's Cat as a trickster can be enlarged upon in turning to the detail of the story. Certainly, he seems to act as an altruistic confidante to Alice, who is "very glad she had someone to listen to her" upon spotting him at the croquet game (56). And yet, he is also a disruptive presence, able to dematerialise and thus invisibly oversee the novel's events and representing subversive laughter through his grin, which first appears in the presence of the Duchess (38) and later in that of the King (56), who objects to the way the Cat looks at him (57). The Cat flouts authority in this manner throughout the narrative, coolly dissolving into the air while the King and Queen discuss how to execute him (57) and consequently upending the croquet game

into chaos. The benevolent Cat thus promises safety and creativity in subversion, adhering to what has been identified as the tendency of certain Victorian fairy-tales to challenge established political norms. At the same time, however, the Cat's mutability means that, while an appealing character, he never seems entirely trustworthy, subtly reflecting the anxiety over the supernatural that was present, as discussed above, in Victorian Britain.

Barrie's *Peter Pan and Wendy* contains another magical guide: Peter Pan, who demonstrates the shapes taken by the trickster in the early twentieth century. Like the Cheshire Cat, Peter constantly challenges authority – particularly the authority of adults, embodied by the figure of Captain Hook – but Barrie's work further extends this subversion to undermine conventional beliefs about the nature of the self. Barrie's play and novel, which Jamie Williamson (129) and Jason Marc Harris (61) have suggested evolved from Victorian fairy stories, were written in an era gripped by new theories of psychoanalysis, and have thus prompted Freudian readings by critics such as Michael Egan, who argues that Captain Hook "represents the Oedipal Father" (49), Jacqueline Rose, who offers a broader reading of sexuality in Barrie's works in *The Case of Peter Pan*, and, more recently in 2011, Kenneth Kidd, who has appraised the story's history in psychoanalysis (84). In such contexts as these, Peter Pan may become a motif for repressed childhood experiences: a boy whose nightly adventures, like dreams, touch upon latent fears that are forgotten by the conscious adult mind. Indeed, Freud himself addressed more traditional fairy-tales and folk-tales in a number of works, such as "The Uncanny", "The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales" and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and psychoanalysis's deep resonance with fairy-tale tropes has therefore been discussed by a plethora of critics, including Bruno Bettelheim (7), D. L. Ashliman in *Folk and Fairy Tales* (140-144), Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (171-176), Simon A. Grolnick (203-216) and Kenneth Kidd. Fairy-tales seem to have appealed to Freud through their universal and primitive natures; as Kidd states, "Mythic and anthropological conceptions of the fairy tale echoed the evolutionary doctrines of the day, linking folk and fairy tales to ostensibly primitive levels of individual and group development" (4), so that "Fairy-tale analysis was not simply a by-product of psychoanalysis but rather a key

genre through which psychoanalysis was practised and disseminated” (5).<sup>2</sup> In the early twentieth century, then, the fashionableness of psychoanalysis and its association with the fairy-tale meant that this literary genre was also acquiring significance as being a way to potentially decipher the mysteries of the self.

But while the character of Peter Pan has been seen as reflecting modern ideas about the psyche which allowed Barrie’s readership to look towards a new century, he was simultaneously rooted in a literary tradition of fairy-tale and folk-tale tricksters. This is immediately obvious through Peter’s being an unlikely hero – a young boy triumphing over his older, larger and stronger adversary through the use of magic and cunning – much as, as noted in this thesis’s introduction, in traditional tales it is the smallest animal or youngest son who achieves success through his trickster status. Yet, while the folkloric trickster usually outwits his larger enemy, my introductory chapter established that he has been recognised by critics also to be the occasional victim of tricks. A similar scenario presents itself in *Peter Pan and Wendy*, with Peter innocently attempting to drink the poisoned “medicine” planted by Hook (166). Furthermore, Peter’s arrogance and his predilection for cruel body tricks – for instance, cutting off Hook’s hand and feeding it to the crocodile (82) – chime with the animal trickster of folk-tales, who is “inordinately vain” (Ricketts 327) and whose tricks are “often centred on the body and bodily functions” (Kononenko and Kukharenko 9).

Like the traditional trickster, Peter is a boundary-crosser, his movement between London and Neverland also suggesting a movement between the world of the living and that of the dead: Neverland is a place where immortal children are frozen in time, and its allusions to heaven have been noted by Richard Locke (106).<sup>3</sup> This echoes Lévi-Strauss’s theory, discussed in the introduction of this thesis, that the trickster, as a carrion-eater, was situated between herbivore and carnivore and consequently life and death. Peter also fuses categories of human and animal; Barrie’s 1906 *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* states that “All

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<sup>2</sup> Bettelheim, a later psychoanalyst than Freud, would argue that these traditional stories were important to a child’s inner development: that they allowed the child to fit “unconscious content into conscious fantasies, which then enable him to deal with that content” (7).

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Owen proposes that Barrie’s *Peter Pan* “is suggestive of what Victorian folklorists already knew, that the British fairies of traditional lore were often linked with death” (53) – he adds that, in Celtic tradition, fairies were often believed to be “departed souls who were unable to enter heaven” or “souls awaiting reincarnation” (54), and that fairyland was thus “a kind of limbo” (54). *Neverland*, an indisputable fairyland, may therefore have been not only otherworldly, but a form of afterlife.

children” are “birds before they . . . [are] human” (21) but that, unlike other children, Peter had retained his bird-like ability to fly (27), and also associates him with a goat (19), emphasising the character’s obvious debt to the Greek god Pan. Peter Pan as a character was subversive, flawed and creative, introducing the Darling children to a world of magical potential; as a figure in early-century literature, he at once probed new theories on human nature while upholding an established trickster tradition.

### **Crafty Servants in Popular Fiction**

While the Cheshire Cat and Peter Pan in many ways seem extensions of the Victorian preoccupation with fairyland, another form of trickster was emerging in early twentieth-century British literature, with roots in the cunning servants of the early modern stage. Frye has identified the “tricky slave” as the character-type who is “entrusted with hatching the schemes which bring about the hero’s victory” (*Anatomy* 173); these figures often overlap with the fools of carnivalesque inversion, symbolising the upheaval of traditional social hierarchies. Carroll’s Cheshire Cat appears to fall into the category of tricky helper, but a later, more realist incarnation of the trope can be found in P. G. Wodehouse’s comic character Jeeves. Jeeves possesses an ability to disappear in an almost magical way reminiscent of Carroll’s cat; the narrator at one point describes how Jeeves “floated noiselessly through the doorway like a healing zephyr. . . . He just streamed in. . . . Then he seemed to flicker, and wasn’t there any longer. I heard him moving about in the kitchen, and presently he came back with a glass on a tray” (“Jeeves Takes Charge” 12-13). The title of Wodehouse’s later novel, *Barmy in Wonderland*, further indicates the writer to have owed a debt to Carroll.

Critics including Anthony Quinton (xiv), Nigel Cawthorne (viii), Robin Fox (301) and Frye (*Anatomy* 173), have recognised Jeeves as a descendent of theatre’s tricky servant; certainly, it is apparent that, like Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*, Autolycus in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* and, to some extent, Mosca in Jonson’s *Volpone*, all of whom engineer the success of their social betters, Wodehouse’s fictional valet uses his cool cunning to disentangle his bumbling employer, Bertie Wooster, from an assortment of imbroglios. This literary allusion is, at times, subtly satirical; for instance, in

“Jeeves Takes Charge”, the 1916 story of Bertie and Jeeves’s first meeting, the valet craftily breaks up Bertie’s engagement with the unsuitable Florence Craye, thus inverting the traditional trope of the servant aiding the young lovers which may be seen in such plays as *The Roaring Girl* and Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

The dynamics between Bertie and Jeeves naturally pose questions about the stability of social hierarchies; indeed, Alison Light has suggested that Jeeves subtly challenged inequality:

In Noël Coward’s patriotic revue of 1931, *Cavalcade*, the Tory imagination was reassured by the sight of a demobbed butler going up in the world only to be ruined by drink, while the coffee-break and commuter classes could be comforted by P. G. Wodehouse’s ‘Jeeves’ novels, in which Bertie Wooster, an asinine toff, relies on his superior manservant (252)

There seems to have been an underlying sense of social anxiety in early twentieth-century Britain accruing from the evolution of conspicuous consumerism: fear of “the lower classes taking on life styles appropriately confined to their social superiors” (Stearns 67). F. M. L. Thompson has explained that “economic growth, improvement in living standards, and the increasing availability of goods and services which the working classes were eager to consume” provoked “The idea of emulation, with its connotation of apeing one’s betters and keeping up with the Joneses” in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain (195). Peter Stearns has also noted an “escalation of consumerism” during this period to have prompted public “attacks on people who consumed at the expense of appropriate saving or class distinctions” (69). Unlike Bertie Wooster, Jeeves is not presented as a great consumer in Wodehouse’s fiction; nevertheless, his subversive intelligence and haughtiness may have drawn from a sense of increased egalitarianism and of unrest among the working-class.

Robert Storey asserts that social shifts have led to the simplification of the crafty servant. Storey speaks of the “social wit” having been most active in classical and early modern comedy, referencing Puck and Ariel as examples, but adds that “As literature becomes more realistic – and its social context more egalitarian – this type is endangered, reduced to the clever Jeeves of Wodehouse’s stories, or to the spunky maid, like Shirley Booth’s Hazel” (*Mimesis* 170). Pace Storey, I want to suggest that, far from being limiting, the sense of

increasing social equality and the move towards more ostensibly mundane settings in fiction gave the “social wit”, or trickster, fresh subversive agency and helped augment the rising trickster paradigm.

This may be demonstrated through P. L. Travers’s character of Mary Poppins. Created in 1934, two decades after Wodehouse’s Jeeves, the more radical Mary Poppins was a magical figure who would use her position in domestic service to undermine middle-class English family life. This children’s nanny has been explored as a “trickster” by Giorgia Grilli (63);<sup>4</sup> indeed, details of her trickster-like behaviour are woven through Travers’s novels. Grilli describes how, before Mary Poppins’s arrival:

the Banks children were boisterous, unruly, and badly behaved youngsters who refused to accept the ways of adults and who sought to rebel against them. . . . Under her care, however, these children become surprisingly eager to obey each and every one of her commands, and suddenly lose their desire to divert from the socially acclaimed exigencies of order, cleanliness, and efficiency. They do so not because they blindly accept these values but because these values suddenly take on new meaning: they are no longer burdensome tasks to be fulfilled in the service of some unnatural duty; rather they are now seen as the lighthearted and cunning rules of an exciting game, and become a form of disguise. (18)

The magical nanny therefore uses chaotic adventures to ensure the children’s propriety in conventional society – a method which, it might further be argued, echoes the manner in which Shakespearean fools briefly inverted order as a means of purging unrest.

Mary Poppins, whose temperament would later be fundamentally altered by the 1964 Disney film, was originally something of “a natural phenomenon, ancient as mountain ranges, on first-name terms with the primal powers of the universe, adored and respected by everything that saw the world as it was. And she was a mystery” (Gaiman, Foreword xiii). Mary Poppins in the novels is conceited, equivocal and often rather sadistic towards the children while at other times unexpectedly philanthropic. A figure of duality, she dissimulates her creative energy behind strict Edwardian values, while ultimately fabricating her own ideology. For instance, in *Mary Poppins*, the first book of the series, the

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<sup>4</sup> Grilli compares Mary Poppins with the tradition of folkloric tricksters, arguing that, like these ancient figures, Mary is an ambiguous character whose “tricks often bring about positive effects” (64) and who engenders a “paradoxical neutralization” by “bring[ing] to light the oppositions inherent in every situation, and in so doing allow[ing] the transcendence of such opposites” (65).

nanny claims, while in a supercilious mood, that all birds are sparrows – or “sparrers”<sup>5</sup> – to her (95), and adds that they belong “in a pie” (97), using language of nursery rhymes<sup>6</sup> to suggest a dismissive attitude towards nature. Later in the novel, however, she converses cheerfully with a starling who describes her as the “Great Exception” (122) – the only human who has continued to understand the language of nature beyond their first birthday. Her ability to talk with animals is a recurrent theme in the stories, echoing the anthropomorphism of fables in a manner that inverts a conventional world-order: in *Mary Poppins*, a nocturnal trip to the zoo reveals free animals observing caged humans (137), while *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* includes a comparable scene where fish in the ocean use fishing rods to catch humans from the surface, attaching “strawberry tart” to their lines as bait (143-145).

Ultimately, although Travers’s novels have not been critically read as a *Bildungsroman* series, *Mary Poppins*’s disruptive presence prompts the children to integrate into adult society – much as, at the end of the adventures of *Peter Pan and Wendy*, the Darling children return home feeling ready to grow up. It seems likely that Travers would have understood the carnivalesque function of the trickster, for she had previously been an actress in a Shakespearean theatre company, making her debut in a 1921 production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Brody 17). Certainly, *Mary Poppins Comes Back* contains a fairy-tale in which a “Fool” arrives at court and edifies the selfish king (117-132), reflecting the fool’s traditional role as a figure of subversive wisdom.

Travers’s writing, with its echoes of Shakespearean inversion, thus also seems to have been influenced by fairy-tales; as Grilli has noted, each *Mary Poppins* novel contains “one unexpected chapter that fully immerses us in the world of traditional fairy tales” (11). This was likely the symptom of a love that the author had for such stories; Valerie Lawson outlines Travers’s enjoyment of them as a child: “All the villains, dwarves, giants and stepmothers, wicked fairies, dragons and witches stayed with her for life. She liked the wickedest women most. . . . She was fascinated by the evil forces of the stories, the black sheep, the wicked fairy” (41). Lawson further records Travers to have been fond of “the

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<sup>5</sup> A pronunciation which seems to reinforce her ostensibly working-class status.

<sup>6</sup> The image of birds in a pie alludes to “Sing a Song of Sixpence”, a popular nursery rhyme from a folkloric tradition, which includes the lines “Four-and-twenty Blackbirds / Bak’d in a Pie” (J. W. Elliott 32).



children's stories of Beatrix Potter, *Alice in Wonderland*, and Kingsley's *Heroes*" (41). I wish to suggest that this predilection for "the wickedest women" is pertinent to the complexity of Mary Poppins's character: unlike the villains of fairy-tale, Mary Poppins is a highly paradoxical figure, but there is an incontrovertible element of darkness to her personality which may be drawn from figures of folklore. In *Mary Poppins*, she arrives at the Banks household upon a gust of the east wind (17) and declares that she will "stay until the wind changes" (23); this seems suggestive of Eurus, the Greek god of the East wind who, according to Barnaby Rogerson's study of numbers in myth and culture, was "unlucky" and had "associations with death" (155) – an association which might hint at Mary Poppins's ambiguous principles. Brian Sibley has recognised Travers to have been impelled by "fairy-tales, myths and legends" (176), and she included the Pleiades from Greek mythology in *Mary Poppins* (156), making it highly probable that she also knew the mythological context of the east wind. In this first book of the series, it is revealed that Mary Poppins's cousin is a hamadryad snake (143) – better known as a king cobra. This may be seen as further suggesting Mary Poppins's roots to be in Greek mythology, a body of myth which contains a type of wood nymph called a "hamadryad" and which, perhaps more pertinently, also features a creature called a Lamia<sup>7</sup> who is part-woman and part-snake, and, as noted in Luc Brisson's study of myth (63), is known for stealing other women's children. The Lamia has been recognised as a trickster by Debbie López (123). Such an allusion adds a sinister implication to Mary Poppins's habit of spiriting children away to other worlds; and, tellingly, at the end of the first book, Michael Banks informs his mother that he prefers Mary Poppins to her (171). The Lamia is associated with the Lilith of Jewish mythology (Resnick and Kitchell 85), who is a wind demon, therefore evoking Mary Poppins's connection with the wind. It appears, then, that this Edwardian nanny's magical ancestry may have been more malevolent than has previously been supposed.

A fusion of good and bad, Mary Poppins's ambiguity is further underscored by her position as a children's nanny, which places her, along with such figures as the governess, somewhere between the Edwardian family and their servants. Writing in 1974 of "Anthropology and Nannies", James Boon proposes:

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<sup>7</sup> John Keats's long poem of 1820, "Lamia", helped publicise this mythological being.

Nannies were, one might argue, socio-cultural ‘tricksters’ that interrelated contradictory categories and roles: they behaviourally and affectively separated child from mother; they facilitated the Victorian dichotomisation of women into lower-class-as-sexual and upper-class-as-asexual; they were a sexual object to their employers and a sexual restraint on their charges, and thus a source of anxious and ambivalent remembrance when the charges matured. (138)

The nanny, bridging social classes and domestic roles, was a figure imbued with suspicion, seen as a threat to established hierarchies. Mary Poppins’s embodiment of this social instability can be found in her reflection of the conspicuous consumption that was a cause of concern in the early twentieth century: she is frequently shown shopping, and, despite her magical immensity, pays serious attention to material possessions such as gloves, soap and belts. At one point, she haughtily expresses her preference for the luxury “Vinolia” brand of soap<sup>8</sup> over the apparently commoner “Lifebuoy” to a shopkeeper (Travers, *Mary Poppins* 153). While the buying of soap perhaps grounds her in the sphere of domestic service, her penchant for upper-class products harnesses the Edwardian concern over ostentatious consumption among the working-class.

It therefore seems that the anxiety connected to social shifts may have fuelled the development of the trickster in British fiction prior to the Second World War, providing potential for subversion. In 1967, Warner Berthoff argued that post-war literature had rebelled against “the very idea of masterpieces” (301), moving away from the intense themes of high modernist works towards more mundane settings. The “popular” fictions of Wodehouse and Travers, with their focus on everyday middle-class life, suggest the incipience of this rebellion in pre-war literature: by attaching connotations of ancient magic to ostensibly humdrum settings through comic, working-class tricksters, these writers subtly undermined the supposedly elitist concerns of high modernism.<sup>9</sup> Paul Sheehan has contended that early-century writers such as Eliot, Joyce and Yeats at once “exploited and supplanted” folk material (69), and that high modernism in general displayed an “ambivalence towards folk material and . . . [a] toning down – though not eliminating – of the trickster as a fictional archetype” (72). It appears, then, that folk material in general was subversive of early-twentieth-century writing both in its neglect by writers of the time, and through its roots in the popular stories of

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<sup>8</sup> “Vinolia” was the soap available to first-class passengers on board the Titanic.

<sup>9</sup> The common – but contestable – perception of high modernism as elitist has been noted by critics including Pericles Lewis (244), Joshua Kavaloski (195) and Art Berman (241).

an oral tradition – an association which might seem at odds with modernism’s intellectual emphases, oral narratives being “nonliterary” (Rebel 106). Although the mutable trickster, epitomising this subversion, would not be limited in terms of genre later in the twentieth century, he thus may have initially emerged as a tool of the middlebrow, heralding a return to more realist styles as a means of challenging modernist experimentation.

### **Artists as Tricksters, Tarot Archetypes, and a Game of “Consequences”**

While high modernism generally appears to have been somewhat hostile to tricksters, there were naturally some exceptions to this, in Britain as well as overseas. Virginia Woolf’s gender-switching character Orlando, for instance, has been seen as a trickster (Artemis 155), while Wyndham Lewis has been judged to be a real-life “trickster” by Sheehan (71n11) and Donald F. Theall (45): an image that the artist himself seems to have promoted. Lewis was interested in this specific character-type; his 1927 collection of essays, *The Lion and the Fox*, despite not using the term “trickster”,<sup>10</sup> provides a thorough description of a similar figure’s presence in Shakespeare:

In the centre of the canvas in most of Shakespeare’s plays we find the king or prince, and his peers; and among them there is a man who is there, with some discretion, it is true, to slander and ridicule them. Even private persons have their ‘clown’, or sort of comic conscience – like Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. Over against the fortunate central person is always another figure, or impulse, that contradicts his power and happiness. This propitiatory figure is a sort of periapt or *paratonnerre*: his function is to forestall adversity, and guarantee (should the dark powers look at that small human figure of authority with jealous eyes) that the *hubris* is not there, or that there is a factor of disillusion always present to prevent too dangerous and overweening an insolence. The jester is thus there *for luck*. (130)

Lewis in this work further recognises incarnations of this same figure in commedia dell’arte’s harlequin (132), Cervantes’s Sancho Panza (208), and Chaplin’s “Charlie” (132). He suggests that many Shakespearean plays rotate around the meeting of the naïve fool and the deceiving knave (202), and shows particular interest in Sir John Falstaff, who he says embodies

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis does, however, speak of his own “trickster’s glee” in his autobiography *Blasting and Bombardiering* (321).

the characteristic reasoning, but with a rapider and more informed cunning, of Sancho Panza. Only the english Sancho Panza, if Falstaff is he, is ten times the size of the spanish one. He is also a *knight*, so in a sense the rôles are reversed. He is a man of the world – a compendium of rosy vices, very pleasant and amusing: fallen on rather evil times, he displays himself as in reality a cutpurse, drunkard and sneak. (208)

Furthermore, *The Lion and the Fox* focusses on Falstaff's humour as the core of his subversion, claiming that this makes the character magically unsusceptible to accidents (223), that it is "the masterpiece of worldly duplicity and strategy" (224), and that it allows him to live "a charmed life" (224).

Wyndham Lewis's deep appreciation of the trickster is mirrored in his own image. Augustus John, writing in 1952, would reflect on Lewis having behaved like "an incarnate Loki" in the early 1900s (73), while Theall proposes that mid-century Canadian theorist Marshall McLuhan, whom he calls another "trickster" due to his satirical writings (44), was influenced "by figures such as the confidence man, the anti-establishment anarchist . . . and, most particularly, the 'bad boy' of British modernism, Wyndham Lewis" (45). Theall further suggests that McLuhan was "fully aware of his role as a trickster" and that this awareness allowed him "to be comfortable with the confusion he deliberately creates for most of his readers" (45). In this instance, then, the notion of the trickster unusually seems to have been used to justify an esoteric style of writing, rather than to subvert it.

While the trickster was clearly nascent in the magical beings emerging in popular fiction, with their allusions to folklore and their subversive potential, Wyndham Lewis's essays suggest a particular scholarly interest in the character-types that can be read as tricksters, and McLuhan's later apparent appropriation of Lewis's trickster image seems to extend an idea of intellectualism being tricky in an abstruse way. The term "trickster" as an anthropological concept, as mentioned in this thesis's introduction, was likely first used in the late nineteenth century; however, it was not to be popularised by Jung until the 1950s, and, prior to this, seems to have most commonly been used outside anthropology studies simply to describe a crafty person – seen, for example, in American artist Jerome S. Blum's 1914 illustration entitled "The Trickster", which depicts figures apparently conspiring in huddles (figure 3).

The term's lack of recognition as a trope is likely why Wyndham Lewis did not speak of Shakespeare's characters as "tricksters", but included the term in his 1937 autobiography in describing mischievous delight (321). Moreover, Lewis appears to have established something of a legacy for himself as what would later be seen as a trickster, thus reinforcing notions of the figure of the artist, and artistic authority, being tricky. Such an image seems to converge with Barker's and Tree's using trickster characters to test the nature of fiction, and with the suspicion cultivated by spiritualism that authority might be illusive. Although these specific occurrences are not directly connected, they evince a drawing-together of strands of thought which conceptualised the trickster figure in the early decades of the twentieth century. Crucially, tricksterism appears to have been thought of both as a form of authority and as a subversion of authority, chiming with the manner that different folkloric tricksters tended to work together to perpetuate a cycle of authority and subversion.



Figure 3. Jerome S. Blum; *The Trickster*, 1914; illustration; *The Little Review*, vol. 1, no. 8, 1914; p. 33.

While Lewis was weaving his trickster image, the continued popularity of Tarot cards within artistic circles was readapting the notion of archetypes into early-century thought. Most pertinent to the trickster were the cards of The Magician figure, which, according to a popular 1911 book on Tarot, was "the caster of the dice and mountebank, in a world of vulgar trickery" and might be seen to represent "the will" (Waite 6), and The Fool figure, which typically

symbolised “the flesh, the sensitive life, and by a peculiar satire its subsidiary name was at one time the alchemist, as depicting folly at the most insensate stage” (Waite 76). These tricky figures seem to have stepped out of the parlour magic that swept the country in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, with all its generated anxiety over illusion and authority, and to have impressed themselves onto the minds of certain modernist writers. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, for example, famously includes a Tarot-reading scene (lines 46-57), and W. B. Yeats’s considerable debt to Tarot has been demonstrated by Joan Weatherly, who explains that he particularly identified with the “Tarot Fool” as “a symbol for the mystical life Yeats said was the center of all he wrote” (113), and states that the Fool figure was present in nearly all of Yeats’s plays (117). Archetypal figures, perpetuated by Tarot, were thus beginning to affect the ways in which writers thought about theme and character.

Artistic contemplation of character-types, parlour magic, and the trickster, is especially evident in the 1932 book *Consequences: A Complete Story in the Manner of an old Parlour Game of Consequences in Nine Long Chapters Each by a Different Author*. This book was a playful experiment by Elizabeth Bowen, A. E. Coppard, John van Druten, Seán O’Faoláin, Ronald Fraser, Norah Hoult, Hamish Maclaren, G. B. Stern, and Malachi Whitaker, each of whom contributed a chapter to a farcical story about Henry Maybird, a character who is romantically preyed upon by the melodramatic Margaret. The setup followed that of the traditional game of “Consequences”, in which a piece of paper is passed around a circle of players, with each player anonymously adding an element – e.g. a man’s name, a woman’s name, a place of meeting, etc – to create a comical scenario. This game had recently been resurrected by the Surrealist movement in the 1920s to form the basis of the “exquisite corpse” technique of collage (Breton 289). Whereas in the parlour game, each player’s contribution is concealed so that the finished story is a surprise, the writers of *Consequences* allowed themselves to read the previous chapters so as to maintain a loosely coherent narrative. Due to the patchwork nature of the project and its roots in farce, the story’s characters tend to play upon stereotypes, and its tone is humorously self-conscious, repeatedly acknowledging its status as fiction. Van Druten, for instance, opens the first chapter with “His name was Henry Maybird; but there ought to be an adjective attached to it. If I remember ‘Consequences’

correctly, you started with an adjective, childishly unpleasant and the funniest you could think of . . . I choose the adjective 'second-hand' [to describe Henry]" (1); setting the satirical tone of the book, van Druten's description of Henry as "second-hand" reflects the protagonist's being passed from author to author. Later, after Henry gets hit by a car, Maclaren writes that "Henry was alive. He had to be, of course, or this consequential story would have come to an abrupt and none too satisfactory end before its time" (44). These narrative interpolations ensure that the text is kept at an artificial distance from the reader. The metafiction is further cemented by the two central characters – Henry and Margaret – being pretentious writers of unsuccessful fiction. Henry, van Druten narrates:

began another novel, this time with a note of mysticism about it. There was a hint of reincarnation in its thesis, for that was where his reading was taking him. In a vague, unorthodox Theosophy he found an escape and a consolation for his loneliness and the failure of his impersonations. He could see himself now as a sort of rare and lonely spirit, apart from his fellows, yet resting somehow in the lap of a mighty Cosmos that knew why he was there. (5-6)

Such a passage seems to mock grandiloquent art and artists, perhaps being directed towards what has been viewed as the aforementioned elitist attitude of high modernist writers; however, the satire is turned back on itself through the fact that Henry is indeed, as he suspects, placed at the centre of a "Cosmos" – albeit a literary one. The text's reflexivity draws the nine authors together in a subversive playfulness. Hoult's chapter lampoons more popular genres of fiction, with Margaret lamenting over the trials which she has inflicted upon her novel's Gothic heroine, Deirdre: "Poor Deirdre! How [Margaret] wept for her; how restlessly she turned about on her pillows at night identifying, as, of course all the best writers do, her heroine with herself. Deidre, too, was tall, pale and beautiful with haunting dark blue eyes that looked upon a mundane world with an infinite weary disillusionment" (29). When placed alongside Henry's literary concerns, Margaret's favoured genre appears a comment on the stereotype of Gothic romance as being women's fiction – a stereotype noted by Betty Rizzo (58) – while Henry seems attached to the high modernism which critics such as Joshua Kavaloski (87) and Robin Walz (108) have seen as dominated by male writers. Margaret's treatment of her heroine also mirrors the statement in *Consequences'* introduction that the authors had treated Margaret with "more than a trace" of

“malice” (Coppard), and thus creates a telescopic effect through the multiple layers of fiction which subtly strains the constitution of reality.

*Consequences*' reliance on character-types is highlighted by the manner in which Margaret's name changes throughout the narrative: she is Margaret, Magda, Maggie, the fallen Magdalen or innocent Mary, reflecting her natural mutations between writers whilst also underscoring whichever particular role she is consciously endeavouring to adopt – for Margaret is determined to view herself as a fictional “type” but unable to comprehend what this type may truly be. In Stern's chapter, she measures herself and her sister against the exigencies of fairy-tale:

Jess was her father's favourite. Therefore, by all the fairy-tale conventions by which Magda could not help measuring the story of her sin and its consequences, either Jess, not Magdalen, ought to have sinned, or else Magdalen, not Jess, ought to have been her father's favourite. But they were bent on making it just as difficult as they could, she informed herself passionately! (9)

Margaret's struggles to be a romantic heroine like Deirdre are at odds with the wry humour of *Consequences*, instigating a conflict between character and narrative tone. The plotline repeatedly mocks her fairy-tale aspirations: in O'Faoláin's chapter, the hero, Henry, first discovers Margaret when she is asleep and snoring loudly, an apparent parody of the prince encountering Sleeping Beauty (“He Said to Her” 23). At the centre of Margaret's imagined narrative is the “sin” she considers herself to have committed – she ran away with a man and lived with him for a brief period before growing disillusioned and returning home – and she desires to see herself as the chastised heroine who has, rather biblically, “left the old safe roads . . . with bleeding feet and torn mantel, in search of the forbidden apple” (Stern 12). She expects her misdemeanour to induce outrage, and is disappointed that her father ambivalently accepted both her flight and return, and that the numerous young men to whom she confesses her “sin” are mildly embarrassed rather than overcome by emotion (Stern 14-15). While Margaret views Henry as her predestined hero, he is secretly dismayed to find her so unlike the virginal damsel he had hoped for (Maclaren 38); she continually fails to realise the genre in which she features. The story ends with Margaret manipulating Henry into marrying her and then promptly embarking on an affair with the vicar, finally confirming her character as too ordinary to cooperate with the Gothic romance she has sought to engender.



Like the original parlour game, *Consequences* is surprising and subversive, constantly flagging up its formal constraints. Its characters are equal parts cunning and foolish, savvy and insular, and the reader is repeatedly made aware of the writers' authority as they play with their puppet-like characters. This theme of artificiality is emphasised by the image on the book's title-page, which shows an engraving by Eric Ravilious of an assortment of very definite character-types, such as a witch, a jester, and a cowboy, sitting around a circular table; the scene is reminiscent of a séance, the figures weaving a tricky magic through their art. This image is curious in that it seems to suggest the writers – or players – to correspond to types themselves: they, too, with their distinct voices, have arguably become characters within the narrative.

*Consequences*, then, written for its authors' diversion rather than to benefit a particular readership, shows prominent writers of the interwar period to have been collectively pondering ideas of authority, trickery, narrative form, and what would later be seen as metafiction.<sup>11</sup> Crucial to these concerns was the notion of character-types: particularly their elasticity and their subversive potential. The writers seem to be readapting the idea of stock types, viewing them as instruments of artistic self-consciousness rather than merely as outdated narrative aids. It is worth noting here that Elizabeth Bowen claimed to dislike the characters of "Consequences", and wished them to be "more straightforward and picaresque" rather than "poseur[s]" (qtd. in Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen* 119). Bowen's distaste for the pretentious characters and desire for more "picaresque" figures is likely connected to her feelings towards intellectual elitism and artistic subversion, which will be explored later in this thesis.

Thus far, this chapter has demonstrated the convergence of various trickster images in British art and culture from the late Victorian era through to the 1930s; during this period, certain writers were already including allusive trickster characters in their fiction as a means of exploring current social phenomena. In what follows, however, I shall suggest that the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, and its effect upon fiction, would act to further consolidate these

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction* explains that, while metafiction is ultimately a technique of post-modernism, certain modernist texts, such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, draw "the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations" (22), and thus may be viewed as including "metafictional strategies" (22).

diverse movements into a particular type of trickster figure who would be used by mid-century writers to dissect and potentially remedy problems.

### **Literature, Character and the Second World War**

There has been much critical debate over how far, if at all, the modernist movement extended beyond the start of the Second World War: as Lawrence Rainey notes, it is “difficult . . . to assign an ending to modernism” (xx). Tyrus Miller suggests that “the late 1920s and 1930s” constituted the “end” of modernism (5), but also posits that “the concept of late modernism” can “help us to situate” Samuel Beckett’s 1961 novel *How It Is* (170), implying modernism’s timeframe to be ultimately ambiguous. Marina MacKay has argued that the literature of the 1940s has a closer “relation to the modernisms of the 1920s . . . than to the realisms of the 1930s and 1950s” (“Is Your Journey Really Necessary?” 1602), and considers texts written during the Second World War to be of “late modernism” (*Modernism and World War II* 1).

This was an artistic period freighted with a particular form of anxiety that is less pronounced in the high modernist texts of earlier in the century; its literature has been described as “fragmented” (Lassner, “Under Suspicion” 121), reflecting Britain’s splintered state as a country which, as Stonebridge and MacKay note (2), was still suffering from the impact of two world wars and the ongoing Cold War. John Mepham has demonstrated that Patrick Hamilton’s 1941 *Hangover Square* and 1947 *The Slaves of Solitude*, and Elizabeth Bowen’s 1948 *The Heat of the Day*, all contain themes of “domestic fascism” (63); writing of the post-war period thus seems to reflect a distrust of authority, and a distinct shift from the tone of much high modernist art, such as that of Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, which showed affinities with fascism.<sup>12</sup> Allan Hepburn has further illustrated that Elizabeth Bowen’s writing in particular had a preoccupation with themes of “guilt and innocence” (“Trials” 131). British fiction after the Second World War, then, was pervaded by a feeling of paranoia and fracture; as MacKay states, “The London of 1920s modernism is a site of expansive, expressive possibility, of mobility and liberation” (“Is Your Journey”

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<sup>12</sup> These writers’ attraction to forms of fascism has been observed by Russell Berman (104), Art Berman (208-209) and Andrew Hewitt (30).

1602), while later literature would show “the blitzed London of the 1940s” as “ominous and endangering” (“Is Your Journey” 1603).

This sense of fragmentation often led critics writing in the twentieth century to view the Second World War as having curbed artistic inspiration in Britain. Malcolm Bradbury influentially claimed that the 1940s:

threw up few major new artists and writers, and the movements that were active in the decade – from hyper-reportage to surrealism and the New Apocalypse – never attained strong influence in the tradition. At first this seems hardly surprising. Artists in wartime are focused more on action than art, and more concerned with their own rather than the word’s morality. . . . The relative artistic silence of the period from 1939 toward that of the 1940s seems very comprehensible, until we recall that the First World War, quite as terrible, and with equal restrictions on artistic activity, was a major seedbed of modern artistic innovation. . . . Where the First World War provoked new arts of minimalism, new vortices of artistic energy, the Second apparently dulled expression. (“Closing Time” 69-70)

Bradbury argues that the trauma of the Second World War meant that “Previous [literary] styles and tendencies were tainted with accusations of intellectual betrayal and irresponsibility, and even in the victorious nations there was a sense of a break with the past” (“Closing Time” 68). Although believing that the late 1940s through to the late 1980s was “a major creative period in the novel” due to its “striking injections from world-wide sources” (“The Novel” 90), Bradbury stresses that western literature during and immediately after the war was creatively arid, unsure of which direction to take. Rubin Rabinovitz, writing in 1967, similarly underscored a post-war shift in literature, arguing that “few novels that could be called great were written” in Britain during the 1950s (166), a literary period which he claimed displayed “a reaction against experimentalism” in its return to the more realist techniques of the Victorian era (166); yet, a complex return to realism was arguably also present in much British literature of the 1930s, including that of Graham Greene (as noted by Diemert 179), Elizabeth Bowen, and Storm Jameson (discussed in Maslen’s “The Case”). While recent critics such as MacKay (see “Is Your Journey Really Necessary?” and *Modernism*), Maslen (see *Political and Social Issues*) and Nicola Humble have reframed the mid-century as an important and radical literary period, moving away from previous labels like “realist” or “experimental”, it is evident that British fiction of this period had objectives different to those of fiction written in the first few decades of the century.

I want to suggest that the conditions of mid-century British fiction were highly accommodating to the figure of the trickster, helping to crystallise a trickster paradigm in twentieth-century writing. In particular, much literature of this period was deceptively subversive; the transition from the avant-garde introspection of modernists such as Woolf or Joyce, towards a focus on subtle, everyday relations between characters – as found in the works of Bowen, Taylor, Patrick Hamilton or Marghanita Laski – rather than reducing the scope of the novel, in fact seem to probe new concepts of community in a manner defiantly removed from that of the previous generation. Mephram has suggested that Bowen and Hamilton moved away from “the inner worlds of characters” towards an emphasis on character interactions – particularly through “dialogue” (60); these themes of community, communication, and the difficulty of knowing another person chime with what Mephram calls the wartime “atmosphere of conspiracy, duplicity, betrayal and suspense” (62). Similarly, MacKay has suggested Muriel Spark and Rebecca West to have had a “preoccupation with disloyalty” that may have lingered from the wars (“Muriel Spark” 506), and, indeed, a sense of suspicion can be found in much interwar, wartime and post-war fiction, represented by trickster figures with equivocal motives.

Daphne du Maurier’s 1938 *Rebecca*, for instance, has a narrative haunted by the machinations of the eponymous trickster, a character whose portrait dramatically swings from angelic to diabolic. In 1951, du Maurier released *My Cousin Rachel*, an unsettling historical novel in which the narrator agonises to determine Rachel’s true nature: the story’s ending is aptly ambiguous, leaving the reader unsure whether Rachel is a scheming murderer or innocent victim. Hamilton’s 1938 play *Gas Light* and Dorothy Whipple’s 1934 novel *They Knew Mr. Knight* are further examples of fictions which highlight the potential dangers lurking beneath characters’ innocuous facades. The traditional figure of the trickster, as well as chiming obviously with the theme of deception, further embodies a tension between the individual and the community: his status as an outsider suggests his independence, and yet the folkloric trickster is also inextricable from society, being “a creation of the community” (Bieder 232), a “culture hero” (Ricketts 327), and relying on the presence of others in order to perform his tricks. Subversion and suspicion are thus realised through trickster

characters in mid-century fiction, allowing writers to probe the dark recesses of society.

There is also a subversive quality to the female modes of writing that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century. Near the start of Muriel Spark's *Loitering With Intent*, a semi-autobiographical novel set in the early 1950s, the tricky narrator, Fleur, is struck by "How wonderful it feels to be an artist and a woman in the twentieth century" (19-20). Fleur's excitement may be seen to reflect what Nicola Humble in 2001 presented as the rise of the "feminine middlebrow" from the 1920s to the 1950s, a genre which Humble argues belonged to women and to "the middle-classes", and which, while being "a product of the inter-war years", was "not immediately disrupted by the Second World War" (3). Humble includes such writers as Elizabeth Taylor, Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamund Lehmann in her study of middlebrow writing (2). This is a form of literature that can be seen as subversive both through providing a platform for a previously underrepresented female voice,<sup>13</sup> and through its status as popular fiction: Virginia Woolf famously wrote a polemic against middlebrow authors, stating them to be "neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between" ("Middlebrow" 198), disparaging their apparent "middlebred intelligence" ("Middlebrow" 199), and violently professing "If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat, or half-crushed worm dares call me 'middlebrow' I will take my pen and stab him, dead" ("Middlebrow" 203). Middlebrow fiction occupied a liminal space, "neither one thing nor the other", being felt to undermine works of "highbrow" modernism, and apparently stemming from a new, female discourse; the rise of the trickster in mid-century fiction thus arguably embodied this sense of subversive, boundary-crossing energy. While this thesis does not seek to limit its focus to middlebrow writing – indeed, Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark are rarely viewed within this category – aiming instead to illustrate the trickster's prevalence across a gradation of mid-century genres, it does include texts that can be read as middlebrow, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Gill Plain's *Women's Fiction of the Second World War* and Maroula Joannou's *Women Writers of the 1930s* and *'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows'* have also explored the changing female literary voice during this period.

tricksters discussed in the following chapters certainly owe a debt to the controversial legacy of the middlebrow and of popular fiction by female writers.

Victoria Stewart has suggested that certain middlebrow writing of the mid-twentieth century placed an emphasis on characters who were writers or readers in a manner that sparked “debates about creativity, reader-author relations and the protean identity of the female writer” (22). Extending from this, it is important to state that another genre of writing was seen to emerge during the mid-century, appearing to clash with the seemingly realist texts of the period but nevertheless further propagating a highly self-conscious trickster presence. Rabinovitz in 1967 conceded that writers including William Golding, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and Lawrence Durrell were “exceptions to the general rule of anti-experimentation” (166), implying there to be a separate branch of fiction to the realist works discussed in his study. Meanwhile, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in 1966 posited there to be two main narrative modes: “empirical”, pertaining to history and fact, and “fictional”, which dealt in mimesis (13); the novel tradition, they argued, had, until the mid-twentieth century, served to fuse together these “two antithetical components” in narrative (15). However, they claimed, the traditional novel was about to “yield its place to new forms”, being unable otherwise to reflect the fragmentation of modern life (15). Scholes expounded on this the following year, arguing that what he called “modern fabulation” was emerging in contemporary literature: this was a type of fantastic narrative that, “like the ancient fabling of Aesop, tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy” (11); Scholes discussed Murdoch’s *The Unicorn* as an example of this allegorical form of narrative (106-132). His work traces “fabulation”’s inclusion of satire and picaresque themes, both of which he relates back to the “moral fable” (36-37), and it is notable that, as discussed in this thesis’s introduction, the picaresque hero and the crafty animals of fable are types of tricksters; thus, although Scholes does not contemplate the trickster directly, his study indicates the new fantastic genre, with its allusions to traditional tales, to resonate with a trickster legacy.

Scholes also suggested that Jung’s concept of archetypes had prompted the movement towards allegory in mid-century fiction (102-103). Such a notion further brings together the trickster and the new fantasy genre, for Jung’s works

– primarily his 1948 “The Spirit Mercurius”<sup>14</sup> and 1954 “On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure” – heralded the “trickster” as a form of archetype: that is, a universal type of behaviour recurring within a collective unconscious. Jung in “On the Psychology” delineated the trickster’s lineage in “American Indian mythology”, “folklore” and “fairytales” (255), and in “picaresque tales” and “carnivals” (260); the trickster, he suggested, was an autonomous figure who embodied “a psyche that has hardly left the animal level” (260) and was “a collective shadow figure, a summation of all the inferior traits of character in individuals” (270). He further stressed the trickster’s proclivity for healing (260 and 272). Some overlap may be seen between Jungian archetypes and the archetypes of Tarot, both of which express universal human themes; indeed, Jung himself professed Tarot cards to be “distantly descended from the archetypes of transformation” (“Archetypes” 38), and Sallie Nichols has considered Jung’s Trickster to be an amalgamation of Tarot’s Magician and Fool:

The Fool and the Magician are both at home in the transcendental world . . . Each is related to the Trickster archetype, but in different ways. The differences between the Fool and the Magician in this respect parallel those between a practical joke and a magical performance. The Fool plays tricks *on* us; The Magician arranges demonstrations *for* us. . . . The Fool is a loner, his method is secretive. . . . The Magician will include us in his plans. (45-46)<sup>15</sup>

Both Tarot and Jungian concepts promoted the use of types, and Jung’s writings certainly would have helped cement idea of the elusive trickster, along with the figure’s literary tradition and therapeutic potentialities, within a mid-century consciousness. The new genre of allegorical fiction that Scholes saw as emerging in such writers as Lawrence Durrell, John Hawkes and Iris Murdoch, thus seems to have been woven from a sense of tricksterism, with writers reaching for a magical heritage in order to subvert current literary conventions.

Certainly, in 1971, David Lodge’s “The Novelist at the Crossroads” expanded on Scholes’s tricky theory of genre, observing another type of contemporary novel:

To the novel, the non-fiction novel, and the fabulation, we must add a fourth category: the novel which exploits more than one of these modes

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<sup>14</sup> This work was originally delivered as two lectures in 1942 and published in German in 1943 and, in a revised and expanded edition, in 1948. An English translation entitled *The Spirit Mercury* was published as a book in 1953, by the Analytical Psychology Club of New York.

<sup>15</sup> Each of these trickster types may also be found in Shakespearean drama, seen in “magicians” such as Prospero or the Duke, and “fools” such as Feste or Lear’s Fool.

without fully committing itself to any, the novel-about-itself, the trick-novel, the game-novel, the puzzle-novel, the novel that leads the reader (who wishes, naively, only to be told what to believe) through a fair-ground of illusions and deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap-doors that open disconcertingly under his feet, leaving him ultimately not with any simple or reassuring message or meaning but with a paradox about the relation of art to life. (22)

Lodge further explained:

Mr Scholes's fabulators, for instance, play tricks on their readers, expose their fictive machinery, dally with aesthetic paradoxes, in order to shed the restricting conventions of realism, to give themselves freedom to invent and manipulate. In the kind of ['problematic'] novel I am thinking of, however, the reality principle is never allowed to lapse entirely – indeed it is often invoked, in spite of the non-fiction novel, to expose the artificiality of conventional realistic illusion. (22)

Lodge's "problematic" (22) novel was a hybrid of "fabulation" and of realism, set in a more ostensibly recognisable world than allusive works such as Murdoch's Gothic novel *The Unicorn*, but laden with self-conscious props, tricks, and "illusions" that underlined the novel's status as artefact. This new form of narrative trickery which, according to Lodge, included such works as Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (24), essentially broke the literary fourth wall, intimating the presences of writer and reader, and calling into question the position of characters.

Such juxtaposition of realism and trickery tested the reader's empathy, presenting seemingly relatable characters but simultaneously highlighting them as fiction; indeed, a movement towards more "stock" characters has been observed in post-war British fiction, mirroring the exploration of literature as artifice. Scholes and Kellogg noted the importance of thinking of characters both as individuals and as types, suggesting that "typical" aspects made characters "part of some larger scheme", with their allusions providing "intellectual and emotional bonuses for the literate reader" (205). More recently, Ian Gregson's intriguing 2006 study has recorded a plethora of allusive "caricature" in post-war literature:

Fiction writers . . . , in the process of evoking the sense of ontological diminishment and fracturing which characterize the postwar period, have drawn upon resources which predate that period but which form an historically sanctioned part of the range of representations of the self which fiction-writing makes available. My main point is that caricature is one of these resources but also an especially significant one because its



widespread use is symptomatic of a satirical attitude to the self which is tellingly characteristic of contemporary culture. (4)

Gregson argues that characters in post-war writing were “flatten[ed]” to become “static and mechanical” (3), and views these character-types as vital in the cultivation of postmodernism, allowing writers to “subvert” realism (3) by “mock[ing] realist conventions – ‘fully rounded’ characters, linear plotting – with confrontational comedy” and consequently “questioning the humanist assumptions behind realism – how ‘fully roundedness’ takes for granted that human personality is complex, coherent, substantial and capable of endless development” (4). These deliberately flat characters, Gregson suggests, exist to convey “a satirical attitude to the self” (9) and arise in texts concerned with questions of authority, flagging up the relationship between “characters and author” as one of “puppets and puppet masters” (4); he places Toni Morrison (9), Muriel Spark (99) and Angela Carter (111) among the writers of “caricature”. Gregson also seems to contest the notion that to use character-types and other “caricatural imagery” is reductive (165), arguing that it is rather a form of reappropriation:

The caricatural impulse can easily be condemned as a refusal to understand otherness, or a refusal to grant fully human status to women, minority groups and those beyond the Caucasian pale. . . . But one of the most significant cultural developments recently has been that oppressed groups have taken their caricatural label and worn it as a confrontational badge of pride. (165)

This concept underscores the subversive potential of literary types: their ability to defy convention. Gregson’s “caricature”, then, may be read as overlapping with the trickster paradigm, concerned with the constant undermining of authority – for, as the apparent return to realism subverted modernist experimentalism, so too did the new emphasis on artificiality subvert these more realist techniques – and centring on the reception of fixed yet elusive character-types.

But character was not only becoming tricky through its use of type. Thomas Docherty has argued that, as British fiction became more “post-Modern”, there developed a “situation in new writing of the reader as character” (155). The reader was increasingly being involved in the text, and the relationship between author, character, and reader was being rethought by reader-response theorists such as Roland Barthes and Georges Poulet. Certain characters played a metafictional role which drew attention to the presence of the reader and his

participation in the crafting of the narrative, challenging conventional notions of writerly authority and holding the reader and even the characters themselves as partially accountable for the events of the plot. Stonebridge and MacKay have identified “strange god-shapes” (4) in the fiction of William Golding, Muriel Spark, and Iris Murdoch, which they consider to be “examples of the fight between textuality and authority” (4). The notion of quasi-divine characters drawing attention to writerly power will be explored more fully in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis; however, it is important to note that the traditional trickster inherently functions to establish the presence of the reader or spectator, and trickster figures may be seen as crucial in the development of this mid-century movement. The fools of Shakespearean drama are the characters who break the fourth wall and address the audience – a trickster trait that was further explored by Barker and Tree in the early twentieth century. Meanwhile, Ann Martin has suggested that images from fairy-tale – a traditional genre which, as illustrated in this thesis’s introduction, helped conceive the trickster – were employed by modernist writers to:

open up a space for the reader in the text, not just to interpret the author’s intentions or politics, but to engage with the historical and cultural resonances of the story itself. Allusions to fairy tales signal the interactions that take place between the modernist author and the inherited tradition, as well as between the reader, the writer, the text, and its contexts against the backdrop of a rich and constantly changing history. . . . [F]airy tales are used by Joyce, Woolf, and Barnes as modernist works; that is, as texts that reflect the instability and the variability that is the experience of modernity. (12)

The figure of the trickster has long been used as a means to explore and even permeate the border between truth and fiction, and to hold up a mirror to the reader, posing questions about the reader’s textual function. In the twentieth century, this trickster trait seems to have developed from having tricky Shakespearean figures address the artificiality of the stage, to allusive figures in literature who called upon the reader’s knowledge of previous texts, to magical characters who questioned a sense of reality, to character-types who satirised traditional narrative – as seen in *Consequences* – to self-conscious tropes who highlighted the instability of the postmodern text.

## **Conclusion**

Twentieth-century Britain appears to have witnessed a rebirthing of trickster characters in fiction, who were developed by writers in the early half of the century as a way to address and potentially resolve arising concerns about authority, illusion, society, art, and the self; the mid-century period, I want to suggest with this thesis, was crucial to the trickster's literary lineage. This emergence of a trickster paradigm was the result of various strands of thought conflating in the early decades of the century. A fascination with magic and its relation to the human, inherited from the Victorian era, merging with an anxiety over deception, resulted in a subtle testing of authority which can be seen in stage characters such as Barker's Puck and Tree's jester as well as in the trend in literature for looking back to past texts that implies a literary authority. Magical sprites and mysterious servants such as Peter Pan, Jeeves, and Mary Poppins appeared in popular tales as tricksters who at once tried the border between truth and fiction, looked back to traditional trickster character-types, and probed new social and theoretical concerns including social mobility and psychoanalytical thought. Meanwhile, "highbrow" modernist writers such as Wyndham Lewis and W. B. Yeats were taking a more scholarly approach to exploring trickster characters and their literary allusions.

Towards the middle of the century, the trickster's association with illusion and subversion seems to have been extended to think about the exigencies of fiction – seen, for example, through the satirising of traditional narrative conventions in *Consequences*. The fracturing effect of the interwar and wartime period instigated themes of suspicion in a number of more realist literary works, centring upon manipulative characters entering claustrophobic communities. Subverting the introspection of high modernism, these narratives focussed on external dangers and their insidious presence in seemingly mundane society. Lipovetsky has stated that the field of trickster studies "developed exponentially in the post-war period" (27), thus suggesting that the disturbance of war prompted a need for conciliatory characters; at the same time as this, then, traditional character-types, partially reintroduced through Tarot and Jung, were coming to be used as a means of exploring the artificiality of fiction in a new genre of quasi-magical narratives. These stories included characters who flagged up the text as an artefact and consequently underscored and questioned the roles of reader,

writer, and character: struggles for authority were performed ironically through these metafictional texts.

Luminous in the trickster paradigm of the twentieth century is the theme of healing. Drawing from the trickster's role in folklore and theatre as a healer and creator of culture, and consolidated by Freud's use of fairy-tales and Jung's use of the archetypal trickster – both of which helped establish the trickster's territory as one of self-resolution – the tricksters of the twentieth century act as altruistic guides, aid transitions from childhood to adulthood, resolve protagonists' imbroglios, help deconstruct the nature of fiction in order to rebuild it, and defiantly act to reimagine conventionally oppressed forms of writing as subversive.

In the following chapters, I shall look at how four British writers in the mid-twentieth century – all of whom are women, two of whom have been considered “middlebrow”<sup>16</sup> and two of whom are typically viewed as more experimental<sup>17</sup> – used tricksters to think through different concerns, some of which were shared within literary circles, and some of which were particular to them as individuals. Through exploring the works of Bowen, Taylor, Murdoch and Spark, this thesis will illustrate the different ways in which elusive, illusive and allusive characters were used in the twentieth century to probe and heal anxieties across a range of British writing.

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Taylor's typical assignment to the label of “middlebrow” has been noted by Victoria Stewart (22), Nicola Humble (4) and Erica Brown (8). Humble also considers Elizabeth Bowen a writer of “middlebrow” fiction (78), while Maud Ellmann has expressed outrage at how Bowen's works have “often been dismissed . . . as middlebrow” (18).

<sup>17</sup> Experimental elements in Iris Murdoch's novels have been noted by Alex Ramon (144), Bran Nicol (“Postmodern Murdoch” 15) and Anne Rowe and Avril Horner (*Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts* 3). Meanwhile, Bryan Cheyette has spoken of Muriel Spark's writing as “experimental fiction” (*Diasporas* 136).

## Chapter 2. “See me as so much gingerbread”: Art, Intelligence, and Fairy-Tale Tricksters in the Works of Elizabeth Bowen

### Introduction

In the mid-1940s, V. S. Pritchett wrote to Elizabeth Bowen, asking whether she created fiction for herself or for the sake of the reader. Bowen’s reply contained a curious passage in which she pondered the artist’s relation to modern society:

Obviously intelligent people are on the increase: education, I suppose. This sounds supercilious: I do not feel supercilious, but I feel slightly frightened – the intelligent people seem to be closing in on the artist like the rats on the selfish bishop who hoarded corn in the famine time. We all know what happened to the bishop; they picked his bones white. The rats were in the right; at any rate they were the instruments of vengeance. The bishop was in the wrong; he had been unsocial. But really nobody could call – and as far as I know nobody does call – you or me Bishop Hattos: we don’t hoard. Whatever comes in goes out again. . . . So I really must get rid of that original rat nightmare, and the idea of that closing-in circle of thousands of avid glittering eyes. (see Pritchett 21)

Here, Bowen uses the legend of the Mouse Tower to visualise her feelings about being a writer. In the traditional German folk-tale, Hatto II, Archbishop of Mainz, hoards corn during a famine and is thus confronted by starving peasants. He then plays a cruel trick, promising to feed the peasants if they wait for him in a barn; when they do so, he bolts the doors and sets fire to the barn, killing everyone inside. He is consequently besieged by thousands of rats, which chase him to the Mouse Tower in the Rhine and eat him alive as apparent punishment for his crime.<sup>1</sup>

Bowen’s letter expresses a sense of artistic threat, of her work and herself being scrutinised by “intelligent” readers with “thousands of avid glittering eyes”. This threat, she contends, is increasing with the prevalence of education, implying the academic environment to be hostile to art, its critical gaze encroaching upon the writer’s creative store. She also describes a feeling of guilt, of being “in the wrong”, as though she might not put her greatest effort into her work but rather inadvertently “hoard” some creative potential and be condemned for it. In an attempt to capture the intensity of this “nightmare”, Bowen rather oddly reaches

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<sup>1</sup> A full version of this tale can be found in Volume 2 of Joseph Snowe’s *The Rhine: Legends, Traditions, and History* (333-337).

for a particularly violent folk-tale, drawing upon its theme of famine to suggest an artistic barrenness in modern society. The “original” tale conveys her emotion in a way she cannot articulate: she does not seem to know why she views herself and Pritchett as “Bishop Hattos”, and yet she struggles to “get rid of” the idea. The legend of the Mouse Tower apparently crystallises a personal fear that is otherwise difficult for Bowen to grasp.

This chapter explores Bowen’s notion of there being a clash between art and academic “intelligence” in mid-twentieth-century Britain, and how this extended from a concern she had over the female consciousness potentially being smothered in a society dominated by masculine discourse. While Bowen has previously been seen as “hostile to feminism” (Joannou, “*Ladies*” 130), and even bluntly stated in 1961 “I am not, and shall never be, a feminist” (“*Woman’s Place*” 378), I want to suggest that a sense of antithesis between feminine creativity and masculine intelligence ran through her oeuvre, and that she attempted to address this antithesis through tricksters of myth and fairy-tale – a narrative sphere that she viewed as simultaneously earthly and logical – flagging up a need for women to have more voice in society. Indeed, Bowen’s use of the fairy-tale sheds light on the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which she portrayed women, with fairy-tale models providing her with a way of representing a female mode of understanding, while simultaneously often having the problematic effect of restricting female characters to negative types.

Whereas Bowen is typically viewed alongside writers of modernist or realist literature, this chapter will begin by demonstrating that her work was innately influenced by the fairy-tales she had loved since childhood, and that, in particular, she was drawn to fairy-tale tricksters as a means of realising the contradictoriness of people and thus potentially conceptualising a balance between male and female modes of understanding. Impelled by the trickster’s traditional proclivity for healing, Bowen, it seems, incorporated a particular type of trickster into her novels and short stories through which she illuminated a wound in society and in art.

### **Fairy-Tales as a Source of Influence**

When Virginia Woolf first mentioned the name Elizabeth Bowen in her diary, it was to note that Lady Ottoline Morrell was reading a novel “by Eth Bowen who tries to write like me” (qtd. in Craig 53 and Morris 116). This rather scathing comment related to Bowen’s first novel, *The Hotel*, published in 1927 – but if, as is suggested by Craig (53), this book did owe a little too much to Woolf, the imitation of style was to be short-lived.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in contrast to Woolf’s early impression, Bowen is often heralded by critics as marking a break from the previous literary generation’s modernist experimentalism. Andrew Bennett, for instance, speaks of Bowen’s work lacking “the avant-garde experimentation of Joyce, or Eliot, Pound, or even Woolf” (28), while John Mepham proposes that Bowen was “uncomfortable with the emphasis on the inner worlds of characters such as in the work of Richardson, Woolf and others” and thus chose to focus on interactions between characters rather than on the occurrences within a character’s mind (60). Gavin Keulks has viewed Bowen as a “realist” writer, based upon her narratives’ plentiful descriptions of physical objects (258). Certainly, Bowen’s fictional worlds are grounded in the physical, filled with details of furniture and modern appliances which, through extensive use of metaphor, serve to subtly reflect the emotional struggles experienced by her characters. Bowen’s literary reputation has further been bound to realism by the numerous critical comparisons between her and Jane Austen, the mother of social realism (see Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* 215, Ellmann 42, and Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen* 31); and Bowen herself acknowledged her debt to Austen’s works, professing that “I learned from her what an art it is to make little things largely felt [in fiction]” (“What Jane Austen Means to Me” 230).

However, despite Bowen’s divergence from the literary introspection popular at the time, and apparent movement towards the realist techniques that would preoccupy many mid-century writers, numerous critics have recognised it as reductive to label her a “realist” writer. Chris Hopkins, for instance, has seen Bowen’s fiction as “a compromise between” realism and modernism (39), while Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle have suggested that a tendency to judge Bowen’s fiction within the “category of ‘realism’” has led to a critical

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<sup>2</sup> Bowen herself would later suggest that all emerging writers experience a “period of apprenticeship” during which they are influenced by the styles of established authors, before developing a style of their own (“Sources of Influence” 207). Woolf has been recognised as an early influence on Bowen’s writing (Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* 183).

misunderstanding of her work (xvi). Lis Christensen observes that Bowen's "realism', such as it is, is increasingly being seen as a thin veil over themes that touch the depth of human experience" (34). Maud Ellmann, while conceding Bowen to have employed realist techniques, nevertheless considers her objects to "loom too large for the exigencies of realism" (8). Vike Plock in "Sartorial Connections" has argued that Bowen's writing can be seen to blur realist and modernist techniques. Bowen, Plock demonstrates, used references to physical objects – particularly clothes – to at once reflect characters' inner worlds and their relationships with one another as well as to suggest these psychological experiences to be fugacious: "In a modern world, in which experiences are short-lived and nothing is static, personal characteristics become as volatile as fashion objects" (298). Despite her supposedly realist techniques, Bowen innovatively "offers a different way of representing the interdependence of human subjects and the world of objects" (Plock 298).

It appears that, while Bowen may have emphasised the everyday external world as a means of intensifying characters' inner turmoil, of hinting at "the something wrong at the heart of middle-class life" (Deen 32), her fiction cannot be critically confined to realism alone. Her poetic style of writing, with all its metaphors, descriptions, and twisting sentence structures, saturates her texts with a subjectivity which seems to convolute the reader's sense of the real. Then there is the aspect of the otherworldly that pervades much of her writing. Elizabeth Taylor reflected upon how jarring it would be for a reader to encounter "a ghost in one of Jane Austen's shrubberies" due to Austen's established realist genre ("E. M. Forster" 65). In contrast to Austen, many of Bowen's works are steeped in the supernatural: in ghosts, demons, and uncanny echoes of the past. This is evident in her 1955 novel *A World of Love* and particularly in her short stories, whose "distinct 'gothic' elements" have led Renée C. Hoogland to dismiss the suggestion of Bowen's writing being "realist" (332n9). And yet, "gothic" seems too drastic a term for Bowen, for, while tales such as "The Demon Lover" and "The Shadowy Third" are dramatically eerie, in many more of the short stories, ghosts filter subtly amongst the living to serve as further extensions of humanity – as Angus Wilson explains, they are "acceptable statements of the continuity of time and life" which "make sense of life not nonsense" (Introduction xiii). Bowen claimed that, at least during her school years, she disliked overt use of the



supernatural in literature “other than in the course of a straight ghost story” (“A Passage” 274), but admitted to incorporating “a supernatural element” into her writing (Preface 9), explaining: “it is inseparable (whether or not it comes to the surface) from my sense of life” (Preface 9). For Bowen, a sense of the supernatural was embroiled within the experience of reality – it was a continuation of her perception of life, and yet it also disrupts attempts to reduce Bowen’s fiction to the conventional tag of “realism”.

Despite the critical acknowledgement of magical elements permeating Bowen’s work, the writers to whom she is still most often compared, and who are most frequently cited as her greatest sources of influence, are Woolf (see, for instance, Lee, *Virginia Woolf* 652, Craig 53, Keulks 285 and Osborn, “How to Measure” 37-38), Austen, E. M. Forster (see Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* 21, 58 and 60, and Sunil Kumar Sarker 1008) and Henry James (see Craig 53, Halperin 45-47 and Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* 60). Undoubtedly, these writers did influence Bowen, but it may be argued that her writing was also inherently impacted by fantastical narratives far more embedded in magic than James’s psychological ghost stories. These were the narratives of fairy-tales and myths, echoes of which may be found across Bowen’s body of work. Victoria Glendinning has asserted that, by the 1960s, Bowen had come to be impressed by “the work of her friend Iris Murdoch who, with a sensibility and a civilized approach to life like Elizabeth’s own, was turning the structure upside down by allowing civilized middle-class characters to act out myth and nightmare and fantasy as characters in fairy stories do” (*Elizabeth Bowen* 218); and yet, while her last few novels may have been shaped by Murdoch, in what follows I shall illustrate that images of fairy-tales appear in Bowen’s fiction from early in her career – she simply fused them more subtly into her work than did Murdoch.

Ellmann remarks upon “how many fathers are absent, dead, or simply unaccounted for in Bowen’s fiction” (3), which is consequently strewn with fatherless girls, including Portia Quayne in *The Death of the Heart*, Pauline in *To the North*, Lois Farquar in *The Last September*, the eponymous heroine of *Eva Trout*, Louie Lewis in *The Heat of the Day*, and Sydney Warren in *The Hotel*. These might be read as Bowen’s Cinderellas and Snow Whites, girls with what may be seen as “the characteristically weak or absent father of so many fairy tales” (Shippey 257) – a trope which held resonance for Bowen, whose father

spent several years in a psychiatric institution following a breakdown in 1905, when she was six years old. This abundance of vulnerable girls makes many of her novels coming-of-age stories, detailing tortuous transitions into adulthood much as the girls of fairy stories undertake painful journeys into maturity.

The figure of the wicked stepmother, concomitant with the fairy-tale genre, is similarly crucial to Bowen's fiction, although this was likely a less personal element, for, although Bowen did have a stepmother following her mother's death, she was purportedly "very fond" of her (Doody 6). In her novels, older women repeatedly adopt maternal roles towards youths unrelated to them, and are typically met with resentment. Anna and her ward Portia, for example, are at odds throughout *The Death of the Heart*, while Eva in *Eva Trout* has viciously turned against her mentor, Iseult, before the start of the narrative – and, in parallel to this, Eva is later murdered by her adopted son. In *The Hotel*, the middle-aged Mrs Kerr is cruelly manipulative of the young Sydney Warren, who so admires her. It is in *The House in Paris*, however, that we encounter Bowen's most wicked matriarch: Madam Fisher.

Madame Fisher is fairy-tale's wicked witch, and her house alludes to the gingerbread house in Grimms' "Hansel and Grethel." While the fairy-tale cottage is designed to draw in lost children for the witch to eat, the boarding house in Paris attracts wandering girls far from home, over whom Madame Fisher then exerts "terrific power" (*The House* 103). The novel also features a pair of child heroes, reminiscent of Hansel and Grethel, in the characters of Leopold and Henrietta; and, as the witch fixates upon Hansel, waiting for him to grow fat enough to eat, so is Madame Fisher fascinated by Leopold, anticipating his maturing into "the reincarnation of his father" (Wells-Lassagne 102), whom her emotional vampirism drove to suicide. Echoes of this particular fairy-tale can be found throughout the novel. In Grimms' rendition of the traditional German story, birds are simultaneously maleficent and altruistic: they initially eat Hansel's trail of breadcrumbs and lead the children to the witch's cottage, but a duck aids the siblings' later escape. *The House in Paris's* Naomi Fisher – nicknamed "Kingfisher" after a river-bird (42, 49) – has a similarly vacillating narrative role, seeking out young women to bring to her mother's home and acting as Madame Fisher's mouthpiece but, ultimately, aiding Karen and Max, the story's lovers, at her own expense. Indeed, Naomi is repeatedly likened to a bird in the novel,

comparing herself to “a swallow” (19) and being described as “a wounded bird” (113). Perhaps most pertinent to the comparison between texts, however, is the scene in which Leopold and Madame Fisher finally meet. Here, she talks to the boy of the presence of fairy-tales in real life and tells him to “see me as so much gingerbread” (200), likening herself to the object of temptation in “Hansel and Grethel”; as wicked matriarch, Madame Fisher is bait but also nourishment.

The mention of gingerbread seems to be Bowen’s attempt to flag up the novel’s subtle allusion to this popular children’s story. Certainly, she spoke of a personal attachment to Grimms’ fairy-tales: “The 210 [stories] released by the brothers Grimm, I refuse to discuss in scholarly terms. They hold me too close – I like them too well” (“Enchanted Centenary” 302), and favoured their form of fairy-tale, with folklore’s traditional profusion of violence, stoicism, monsters and vengeance, over Hans Christian Andersen’s more romantic tales, which she felt to “overlap on the adult world in that they introduce emotion – and thereby break one of the fairy tale’s most primitive, rigid laws” (“Comeback” 294). Perhaps she felt the Grimms’ tales to have an affinity with her own style of writing: while her narratives are emotive in the sense that they focus upon universal human crises,<sup>3</sup> her prose rather coldly depicts characters’ inner tragedies alongside the mundanities of the physical world, deflating any movements towards melodrama by frequently focussing dialogue and description upon solid objects. Her sentences are elaborate, rely on obscure metaphors and regularly employ the passive voice or a backwards structure, which distances the reader from the immediacy of emotion. Bowen’s refusal to discuss fairy-tales “in scholarly terms” may also intimate why she did not speak of their influence on her writing in the same way that she acknowledged her debt to writers such as Forster or Austen: these traditional stories held her “too close” and should thus be latently incorporated into her fiction without being consciously scrutinized. Her childhood reading, she claimed, led her to “have in my make-up layers of synthetic experience, and . . . the most powerful of my memories are only half true” (“Out of a Book” 48) – the stories she read as a child had become so enmeshed with her memories of youth that they had formed dense “layers of fictitious memory”

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<sup>3</sup> Bowen stated that “the [most] enduring novels treat of subjects which are rarely unique” (“The Echoing Grove” 155), suggesting that the secret to successful fiction-writing is to take a universal subject, such as love, and interpret it in a unique manner, rather than endeavouring to find an unusual subject.

(Bowen, "Out of a Book" 48), which were indistinguishable from actual experiences. Similarly, fairy-tale images were to be implicit in her writing without being publically recognised. Childhood reading, Bowen contended, held all the secrets to her subconscious mind – she wrote, "I feel certain that if I *could* read my way back, analytically, through the books of my childhood, the clues to everything [about my identity] could be found" ("Out of a Book" 51). Her insistence that "fairy-tale morality is . . . child morality" ("Comeback"<sup>4</sup> 292) thus implies the fairy-tale to be synonymous with the childhood experiences that built her sense of self. While Jane Austen, whom Bowen did not read until the age of twenty-one, could be academically discussed as a source of inspiration, traditional children's tales, with their deep universal themes and moral lessons, were too deeply engrained in her self and her work to be critically dissected. This, then, could be the reason she found the story of the Mouse Tower – another old folk-tale, one that she believed "we all know", which shares the violence and vengeance of Grimms' stories – to best express an otherwise ineffable emotion. While the brutal fairy-tales themselves were ideally narrated in an impassive tone, they were profoundly emotional for Bowen on a personal level, occupying space deep within her.

As Gill Plain states, in the traditional fairy-tale "there is no God to mitigate our suffering or to forgive our sins" (84). Perhaps it seems odd, then, that Bowen, a practising Protestant, should feel such communion with Grimms' tales rather than Hans Andersen's more Christianised stories. One particular area of the fairy-tale which Bowen incorporated into her fiction, and which seems to have a complex relationship with Christianity, was the idea of fate. She noted that the tale of "Sleeping Beauty demonstrates that you can't dodge predestined fate" ("Comeback" 292), and, certainly, fairy-tales' reliance upon character-types suggests that persons are destined to fulfil specific roles. Ellmann has illustrated that Bowen's characters have a "hypnotic subservience to fate" (23), and that even the sentence structure in *The Last September* stresses "the subordination of the individual to fate" (60). Ellmann also, contrastingly, suggests that the fish motif found in *Eva Trout* "draws attention to the play of chance, rather than the work of fate" (220) – and yet, at odds with Ellmann's idea, *Eva Trout* arguably

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<sup>4</sup> This essay was published in *The New York Times* magazine in September 1963 and, as Hepburn argues, "demonstrates Bowen's obsession in the 1960s with oral tales and transformations" ("Notes" 450).

includes many scenes, such as Eva's encounter with Elsinore in America (131), which are portrayed as dreamlike and fated, and critics Corcoran (*Elizabeth Bowen* 131) and Lee (*Elizabeth Bowen* 201) have both termed *Eva Trout* a "fairy tale" due to, as Lee puts it, its "settings . . . , its names . . . , and its arrangements of characters" (*Elizabeth Bowen* 201). In *The House in Paris*, a character reflects that "fate is not an eagle, it creeps like a rat" (76), and fairy-tales, with their fixed character tropes, have a similarly resigned attitude to fate as something inevitable and, often, brutal. While Bowen's fiction is not necessarily pessimistic, there is a certain bleak sense of destiny which pervades scenes in works such as *The House in Paris* and *Eva Trout*. In one essay, Bowen spoke casually of fate as if recognising it as an aspect of life ("Out of a Book" 50); possibly she felt that the fairy-tale's straightforward acceptance of destiny chimed more with her own understanding of the world than did the Christian dissonance between fate and free will.

It is important to recognise that Bowen did not consider the fairy-tale genre to be limited to traditional tales passed down through generations and transcribed from oral forms, but also acknowledged more modern fairy-tales in the form of longer narrative texts. In both *The Hotel* (172) and Bowen's short story "The Visitor" (*Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories* 130) characters describe George MacDonald's 1883 children's fantasy novel *The Princess and Curdie* as a "fairy tale", while Bowen herself labelled John Ruskin's 1851 novel *The King of the Golden River* another "fairy tale" ("Introduction to *The King*" 295 and 296). Two other novels that surely fall into this category are Lewis Carroll's "Alice" books of 1865 and 1871 – traces of which can be found in Bowen's fiction. Lee has remarked upon *The House in Paris*'s Henrietta being an incarnation of Carroll's Alice (*Elizabeth Bowen* 81, 82, 96, 97), but I want to suggest Bowen's 1948 novel *The Heat of the Day* to have an even greater intertextual engagement with Carroll's work; for, as Madame Fisher's mention of fairy-tales and gingerbread hints at *The House in Paris*'s debt to "Hansel and Grethel", so does *The Heat of the Day*'s reference to "Cheshire cats, leaving grins behind them" (122) allude to the influence of Carroll's writing on this novel.

Carroll's work seems to have been important to Bowen's ideas on fiction. When Bowen died in 1973 she was working on a collection of memories, fictions and ideas, which was published posthumously in 1975, entitled *Pictures and*

*Conversations*. The title of the work comes from a passage early in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "once or twice [Alice] had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, 'and what is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversations?'" (1). Bowen's rich descriptions and focus on realistic dialogue mean that her fictions may be construed as comprised of pictures and conversations; perhaps her title reflected how, to Bowen as to Alice, the parts of the story which seem the most extraneous and detachable, the "pictures and conversations", were also the key source of its value.

In this first scene of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice observes the agitated White Rabbit checking his watch in a field before following him down the rabbit-hole to Wonderland (2). *The Heat of the Day*, meanwhile, opens with the character Harrison being observed in a park, noticeably troubled by something and repeatedly checking his watch (10 and 20); he then proceeds to Stella's apartment, where he makes a shocking claim – the suggestion that her lover, Robert, is a Nazi spy – which upturns Stella's reality and figuratively leads her down the rabbit-hole to a world where nothing is as it seemed: a disturbed, emotional "Wonderland" that is reflected in the physical instability of London during the Blitz. Stella awaits Harrison's arrival here by watching the door through a mirror (24), paralleling the way in which, at the start of Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice discovers the doorway to the Looking-Glass world – a similarly unstable universe – in a mirror (4). Hepburn, in his essay "Trials and Errors", which deals with the themes of trial and wartime culpability in *The Heat of the Day*, fleetingly mentions Lewis Carroll's work when he writes that "In various genres, Bowen thought over the narrative possibilities of trials. In 'The Unromantic Princess', a short story for children published in 1935, she uses the trial comically, in the manner of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, to criticise arbitrary power" (132). Certainly, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* plays with scenes of trial, with the Knave of Hearts being tried for stealing tarts (75), while *The Heat of the Day's* plot revolves around the question of Robert's guilt, the narrative itself thus acting as a form of trial.

*The Heat of the Day's* deliberate recourse to Carroll's fantasy story might also offer a narrative escape from the London Blitz. Plain has posed that "for all its contextual engagement of the war, on every other level *The Heat of the Day*

strives to shut the conflict firmly out of its complex examination of interpersonal relationships” (166), and suggests that Bowen tried to evade “the trauma of war” by allowing her characters to achieve a sense of “timelessness . . . [which] enables them to spiritually abscond from the physical environment of conflict” (122). Further to Plain’s theory, it appears that, by latently engaging with a popular fantasy text, Bowen provided another escape route for her characters: a parallel literary space and genre which relied upon the child logic she recognised as existing in fairy-tales – a world reflecting the confusion of wartime London but ultimately promising safety in the inevitable triumph of good over evil, far less problematic than the likely outcomes of her own narrative.

### **Bowen’s Fairy-Tale Tricksters**

The introduction to this thesis delineated the types of trickster found in classical fairy-tales: the youngest brother who triumphs over his siblings either through cunning or luck, the altruistic helper whom the hero or heroine encounters and the wicked witch or stepmother. In longer literary fairy stories, the trickster may be more nuanced, a wily outsider like Barrie’s Peter Pan or Carroll’s Cheshire Cat. Bowen’s fascination with fairy-tales appears to have extended to an appreciation and understanding of these tricky figures, for her fiction is bestrewn with incarnations of such character-types who act as aptly subversive presences. This deliberate reception of the trickster is most evident in her own satirical fairy-tale, “The Unromantic Princess”. In this story, Bowen plays with trope of the lucky “Third Son”, making her character a quintessential fairy-tale trickster through his irreverent attitude, low social status and eventual marriage to the princess. However, Bowen’s characters in this story are uncomfortably self-aware, highly conscious of the roles expected of them by the fairy-tale genre; for example, the Princess recognises the hero as “a Third Son in disguise” (*The Bazaar* 103) and thus anticipates his function in the story, while the hero himself reflects that “I am a Third Son, and I ought to have more luck” (110). Meanwhile, the fairy godmothers are subversive through their defiance of the genre, bestowing the baby princess with gifts of “Punctuality” and “Commonsense”, rather than the typical offerings of grace and beauty, due to their having “modern ideas about girls” (99). The self-conscious fairy-tale explicitly challenges the use of traditional tropes: although the Third Son does eventually marry the Princess, he is not

romantic in his intentions and primarily weds her for practical purposes, and the tale ends with an acknowledgement that “Times are changing” (110). But while “The Unromantic Princess” makes a point of using realism to subvert typical fairy-tale types within a clearly established fairy-tale setting, Bowen also seems to have relished reimagining such traditional tricksters within a modern, realist world. Here, rather than being conveyed as flat stereotypes, the fairy-tale figures are jarring and mysterious within their modern-day surroundings, seeming to probe character and character dynamics in a curious way.

This chapter has already introduced one such “realist” fairy-tale trickster: Madame Fisher in *The House in Paris*, who is homologous with the wicked stepmother or witch. Madame Fisher’s quasi-magical influence is felt throughout the novel to the extent that she is almost omnipresent, a fixed point around which the other characters rotate. The reader is made aware of her presence long before meeting her due to the house’s inhabitants having to creep around, constantly being reminded that “somebody was ill somewhere” (24). Despite being physically absent from the middle section of the novel, Madame Fisher remains relentlessly influential, almost possessing her daughter at one point, who, we are told, “put on Mme Fisher . . . [and spoke] with her mother’s smoothness” (100). Later, she trespasses invisibly on Max and Karen’s private meeting, when they feel “shut up with what Mme Fisher said” (140).

A similar “wicked witch” can be noted in Bowen’s 1941 short story “Look at All Those Roses”. Here, Mrs Mather’s cottage, a “trap baited with beauty” on a “spell-bound afternoon” (*Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories* 573), provides a gingerbread house echoic of Madame Fisher’s house in Paris. Lou, the story’s protagonist, is drawn in by the cottage’s plethora of roses after her car breaks down outside – an incident she later attributes to the work of “the evil eye” (575). Inside the house, she discovers Mrs Mather and her invalid daughter, Josephine, a character reminiscent of Sleeping Beauty in her imprisonment by a controlling matriarch; when Josephine speaks to Lou of her desire to see London, her “mother’s step sound[s] on the hall flags” (576), flagging up her captivity. As in much of fairy-tale and Bowen’s fiction alike, the father is mysteriously absent. Ellmann has noted this story’s resemblance to folk narrative, positing that “the mother and daughter of the rose-house are the stuff of fairy-tales; when Lou crosses the threshold, in a Pinteresque tradition, she steps from modern satire



into ancient fable” (3); indeed, Lou instinctively declines the food offered to her by Mrs Mather, with Josephine’s reflection that “if she eats she may have to stay here forever” reinforcing the sense of fairyland enchantment (578). She feels “attracted by calmness” (574), mesmerised by the timeless atmosphere of cottage, an all-female fairyland enticing to Lou, who is tired from quarrelling with her boyfriend, Edward. Trickery and “conspiracy” (577) are ubiquitous in this story, with Mrs Mather at the centre of a fretful sense of confused identity: Lou and Edward feel that “there was nothing to ‘place’ her by. . . . [T]hey could not tell if she were rich or poor, stupid or clever, a spinster or a wife” (574) – she has “no expression at all” (573), her face bearing “a sculptural clearness” that underlines her uncanny ambiguity (574), its suggestion of a mask emphasising her status as a stock character. Eventually, outside amongst the ominous roses, Lou’s “obsession about keeping Edward drifts away, and she sinks into an ecstasy of indifference” (Ellmann 2), seemingly fated, like Sleeping Beauty, to lie there indefinitely, until Edward returns and snatches her away from the cottage, perturbed by rumours he has heard in the village about “the abrupt disappearance of Mr Mather” (581), who is intimated to be buried beneath the roses. Like the wicked stepmother in Cinderella, or the evil queen in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Mrs Mather emits a sinister matriarchal power which is innately hostile to the figure of the patriarch.

The arrangement of Mrs Mather, Josephine and their cottage chimes not only with the dynamics of Madame Fisher, Naomi and the house in Paris, but also with *The Heat of the Day*’s Mrs Kelway and her daughter Ernestine at their home of Holme Dene. In each of these cases, the house and daughter function as extensions of the matriarchal power; while in “Look at All Those Roses” and *The House in Paris* the mother-daughter-house structure enforces a sense of the desire to control others emotionally, in *The Heat of the Day*, Mrs Kelway’s implied Nazi sympathies create a different form of insidiousness at Holme Dene, with the matriarchal force here being conterminous with fascism, both of which have used the character Robert as an instrument. Bowen, herself inheriting Bowen’s Court in County Cork, included the “Big House” in many of her stories; in *The Heat of the Day*, *The House in Paris* and “Look at All Those Roses”, the houses’ allusions to matriarchy and to the fairy-tale gingerbread cottage underscore the threat felt in society by female power, akin to the wartime suspicions of fascist alliances, as

well as the social rejection of the figure of the older woman; while the fairy-tale cottage is buried deep within the forest, Madame Fisher is physically restricted to her house and Lis Christensen has commented upon how the name “‘Holme Dene’ . . . suggests the isolation of the house” (131).

Meanwhile, *The Death of the Heart* introduces another form of fairy-tale trickster in the character of Eddie. Described by John Bayley as a “gaily amoral . . . brilliant young man from nowhere who lives on his wits and his unscrupulousness” who “was suggested by the real life personality of Goronwy Rees, with whom Bowen had a brief fling” (“Elizabeth Bowen”), Eddie improvises and manipulates his way through life, beguiling the novel’s female characters. Portia, the novel’s protagonist, becomes enamoured with him; he toys with her affections and visits her during her stay at the coastal town of Seale, where he promptly engages in flirtation with Daphne, the daughter at the house where Portia is staying. His friendship with Portia’s guardian, Anna, has been damaged by his once attempting to kiss her (66). Theatrical, resilient and mischievous, Eddie exerts an influence on the other characters that is more destabilising than wicked: the narrative describes how “Everyone seemed to get a kick out of their relations with Eddie; he was like a bright little cracker that, pulled hard enough, goes off with a loud bang” (62). Though rather unlike Bowen’s other trickster characters, Eddie may be seen as akin to fairy-tale’s serendipitous trickster while also embodying the moral ambiguity of the folkloric animal tricksters.

Bowen’s short stories and novels alike thus appropriated tricky figures from traditional fairy-stories; and yet, the transition of fairy-tale tropes from her short stories to her novels initially appears problematic. Her novels are more realist than many of her short stories, and the need for nuanced characters that must be developed over the course of a novel seems to obfuscate the use of traditional character-types. Bowen, however, considered there to be no such problem. Writing of the stories she read as a child, she professed:

obviously, the characters in the books gave me prototypes under which, for evermore, to assemble all living people. This did not by any means simplify people for me; it had the reverse effect, and I was glad that it should – the characters who came out of my childish reading to obsess me were the incalculable ones, who always moved in a blur of potentialities. It appeared that nobody who mattered was capable of being explained. Thus was inculcated a feeling for the dark horse. (“Out of a Book” 51)

This quotation is especially notable for two reasons. To begin with, it suggests Bowen to have deemed there to be a greater bond between the world of literary tropes and real society than might typically be assumed: she did not find it problematic to “assemble all living people” into the character categories of traditional literature. In a review of Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples*, Bowen spoke disparagingly of formulaic narratives, suggesting that, in stories written around such a plotline, however entertaining they may be, “No new world has been created, no unique vision sheds light, nothing of significance has been laid bare” (“The Golden Apples” 152). There thus appears to have been a difference between reusing a “stock” plotline, which Bowen deemed unimaginative, and recognising the existence of character-types, which she appears to have considered a realistic and universal truth. Indeed, while praising Welty for writing short stories in which “nothing comes out of stock”, Bowen also commended Welty’s characters for being “at once their own and universal” (“The Golden Apples” 153), implying that a character could and should be both unique and typical. Welty’s *The Golden Apples* interpolates numerous allusions to myth, further suggesting Bowen not to have been averse to inherited literary shapes, but only to unoriginal contrivances of plot.

Secondly in the above quotation from “Out of a Book”, Bowen seems to be describing a particular interest in the trickster – a “dark horse” character that could conform to a “prototype” while simultaneously being “incalculable” and mysterious. Certainly, many of her novels’ most “trickster” characters may be read as adaptations of elusive fairy-tale figures. *The Heat of the Day*, with its aforementioned debt to Carroll’s “Alice” books, again looks to these books for its use of the trickster. In this novel, Harrison and Robert are intrinsically hinged together, creating a double-act that ruptures Stella’s understanding of virtue, as the ostensibly “good” Robert and “bad” Harrison merge together and switch roles. The introduction to this thesis has established the trickster’s roots in images of doubleness and dichotomies, which are crucial to the interplay between Robert and Harrison: both are in love with Stella, both – although on opposing sides – are involved in espionage, both share the same first name and one is eventually mistaken for the other (305); as Plain states, “By the end of the novel, the two men have become indistinguishable” (168). Harrison’s first appearance to Stella, at a funeral (72), foreshadows his instigation of Robert’s death at the end of the

novel. Together they form the novel's imbroglio of tricksiness: Stella's predicament, throughout the book, is in discerning which of the two is deceiving her and which is speaking the truth. If Harrison is the White Rabbit, opening the story and, like Carroll's character, repeatedly checking his watch throughout the narrative, then Robert is perhaps the Hatter, whose culpability is questioned throughout *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Both the White Rabbit and the Hatter are connected with the theme of time – the White Rabbit in his attachment to his watch and fear of being “late” (1), and the Hatter in facing the accusation of “murdering the time” (47). Similarly, time is a theme which Plain has identified as recurrent in *The Heat of the Day* and Bowen's short stories, where she suggests that it is consubstantial with patriarchy (122); in this novel, time also serves to further unify Harrison and Robert through their fairy-tale counterparts, the White Rabbit and the Hatter.

Alongside Harrison and Robert, there is a third and slightly different trickster presence in *The Heat of the Day*: the peripheral Cousin Nettie, who may be viewed as another “incalculable” “dark horse”. Believed mad, she has been confined to Wisteria Lodge, an institution she describes as being “Too far [from anywhere] for anyone to come” (206) – a marginal territory which reflects her role in the novel as a shrewd but detached spectator. When visited by Stella's son, Roderick, she hosts a tea-party reminiscent of the tea-party in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – an allusion further compounded by her embroidering a purple rose throughout this meeting, which mirrors the rose-painting scene in *Alice's Adventures* (L. Carroll 51), and by Wisteria Lodge's being a psychiatric institution while, in Carroll's *Wonderland*, the Cheshire Cat exclaims: “we're all mad here” (*Alice's Adventures* 41). Indeed, this is the scene which contains the novel's aforementioned reference to “Cheshire cats” (122), and Nettie herself may be viewed as the Cheshire Cat's real-life counterpart. Both characters are examples of altruistic helpers – a type of fairy-tale trickster defined in this thesis's introduction. While the Cheshire Cat coolly aids Alice's navigation of *Wonderland*, Nettie imparts crucial information that helps Roderick make sense of his family's past: the revelation that it was his father who had left his mother, not the other way around, as he had believed. Like the Cat, she occupies a liminal ground between madness and sanity, implying that she has only feigned insanity to escape her husband and his house, Mount Morris. Nettie's brief appearance in

the novel is catalytic, disruptive and surprising: her exposing family secrets adheres to the trickster's traditional function as a truth-teller, and her outsider's stance allows her to comment upon characters' actions without being observed – as Stella later remarks, “who could have thought of *her* [being the one to divulge the secret]?” (228). While Carroll's cat physically fades into invisibility, Nettie fades in and out of her family's consciousness, cyclically forgotten and remembered, but her wealth of insight also gives her an aura of omniscience – perhaps her collection of “tinted pictures of children” (209), as well as underlining her own childlessness and her role as an observer rather than a participant, is a nod to Carroll's hobby of photographing children,<sup>5</sup> thus establishing a communion between the tricky narrative outsider and the figure of the author.

### **The Fisher King, *The Heat of the Day* and *The House in Paris***

Bowen's love for fairy-tales prompted her to include images of them in her work, while her more particular interest in “incalculable” literary tropes caused her to look to tricky fairy-tale figures in crafting her most elusive characters. But Bowen also used traditional tricksters to approach complex ideas. Carroll's Cheshire Cat is not the only trickster figure impressed upon the character of Cousin Nettie, for, in describing her past experience as a young bride at Mount Morris, Nettie declares:

‘what [Francis] had wanted me to be was his wife; I tried this, that and the other, till the result was that I fell into such a terrible melancholy that I only had to think of anything for *it* to go wrong, too. Nature hated us; that was a most dangerous position to build a house in – once the fields noticed me with him, the harvests began failing; so I took to going nowhere but up and down stairs, till I met with my own ghost.’ (217)

Nettie is here describing her actions and emotions as having a literal influence upon the land and its fertility – an idea which grasps at the figure of the Fisher King, a mysterious trickster and fertility symbol from Arthurian legend. The Fisher King's first literary appearance, in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*, presents him as an omnipresent guide helping Percival on a quest, shape-shifting between the

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<sup>5</sup> Carroll's photographs were largely forgotten until the publication of Helmut Gernsheim's *Lewis Carroll, Photographer*, in 1949 – a year after the publication of *The Heat of the Day*. However, Gernsheim and his wife discovered these photographs in an antique shop in 1947 (Gernsheim, *Creative Photography* 233 and G. Harrison par. 6), a time when Bowen was living in London, so it is possible that the photographs were a talking point in artistic circles before the publication of Gernsheim's book.

roles of fisherman and king. Wolfram von Eschenbach's 13<sup>th</sup> century poem "Parzival" then rebirthed him as a "Grail King" named Anfortas, who is maimed in punishment for his weakness for women – a flaw which prevents him from achieving the purity required of the guardian of the Holy Grail. In the Lancelot-Grail cycle, the Fisher King is named Pelles, and engineers the birth of Galahad by tricking Lancelot into bed with Elaine (see Lacy). These qualities of omnipresence, shape-shifting, physical lusts and sexual tricks, all resonate with the traits of folkloric tricksters as discussed in this thesis's introduction. The Fisher King was introduced to the twentieth century by Jessie Weston, whose 1920 book *From Ritual to Romance* identified his connection to fertility (60), illustrating that the king's maiming in the medieval texts led the land to become infertile – similar, it seems, to the manner in which Cousin Nettie's problems adjusting to the conventional role of "wife" cast a sterility across the land. The healing of the king's wound in legend, Weston claimed, would restore the land's fecundity. Two years after the publication of Weston's book, T.S. Eliot appropriated the image of the Fisher King as a fertility god in *The Waste Land* – a character who, according to Jeffrey Hart (560), likely inspired Hemingway in his creation of protagonist Jake Barnes for the 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*. C.S. Lewis also openly modelled the character of Elwin Ransom on the Fisher King in his 1945 work *That Hideous Strength*. Literary circles of the first half of the twentieth century were thus aware of the Fisher King legend, and, as shall be demonstrated, it seems probable that Bowen deliberately infused him into her fiction – it is also notable that his legend is entwined with the theme of infertility which drew Bowen to the tale of the Mouse Tower in her letter to Pritchett.

I want to suggest that Bowen used the Fisher King, with his associations to fertility and infertility, as means of underscoring what she deemed a skewed social perception of the female body and women's allegedly "natural" roles. The three trickster figures in *The Heat of the Day*, although never meeting one another, are connected by the legend of the Fisher King – Robert is maimed from an old war wound, and Harrison is rather peculiarly asked if he fishes (77) – but it is Nettie, the female trickster, who seems the centre of this nexus, being strongly imbued with images of infertility. Her words to Roderick intimate that the reason "Nature hated us" was her inability to fulfil the wifely role expected of her, and her childlessness is implicit in the passage quoted above, with its description of failing

harvests and stasis. Nettie suggests a sense of having been watched, by Francis and his land: “the fields noticed me”. Life at Mount Morris, a house symbolic of patriarchy, suffocated her with its demand for an heir, until she encountered her “own ghost”: a possible manifestation of the split between herself and the mother she was expected to be. That her own infertility was reflected in the land’s infertility highlights a social tendency to view marriage and motherhood as somehow “natural”.

Nettie’s embroidering a purple rose may thus imply rebellion against the ostensibly “natural” function society demanded of her as a woman. Roderick, viewing through the male lens, suggests it should be pink, to which Nettie replies “there are purple roses” and describes one at Mount Morris that can only bloom for one week before dying (216), again underlining the sense of patriarchal institutions being inhospitable to the unconventional woman. There is a dissonance, for Nettie, between the land – the patriarchal world – and the flowers, denoting women, which have to find a way to thrive on it. Hers has been a method of escape: by feigning madness, she has removed herself from the expectations of society and carved a space where she can now silently observe others, rather than being scrutinized herself.<sup>6</sup> Plain remarks that Nettie’s “story is the product of a previous generation, and her ‘madness’ the result of being pressured into the role of wife to Cousin Francis. . . . Women must exist within a severely constrained environment. Nettie’s answer is an escape into madness which leaves Cousin Francis short of a successor” (173). Harriet S. Chessman, meanwhile, sees Nettie’s withdrawal as less of an escape: although “Nettie resists the story she had been built into: the story of the wife contained on her husband’s estate, held within the four walls of his house,” ultimately, her “retreat from story lands her in a static and nonsignificant world” (72).

While it is certainly apparent that Nettie’s story highlights a lack of social space for women outside the roles of wife and mother, her trickster-status prevents her from being a wholly powerless character in terms of narrative, allowing her a certain amount of agency and influence over Bowen’s plot. Her outsider stance, subversive presence and trickery impact the course of the novel,

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<sup>6</sup> In *The House in Paris*, Karen Michaelis – whom Radford has suggested was named after the Danish feminist writer (40) – similarly succumbs to madness, unable to conform to the role of mother.

and, despite being unable to heal society from the damage of patriarchy, she does expunge family secrets and instigate a form of cathartic healing in Roderick and Stella. Nettie was powerless when confined to the role of wife at Mount Morris, and yet, as trickster, has withdrawn herself not only from a patriarchal society, but also partially from the narrative world of *The Heat of the Day*, to the extent that she has acquired a detached insight and guidance over the novel as an artefact.

In *The Heat of the Day*, then, Bowen's embedding images of the Fisher King among her trickster characters illuminates the deficiency of the patriarchal gaze. Robert and Harrison, like Nettie, demonstrate the pressures of being watched and judged. Robert, though a spy and thus an observer of others, is eventually driven to his death by the gaze focussed upon him by Harrison, Stella and the reader. Indeed, as Nettie has withdrawn from the public gaze into a liminal world from which she can observe others, it is suggested that Robert's desire to spy stems from a childhood spent under paternal scrutiny; notably, his sister reflects that, "Our father always used to look us straight in the eye . . . [so that] as children we should have never dreamed of attempting to hide anything", to which Robert adds, "We should never have succeeded" (186). While Nettie's photographs of children suggest her to be an observer, Robert's childhood bedroom at Holme Dene contains many photographs of himself as a boy (116), compounding the sense of his having been an object of surveillance until, as he later reveals, becoming a Nazi spy "bred my father out of me" (273), allowing him to watch rather than be watched. The authoritarian gaze upon him has, nevertheless, been appropriated by Harrison, and Robert indicates that he has always been aware of the shadowy presence of a watcher, commenting: "There'd always been X – who had always had to be *someone*" (271). Both Nettie and Robert are impaired by the pressures of the patriarchy.

If Robert is the watched object, Harrison, in contrast, is depicted as unwatchable; despite being a source of fascination for both Stella and Louie, he reveals little about himself, seeming to slip into and out of being with as much ease as the Cheshire Cat. Like the tricksters of the early modern stage, he acts as a commentator observing the lives of others, rather than being scrutinised himself. However, at the end of the novel, he effectively takes Robert's place in terms of narrative role: after Robert's death, Harrison also immediately



disappears for “quite a time” (315) – we are led to believe it is several months – and, upon his return, tells Stella he left because he “was switched” (317), finally revealing that his first name is Robert (321). There is the implication that he will now become Stella’s lover. Consequently, by adopting Robert’s role in the narrative, Harrison may switch status from observer to object, and thus inherit the burden of scrutiny. Indeed, it is intimated that Robert has been reborn into Harrison, much as, in Weston’s study, the Fisher King’s ritualistic death and rebirth ensured the rotation of the seasons. This uncanny replacement of Robert with Harrison alludes to the immunity of the patriarchy, for, while Cousin Nettie is socially ostracised for her childlessness, frozen in an infertile world without descendants, Robert and Harrison, both also childless, are guaranteed the security of a different form of succession: the continuation of male power. Yet, Robert’s association with the wounded Fisher King taints the patriarchal order with an implication of stasis; this, Bowen seems to suggest, is an artificial type of fertility, unnatural and stagnant. Both Nettie and Robert, women and men, suffer under a male-led social gaze, and it seems that, by including images of the Fisher King, Bowen is underscoring the downfalls of a society in which men are given dominance. Crucially, she attaches the Fisher King to her trickster characters – a synthesis which turns him into an ironically mobile figure, the trickster being capable of crossing boundaries and obtaining some distance from the narrative – and is thus able to use him to pass commentary on 1940s Britain.

Bowen’s use of the Fisher King to illuminate the dangers of patriarchal society and the unnatural expectations placed upon women, was, however, not new to *The Heat of the Day*. In *The House in Paris*, published in 1935, Bowen’s portrayal of Madame Fisher and her daughter, Naomi Fisher, bears strong allusions to this figure – not least through their surname. Jean Radford has noted that the fictitious street in which Madame Fisher’s house stands, the “Rue Sylvestre Bonnard”, has been named after a character in Anatole France’s 1881 novel *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* (Radford 40); in France’s novel, Sylvestre is devoted to researching the Golden Legend – a medieval collection of hagiographies which has been linked to the tale of the Fisher King by Giles Morgan (64). While the street name is not an explicit reference to the Fisher King, it does suggest Bowen to have been thinking about narrative figures and structures from medieval legends. Perhaps more of an obvious link between

Madame Fisher and the Grail King is the fact that, while she lies ill and confined to her bedroom, the guardian of girls travelling far from home, the Fisher King in Von Eschenbach's version of the tale lies wounded in his castle, guarding the Holy Grail. Ellmann (119) and Wells-Lassagne (102) have observed that Madame Fisher engineers Max's affair with Karen in the novel – in which case, such a contrivance might be said to reflect the Fisher King's tricking Lancelot into bed with Elaine in the Lancelot-Grail cycle. It is also notable that, early in this novel, we are told of the "deep streets, fissures in the crazy gloomy height" (8), with the somewhat jarring use of the word "fissures" highlighting its relevance to the homophone "Fisher" and presenting the idea that traditional images of safety and homeliness may in fact be torn and vacuous – an idea concretised by Madame Fisher's insidious boarding house.

Meanwhile, Naomi seems drawn from the Arthurian figure's more altruistic aspects; her nickname, "Kingfisher" (42), may be a play on "Fisher King", and, like the king in Chrétien de Troyes's poem, she guides the protagonists in their quest, selflessly helping Max and Karen be together despite her own love for and engagement to Max. Her being compared to a "wounded bird" (113) emphasises her stasis and connection to the wounded Fisher King. Indeed, Madame Fisher and Naomi Fisher are both attached specifically to the wounded version of the legendary king, and reflect polarised negative stereotypes of women: Madame Fisher is the wicked widow, lascivious and apparently omnipresent, whereas the middle-aged Naomi is childless – like Cousin Nettie and, certainly, Bowen herself – and is judged by the other characters for her virginity and fussiness. If Madame Fisher encapsulates society's fear of female sexuality and power, Naomi is the "old maid" faced with social ridicule.

As in *The Heat of the Day*, then, Bowen appears to be using the Fisher King and his maimed state to flag up the insularity of conventional gender roles and society's gaze and expectations: women are not permitted a credible space outside the roles of wife and nurturer, and Bowen perhaps calls for a form of social healing. Her relationship with feminism is certainly complex: in her essay "The Achievement of Virginia Woolf", she wrote:

From whence, then, came this obsession of [Woolf's] that women were being martyred humanly, inhibited creatively, by the stupidities of a man-made world? What must inevitably be called Virginia Woolf's feminism . . .

was a bleak quality, an aggressive streak, which can but irritate, disconcert, the adorer of Virginia Woolf the artist (81)

This is the statement that led Joannou to ponder whether Bowen was “hostile to feminism” (“*Ladies*” 130) despite her texts’ being concerned with “rich feminist themes such as the relationship of women to male authority” (“*Ladies*” 129). It is important to acknowledge that, when Bowen declared herself “not” a feminist in 1961, the word “feminism” would likely have had different connotations to those it evokes in the twenty-first century. Kaitlynn Mendes explains that, from the late 1920s until the rise of Second Wave feminism in the late 1960s, “feminist activism was in ‘abeyance’” in the UK (4), and Elizabeth Wilson has similarly suggested that, in the 1950s, “Feminism led an underground or Sleeping Beauty existence” (187). Bowen, politically conservative, may thus not have identified with the label “feminist”, likely viewing it as indicative of radicalism; nevertheless, her use of myth and fairy-tale seems to subtly infuse her works with a sense of social injustice towards women.

Feminist themes are perhaps less explicit in Bowen’s works than in those of Woolf, but in both *The House in Paris* and *The Heat of the Day* she appears to have reached for the Fisher King legends in crafting tricksters who highlight deeply-engrained problems within patriarchal society, drawing upon the legends’ themes of infertility, injury and stasis in order to signify a wound in the treatment of gender. On a tangent to this, it is worth noting that Bowen’s decision to incorporate aspects of Arthurian legend in her modern, realist novels, may intimate a stronger relationship to the Celtic revival than has previously been supposed of her. Craig notes that Bowen did not learn of the existence of the revival “until 1916, when she was at school in England” (26), and, certainly, her work is more often read in relation to the modernist movement, which tends to be placed at odds with the romance of the Irish literary revival. Nevertheless, Glendinning has spoken of Bowen as “thoroughly Celtic in her imaginative range” (“Bowen” 74) and Megan Quigley has suggested that Bowen’s 1929 novel *The Last September* “simultaneously resounds with Revivalist nostalgia and presents a modernist exploration of time and identity” (182) – continuing from this, it might be argued that many of Bowen’s novels use trickster figures and a “fairy-tale” sense of nostalgia to compound the stagnation of an inherited patriarchal order. Her 1955 *A World of Love*, for instance, though not engaging with the figure of

the Fisher King, has ubiquitous themes of nostalgia and Irishness which are attached to its depiction of patriarchal power.

The predominantly female cast of characters in *A World of Love* are haunted by their relative Guy Danby, who has been dead for more than three decades: they live in his estate where his presence is ceaselessly felt, and Antonia and Lilia, the two women old enough to remember Guy, reflect upon their romantic interactions with him. Meanwhile, Jane, the novel's young protagonist, becomes fixated upon a collection of love letters written by Guy which she discovers in an attic trunk, and the novel follows her as she is essentially seduced by the past. The house, Montefort, seems shrouded in romance, a fairy-tale retreat from mid-twentieth-century Ireland – one character Jane encounters is convinced that the house no longer exists (64) – and its inhabitants are frozen within a male-led order: Guy's being dead immortalises the patriarchy. Throughout the novel, Jane is trapped within a male discourse, her perspective determined by what she has read in Guy's letters; she seems to stand alone in the shadow of a faceless masculinity. This is particularly evident in the scene in which she visits a neighbour for a dinner party: Bowen narrates how "Jane entered a drawing-room black-and-white at the door end with standing men. . . . The fact was not only that she distinguished no one but that, so far, so compact was the group that all these alike, anonymous masks seemed to be attached to the same body, one abstract shirtfront" (58). Jane is here intimidated by a united body of men, their lack of individuality making them a representation of the patriarchy, as does the description of their faces as "masks", which underscores their being fixed in a particular role – Jane, too, feels that she is a "ventriloquist's doll" (60), hinting at her voicelessness as a woman. Later in this scene, we are told: "'You're nothing,' [Jane] thought of the company, 'but a pack of cards!' – but the cards were stacked, and against her" (61) – "You're nothing but a pack of cards" is another line from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which Alice cries when Wonderland's monarch is ordering her execution (83). Here, Jane similarly realises her powerlessness when faced with the authority of the dominant order: the cards are stacked against her. She is especially stifled by the sense of Guy's presence at this dinner party, for he is vastly more tangible than the living characters and, since an extra place has mistakenly been laid at the table, is reified into physical space. Jane sits opposite the empty place, and the scene is

depicted as akin to a séance, underscoring the presence of the dead – we are told that “Seated across the table, which was a round one, Jane faced the gap in the ring of lit-up masks” (66), again using the term “masks” to describe the male faces, and:

Invisibly concentrated around [the ghost of Guy] was all the time he had ever breathed: his todays, his yesterdays, his anticipated tomorrows – it could be felt how and understood why something had emanated from him so strongly into the experience of the room when he joined the party. The set of his head was joyous and dictatorial – he was *at* the party, into it, key-placed in the zonal merging manly pattern of black-and-white round this round table. (69)

Guy here heads the patriarchy, his transcendence signifying its omnipresence, its extension through past, present and future. This omnipresence, along with his control over the living characters, his shape-shifting between their differing perceptions of him and his aura of mystery, also suggests him to be a type of trickster, albeit a rather menacing one. Jane’s younger sister, Maud, frequently interacts with an imaginary companion named “Gay David” – a name similar enough to Guy Danby to suggest his infiltration into the minds of the younger generation, an insidious inheritance of androcentrism. While it may be tempting to construe Guy as passive in the sense that he is able only to exist within the minds of women, forced to adapt to their differing perceptions of him, it is impossible to ignore Bowen’s portrayal of the women as victims: they are the ones imprisoned by an external consciousness, and Guy leaves even the stoic Antonia “shaken” (78) after invisibly summoning her to him (77). Far from being shaped by them, he cunningly chooses to present himself to the women in different ways. Plain, as has been previously discussed, has posited that “time” in *The Heat of the Day* is reflective of patriarchal order; in *A World of Love*, although the start of the novel – before the discovery of Guy’s letters – depicts a house of women where the lack of accurate clocks and calendars speaks “of the total irrelevance of Time” (21), near the end of the novel, the women sit listening as the chimes of Big Ben wash over them via the wireless: “The sound of Time, inexorably coming as it did, at once was absolute and fatal. . . . Time swooped as it struck – and Antonia, hearing each felling blow, flinched once: who can flinch nine times?” (129). Guy’s ghostly infiltration into the house has brought with it an inescapable sense of patriarchal consciousness. Guy is the sort of trickster reminiscent of Harrison in *The Heat of the Day*, as both characters take little

action themselves, seemingly preferring to observe others, and are childless, yet their shadowy presence is so strongly felt by the other characters as to manipulate the narratives, their legacy spreading far enough to immortalise them.

Thus, in *The Heat of the Day*, *The House in Paris* and *A World of Love*, Bowen appears to have split the trickster figure between very different characters in order to map out patterns of power and passivity: Harrison, Guy and Madame Fisher all hold an omnipresent form of authority which allows them to manipulate other characters, while Cousin Nettie and Naomi Fisher occupy a liminal space outside of society, omniscient through their distance from other people rather than their involvement with them, passive and amorphous. In these novels, Bowen seems to be grappling with ideas about patriarchy and female spaces, frequently reaching for images from fertility myth and from fairy-tale in an attempt to crystallise these thoughts. Myths and fairy-tales were, after all, something innate and subconscious to her, dealing with hazy feelings about childhood and nurture while simultaneously offering concrete tropes and upholding a system which Bowen described as “authoritarian”, elaborating that, in fairy-tale, “The prototype hero is, as often as not, acting under orders; the apparent free-lance, sooner or later, finds himself acting under advice. To ignore advice, as our lad soon finds, is as fatal as to contravene orders” (“Comeback” 291). Perhaps this coming-together of fictional power hierarchies and a more ineffable sense of identity is why Bowen may have used classical tales to address her feelings about an inherited social order masquerading as a natural system.

### **Art, Academia and Female Outsiders**

This chapter has thus far traced how Bowen used trickster figures, drawn from characters in myth and fairy-tale, to highlight her impression of a social and cultural clash between the patriarchal gaze and the space required for alternative – especially female – modes of understanding. This dichotomy is often underscored by images of doubling: Harrison is fused with Robert, Cousin Nettie meets her “own ghost”, the cruel Madame Fisher is hinged to the kind Miss Fisher and Jane is tightly bound to Guy – for instance, at the dinner party scene, she is so twinned with the presence of her dead cousin that “not a soul failed to feel the electric connection between Jane’s paleness and the dark of the chair in which

so far no one visibly sat. Between them, the two dominated the party” (Bowen, *A World* 67). The trickster doubling plays out dynamics between the observer and the object and consequently probes issues of authority and gender. In *The House in Paris* and *The Heat of the Day*, tricksters are more specifically attached to the figure of the Fisher King, in order to establish the sterility of mid-twentieth-century gender conceptualisation and a need for social and cultural healing. The Fisher King’s theme of infertility is shared with the legend of the Mouse Tower,<sup>7</sup> and, as seen in her letter to Pritchett at the start of this chapter, the legend of the Mouse Tower was also useful to Bowen in describing a sense of deficiency in modern society.

However, while Bowen’s analogy of the Mouse Tower evinces her emotional engagement with traditional tales, images of which, this chapter has shown, recur throughout her oeuvre to indicate the flaws of patriarchy, it also hints at why, ultimately, Bowen needed the trickster. In what follows, I shall suggest that Bowen was exploring what she perceived as a deep and nuanced dichotomy between the artist and the “intelligent person”: a dichotomy apparently loosely extending from a female-male binary without being restricted to it.

Bowen’s letter to Pritchett described a feeling of being threatened as an artist by the gaze of educated readers, depicting the discord between the observer and the object: a theme which, as has been demonstrated, played out in her fiction. This letter, furthermore, is far from being the only instance of her expressing a perceived distance between creativity and the form of intelligence engendered by modern academic institutions, an anxiety perhaps reflecting what Malcolm Bradbury described when he wrote that, in the early twentieth century:

With the modern novel there therefore came modern criticism. . . . [I]n time it came to seem that it was not what the novelists said about it but what the critics said that constituted the only worthwhile or reliable interpretation. . . . In the process a speculative gap often began to appear between what the critics were perceiving and what contemporary novelists were actually doing (“Introduction to the 1990 Edition” 5).

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<sup>7</sup> Both these legends may also be linked to Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, as the Fisher King was a source of inspiration for Eliot and the Mouse Tower echoes Eliot’s images of rats and bones: “I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones” (*The Waste Land* lines 115 and 116 ) and “And bones cast in a little low dry garret, / Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year” (*The Waste Land* lines 194 and 195).

To Bowen, the “intelligent” reader, the cerebral critic or scholar, seems to have posed a threat to the instinctive form of understanding and emotion involved in the creation of art; indeed, any sort of intellectual approach to art appeared problematic to her. In essays, she made a distinction between “the imaginatively creative . . . [and] the merely cerebrally inventive writer” (“*Afterthought* 206), holding in greater esteem those who birthed their own organic style under the influence of other writers, than those who sought formulaically to copy existing works of literature. Her review of *The Olive Tree*, Aldous Huxley’s 1936 collection of essays, criticised Huxley as being “at once the truly clever person and the stupid person’s idea of the clever person; he is expected to be relentless, to administer intellectual shocks. . . . [I]n a great glare of intellectual hilarity his characters dangle rather too jerkily; they are morality characters with horrified puppet faces” (“Mr. Huxley’s Essays” 146). Bowen, while in favour of character “prototypes” – which she discussed in lectures with recourse to the idea of a catalytic and seemingly tricky “simple soul” figure in narrative (qtd. in Ellmann 206) – seems to suggest Huxley’s characters to be too contrived, merely invented as vehicles through which he could deliver his intellectual ideas, rather than being natural characters formed through feeling. She herself, in contrast, relied on instinct when creating art, claiming in her letter to Pritchett that “if I thought more, I might write less” (see Pritchett 20), and has consequently been praised for the

natural force . . . [which] distinguishes her from the many and very various writers with whom she has affinities. . . . [S]he always sees [her characters] from the outside, never from above, with that satirical view of intellectual superiority that Aldous Huxley found in his early novels. . . . [S]he was never the slave of the academic world as Virginia Woolf . . . too often was. (A. Wilson, Introduction x).

Bowen’s sense of there being a clash between art and academic intelligence was likely fuelled by her involvement in the education system. Her husband, Alan Cameron, whom she married in 1923, was Secretary for Education in Oxford, while she herself would regularly lecture at American universities in the 1950s and 1960s. Following a visit to Germany in 1954, she rather sadly reflected that their universities were “intellectual-professional forcing house[s]. No one goes there who is not thought likely to stay the course in an out-and-out cerebral career. And this seemed to me to be bearing hard, in particular, upon the young women. For a woman in her young days, life should be opening up, not narrowing down” (“Without Coffee” 95), and recorded an exchange with a female German



student who remarked that “‘Maybe if I were taught less, I’d think more” (“Without Coffee” 97). There is a sense here of Bowen regarding modern intellectual discourse as male-centred, cerebral rather than creative and eclipsing or “narrowing down” the potential of the female voice: a notion perhaps compounded by her having witnessed what Anna Bogen terms “the elitist male circles of high modernism” (31).

These ideas appear to have been nascent in Bowen much earlier than the 1950s, however. From 1914 until 1917, she attended Downe House, a boarding school for girls in Berkshire and an academic institution which seems to have been inhospitable to emotion – indeed, a place where, according to Ellmann, Bowen was taught “how not to exhibit feeling” (30). Reflecting on this period of her life, Bowen described how Downe House’s headmistress, Olive Willis, went so far as to inform the pupils that “it did not matter if [they] were happy so long as [they] were good” (“The Mulberry Tree” 16); feelings were not considered worthy of attention, so any “serious or emotional talks” on such topics as “art, Roman Catholicism, suicide, or how impossible someone had been” had to be conducted in secret in the passageways at night (“The Mulberry Tree” 15). At school, Bowen recalled, “the greatest crime . . . was silliness” (“Downe House” 218), and “emotion” had to be “banked up in the holidays” (“The Mulberry Tree” 17), as though inaccessible during term-time. Stoicism was the favoured attitude, with Bowen remembering with disdain the “one or two people [who] contrived to keep diaries, moon round the garden alone and be quite unhappy” (“The Mulberry Tree” 18): she herself ostensibly coped well with the “prosaic” atmosphere, describing herself as potentially “insensitive. A toughish, thick child, . . . [who] did not in fact suffer in any way” (“The Mulberry Tree” 20). While Bowen spoke fondly of her time at this school, the sense of there being a discrepancy between the sterility of academic learning and the emotional sensitivity required to experience art seems to have troubled her, pervading her fiction.

Furthermore, while it is unlikely that she viewed intellectualism as wholly masculine and creativity wholly feminine, Bowen does appear to have attached traits of emotion and sensuousity to certain liminal female characters in her fiction, who often struggle both in their academic situation and in their navigation of the male world, as though the form of intelligence conventionally prized in schools is problematically saturated in male discourse. It is these female characters to

whom the images of the Fisher King are most often applied, suggesting femininity to have a particular affinity with the themes of marginalised consciousness, sensitivity, nature and inhibited fertility, which Bowen associated with the Grail King. In contrast, confident, authoritarian male characters are often attached to some form of intellectual elitism: for example, Harrison in *The Heat of the Day* is an intelligence officer, authorised to access stores of knowledge held by the state, and the pressure of his gaze on the other characters may reflect Bowen's own sense of being watched by the "avid glittering eyes" of "intelligent" critics.

In *The Death of the Heart*, the marginal character of Lilian exemplifies a sensitive figure eschewed by academic institutions. Lilian is a girl in her teens, who belongs "to a junior branch of an emotional society, in which there is always a crisis due" (59). Her proclivity for strong emotions repeatedly interrupts her schooling: she has "had to be taken away from her boarding school because of falling in love with the cello mistress, which had made her quite unable to eat" (51),<sup>8</sup> and, later, the novel's young protagonist, Portia, records in her diary that "Lilian was bilious in lessons and had to go out, she says when she has feelings it makes her bilious" (110). That Lilian's passions lead to her literal expulsion from the academic environment highlights the clash Bowen perceived between emotion and cognition. She is a "removed and mysterious" figure (51), who is likened to the "Lily Maid" from Arthurian legend<sup>9</sup> (51) and whose earthiness is underscored by her habit of lingering in cemeteries, where she "enjoy[s] the melancholy" (50). Lilian is intuitive, feels communion with other characters and is attuned to the natural cycles of life and death; furthermore, she seems to have a primal talent for healing, as seen when, comforting Portia in a moment of crisis, her touch sends a "sedative animal feeling" up Portia's arm (268).

Another of Bowen's narratives that connects school with the repression of female emotion is her short story "The Apple Tree". In this tale, nineteen-year-old Myra is traumatised by the memory of a fellow pupil's suicide at their boarding school when she was twelve. Describing the experience, Myra explains: "I don't think we [pupils] knew we were unhappy; we never spoke of that; we should have felt ashamed" (*Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories* 521), emphasising the stigma

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<sup>8</sup> At Downe House, "the girls were forced to finish up everything on their plates" (Ellmann 30).

<sup>9</sup> According to legend, the Lily Maid is the tragic Elaine, who dies of heartbreak (see *The Story of Elaine*).

associated with emotion and adding that “From being [at school] . . . so much, we began to feel that this was the world” (521) and “there seemed to be no other world outside the school” (522), perhaps hinting that the female pupil, Doria, was literally unable to thrive in a world limited to the academic sphere. Myra has been left a “mannerless, sexless child, the dim something between a mouse and an Undine, this wraith not considerable as a mother of sons, this cold little shadow” (515): her stifling school experience has led to her loss of female identity and loss of fertility, and she is likened to an “Undine”, a fairy-like creature and perhaps more specifically the focus of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s 1811 German fairy-tale novella – again, Bowen reaches for images of the fairy-tale to suggest a lack of space for women in the academic sphere. In the traditional German story, the Undine is a trickster, a water spirit who marries a knight in order to gain his soul; Myra’s traumatic childhood experience has comparably left her devoid of personality or “soul”, and her midnight encounters with Lancelot, a character named after another knight, augment her association with the fairy-tale. She has been made ill through years of repressing the emotion she experienced upon Doria’s death, never having spoken of the incident until now. The story is titled “The Apple Tree” due to Doria’s committing suicide at the apple tree in the school grounds, and conjures a notable parallel with the title of Bowen’s essay on her time spent at Downe House: “The Mulberry Tree”. Through this similitude, Bowen may be implying the malady at Doria and Myra’s school – that is, the stifling environment without scope for feeling – to be a more universal condition found throughout schools at the time.

“The Apple Tree” was first published in 1934; Bowen’s final novel, the 1968 *Eva Trout*, shows her to have been still grappling with themes of art, emotion and academia more than three decades later. In this novel, we discover that Eva’s classmate, “a fairylike little near-albino who for some reason had been christened Elsinore” (52), attempted suicide while they were at school together. When Eva later encounters her as an adult, Elsinore is “ethereal” and “like ectoplasm” (132), with “frosted lips” (141), as though dead; her appearance resembles a creature from a fairy-tale and her name elicits images of Shakespeare’s haunted castle in *Hamlet*, marking her as one of Bowen’s many liminal, displaced women. As Doria’s suicide in “The Apple Tree” is prompted by Myra’s ending their friendship, so was Elsinore’s suicide attempt triggered by her separation from Eva, whom

she loved. In both these instances, death has been favoured over the experience of emotion; indeed, to feel something within an academic environment seems impossible.

Jack Zipes has recorded how women writers in previous centuries “created their fairy tales for the most part to express their views about young people and to prepare them for roles that they idealistically believed they should play in society” (*Fairy Tales* 29). Bowen, as this chapter has illustrated, likewise deemed childhood reading of such tales to beget a fundamental understanding of the world, from helping her to identify the “prototypes” in society, to allowing her to build a strong sense of self. Fairy-tales, for her, ultimately nurtured an instinctive form of intelligence, and she would reach for them when attempting to express deep emotion. As a form, they stood for a creative discourse, of emotion, art and often femininity, which helped to crystallise feelings which were otherwise difficult to articulate. This natural sphere of understanding was at odds with modern academic learning – Zipes has suggested that the fairy-tale came to pose a potential threat to mainstream education: “as childhood assumed a more precious and distinct state of experience during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the social forces dominating education constantly checked and investigated to see if the ‘standard’ fairy tale maintained an ‘ideology of harmlessness’” (*Fairy Tales* 34). In this way, then, Bowen drew from fairy-tales when depicting a discrepancy between cerebral intelligence and natural, emotional knowledge; this extended to a clash between male and female forms of understanding, with fairy-tales given a particular affinity with emotional female figures in her fiction.

Ineffable female characters such as Lilian, Myra and Elsinore and, indeed, Cousin Nettie and Naomi Fisher, meander on the peripheries of Bowen’s fiction, drawing from tricksters of myth and fairy-tale to illuminate their exclusion from patriarchal systems. In *Eva Trout*, however, we have a female trickster as the novel’s protagonist – a more solid, rounded character whose tricks and experiences similarly flag up problems with the treatment of women and with contemporary pedagogy. Eva is a trickster in the traditional sense firstly in her travels: she roams England, France and America, crossing borders and lacking any sort of identity of place. Secondly, she literally tricks other characters, embroidering elaborate lies and staging scenes. These falsities seem designed

to depict herself as a more conventional woman than she is: she pretends to have been engaged (89), pretends to be pregnant (121), pretends to be married (127) and even convinces another character to pretend that he is going to marry her (238). Such deceptions indicate Eva's anxiety over her role in society as a woman: she feels pressure to adhere to statuses of fiancée, wife and mother, eventually adopting a son in an attempt to comply with social expectations. This concern over her female role seemingly dates back to her schooldays, when she was taunted and called a "hermaphrodite" (51); here, Eva's trickster-like blurring of gender boundaries reflects the paradox she feels between the social expectations placed upon her as a woman – to be sensitive and emotional – and the pressure to respond to an intellectual type of pedagogy. The difficulties she experiences in finding a space within society are concretised by her fretful relationship with education. Though we are told that, like Myra, Eva "so seldom spoke of" her time at school (48), her schooldays appear to haunt her: she twice returns to her old school during the course of the novel, harbours an obsession with her former English teacher and displays an interest in academic institutions in general when she visits Cambridge University upon falling in love with a student there. At school, Eva seems too creative to be fully educated: as Ellmann states, "Educating Eva is a matter of taming her imagination" (204).

Meanwhile, Eva's English teacher, Iseult, named after a figure from Arthurian legend, enacts a failed attempt to reconcile art with education. Early in her career, Iseult is simultaneously involved in education and "a young artist" (61); she is portrayed as a passionate character, who frames her deep love for her husband through images of flowers and nature: "She never foresaw their marriage, its days and nights, other than as embowered by dazzling acres, blossom a snowy blaze and with honeyed stamens" (22). Later, however, Iseult rejects Eva, her former student, and claims to have lost interest in teaching (226); she also fails to write her book (228), leaves her husband and is declared by another character to have undergone an "emotional hysterectomy" (226). Her attempts to combine her passionate nature with a career in pedagogy have resulted in her becoming disconnected from both. At the end of the novel, Iseult's reconciliation with her husband perhaps suggests her to have chosen art and emotion over education – a choice reified by the death of Eva, who was a symbol of Iseult's academic career.

In her early days, Iseult is described as a “D.H. Lawrence reader”, and Bowen’s ideas about art and intelligence seemingly held an affinity with those of Lawrence, whose most famous novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, depicts a clash between the sterile intellectualism of the modern world and a natural form of understanding and intuition concomitant with fertility. Lawrence further elucidated his perception of a distance between academia and emotion in “The Novel and the Feelings”, in which he claimed that “we wear our education just as externally as we wear our boots . . . [while] in some other part of my anatomy, the dark continent of my self, I have a whole stormy chaos of ‘feelings’” (202). Speaking of Lawrence on the BBC Home Service, Bowen contended that his “ideas have such force and luminousness that they come through . . . and fling themselves at your mind” (“The Living Image -1” 250), and, in an essay, indicated that she deemed Lawrence to be at odds with modern academia: “who cares now that Lawrence was an anti-intellectual? The intellectuals during the decade and a half of Lawrence’s eclipse, have had time to prove themselves; but have they taken us very far?” (“D. H. Lawrence” 159). She named her short story “Women in Love” (*The Bazaar* 330-349) after his 1920 novel of the same title. Another of Bowen’s early short stories, “Daffodils” (*Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories* 10-17), involves an English teacher who despairs over her pupils’ regurgitating her teaching without displaying true understanding or original ideas of their own, unable to truly perceive the beauty of Wordsworth’s daffodils, rather like Bowen’s own aforementioned distinction between “the imaginatively creative . . . [and] the merely cerebrally inventive writer.” In contrast, in *Eva Trout*, the schoolgirl Eva expresses a desire to see daffodils and a belief in their existence despite never having witnessed them (54) – an interest which marks her as the sort of imaginative character antithetical with academic learning. A similar fusion of flowers, emotion and academia may be found in Lawrence’s *Women in Love*: here, we find a scene in which the teacher Ursula’s botany lesson – where the children are studying flowers – is interrupted by Birkin, with whom she is in love. He is soon joined by his lover Hermione. The trio’s dialogue is focussed on the beauty of the flowers but tainted by the women’s strong feelings towards Birkin (87), so that flowers are substituted for emotion within an academic environment. There seems to have been some overlap between these two writers’ conceptualisations of the sensuous and the intellectual, with Lawrence potentially influencing Bowen.

It thus appears that Bowen used a particular type of trickster – liminal, sensitive female figures, with allusions to myth and fairy-tale, on the margins of her fiction – to help realise her sense of there being an antithesis between art and the cerebral coldness of “intelligent people”, a blanket term which seems to have included critics, intellectuals and those affiliated with the education system. This theme is also developed by pairings of more traditional trickster figures which include an observer and an object, and thus engage with her sensation of being watched, as an artist, by the “glittering eyes” of critics. As has been shown, Bowen loosely shaped this conflict around the binary of male and female, viewing the cognitive type of intelligence as androcentric and drawing a parallel between the objectification of women and the critical gaze placed upon artists. Images of myth and fairy-tale are used to signify feeling, perhaps appealing to something intuitive and universal despite the tales’ traditional lack of emotion. The rift is not always structured between men and women in Bowen’s fiction, however, and her use of specific trickster characters seems to have developed more in her later works. For example, her first novel, *The Hotel*, contains the following dialogue between Sydney Warren, the novel’s 22-year-old heroine, and James Milton, the clergyman who is in love with her:

‘No, look here, Sydney... why should we be afraid? It’s a way out for us both – can’t you see it so? – a way out of ourselves. Don’t you remember the boy – Curdie – in the fairy tale, who opened a door straight on to the sky and was told to walk through it? He didn’t like it at all – naturally – there was just the sky there and some of the stars were under him. However, he went forward, and just found himself walking – he had no idea how. If we go straight ahead –’

‘I’d have gone back through the door. I’m not the stuff for a fairy tale. I’ve no faculty of wonder, James. Nothing is new to me.’ (172)

James is referring to a scene from George MacDonald’s 1883 children’s fantasy novel, *The Princess and Curdie*, in which the eponymous child-hero faithfully obeys the princess’s command to step through a door into the sky (36). James uses the fairy-tale analogy in an attempt to persuade Sydney to take the step of marrying him; Sydney refuses to co-operate in this romantic fantasy, and her abrupt dismissal of fairy-tales deflates James’s poetic ideas and hopes of matrimony. That the fairy-story in question is one written in the Victorian era underscores Sydney as the modern woman avulsing ties with the previous generation’s values: she eschews marriage along with images of magic, preferring pragmatism to imagination, presenting herself as incompatible with

sensibility – “I’m not the stuff for a fairy tale” – and impossible to shock – “Nothing is new to me”.

Sydney’s attitude suggests a hostility towards nostalgia, a rift between the realities of modern life and the practice of make-believe: she considers fairy-stories to have no place in the everyday world around her. In this instance, untypically of Bowen, it is the male character who uses the fairy-tale, and uses it in an attempt to uphold traditional values and to place Sydney in the role of wife. The fairy-tale imagery is not innately attached to a particular character, as in the author’s later works, and neither Sydney nor James can be credibly described as tricksters. While, in *The Hotel* and in some of her early short stories, Bowen was clearly already thinking about fairy-tales in relation to emotion and imagination, it was not until her novels of the 1930s onwards that she fully crystallised her paradigm of tricksters, fairy-tales and conflicting modes of understanding.

## **Conclusion**

Elizabeth Bowen engaged with myths and fairy-tales on a number of different levels. The stories she had read in childhood, with their stoicism, childlike logic and universal themes, were innately entangled with her sense of emotion and self: she felt that they permeated her very sense of identity, so that she could not possibly address them directly or discuss them in intellectual terms. Her love for such tales impelled her to use images of them in her fiction and to look to them in creating natural characters. Furthermore, she was particularly interested in the types of character who were elusive, prompting her to create ambiguous figures based upon traditional trickster tropes, with allusions to myth and fairy-tale. She appears to have recognised the trickster as a means of understanding the contradictoriness of people, feeling that this “prototype” encountered in her childhood reading, far from reducing her view of society, helped her to realise the creative potential in “incalculable” figures. Bowen fused the trickster, a symbol of dilemma, with images of fairy-tale and myth, which she deemed something innate and unconscious, to flag up a skewed perception of what is “natural” regarding gender roles, depicting women as inhibited by a male lens – perhaps suggesting Bowen to have been more strongly engaged with feminist issues than has previously been thought.



This social problem, crucially, extended to address an explosive clash between art and intelligence, which seems to have preoccupied Bowen throughout much of her writing and which she saw as roughly shaped around the dynamics between the male gaze and female objectification. In illuminating this perceived antithesis, Bowen created a specific type of trickster: a sensitive, marginalised female figure, redolent of myth, who, being rooted in nature and intuition, would function to ground the characters around her. Therefore, fairy-tales and tricksters work together complexly on different levels in Bowen's fiction to flag up a need for more female agency in society. She explored traditional cultural roles as problematic and negative, but also, paradoxically, as potentially liberating or empowering: the inclusion of the "wicked matriarch" restricted to her house indicates a limited female social space outside of stereotypes, and figures alluding to fertility myth draw attention to the sterility of a patriarchal order, while, ultimately, Bowen conceived the fairy-tale as a form to have affinity with a female consciousness, and thus to subvert the male discourse of modern academia. Perhaps the apparent intellectual contradiction here complemented her sense of being an artist working in opposition to the intelligentsia and the modern education system. Certainly, the tension between art and intelligence expanded, for Bowen, from feeling threatened as an artist by the "glittering eyes" of cerebral critics, to a concern over the direction of pedagogy; ultimately, the tricksters that infiltrate her fiction helped her to frame this dichotomy and, perhaps, to hunt for a sense of healing.



### Chapter 3. “A mirror reflecting other people”: Elizabeth Taylor’s Tricksters of Dispersed Identity

#### Introduction

In early 1949, Elizabeth Taylor wrote to Elizabeth Bowen, whose work she greatly admired and with whom she had established a close friendship (see Taylor’s “A Memoir” 81-88), to praise Bowen’s most recent novel, *The Heat of the Day*. Her letter particularly extolled the solidity of Bowen’s characters: “Nice, tall people sitting up straight”, who “are all real and *physically* real. When they lift a hand, or laugh, it is a real thing that is done” (see Reeve 105). Perhaps unusually, Taylor also commended the predictability of Bowen’s writing, remarking on its “safety. Because we are sure you will never make us stumble and redden as Henry James does. No risks. Just as I was thinking: ‘It is nearly the time when we meet Louie again,’ I turned the page and her name was the first word. I almost glanced over my shoulder” (see Reeve 105).

Taylor’s letter to Bowen suggests a desire for familiar forms in both character and plot. However, she rather paradoxically seems to have perceived these forms to arise from that which is disparate, elsewhere praising E. M. Forster’s “incongruous” writing style (“E. M. Forster” 66)<sup>1</sup> and musing that “A sense of the incongruity of things is not so unimportant as some people think. Even if it’s not used, it’s a good piece of equipment to have and would help some serious writers – Iris Murdoch, for one – not to fall into dreadful traps of bathos and sententiousness” (qtd. in Liddell 72). This perception of life’s “incongruity” perhaps chimes with her forceful rejection of religion (see Beauman 69) and her consequent dismissal of notions of fate and patterns in life. Indeed, Bowen professed to have discerned Taylor’s atheism from her novels (see Taylor’s “A Memoir” 82), perhaps intimating that Taylor’s narratives are somehow hostile to the idea of there being a greater, divine structure. She rejected using “model[s]” in her writing (“Setting a Scene” 69); and yet, her novels, like Bowen’s, adhere to certain familiar forms which allow them to be believable to the reader. Taylor

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bowen similarly praised Forster’s incongruity of subject matter: his “welding of the inexplicable and the banal” (“A Passage” 275).

seems to have desired to build solid, “real” characters, but to build them by piecing together incongruent fragments.

This chapter will suggest that incongruity and fragmentation were concepts key to Taylor’s approach to life, art and identity, and that she used two distinct types of trickster in her narratives to present this ethos in obverse ways. Clare Hanson has posited that Taylor’s “fiction is centrally concerned with ‘male’ and ‘female’ worlds . . . , and with their intersection and interrelation” (*Hysterical Fictions* 75): this dichotomy also appears to have informed her use of trickster characters. In *Palladian*, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* and *A Wreath of Roses*, she created adult male characters adhering to the traditional trickster trope in order to flag up form and shape as beautiful yet illusory, intrinsic within art but ultimately masking a bleak shapelessness. These characters draw upon the trickster’s ability to be at once a type and formless. However, in other works, Taylor, arguably inspired by the artwork of Elinor Bellingham-Smith, also crafted a more original sort of tricksterism, linking children with sensitive women in order to form trickster pairs who crucially function to highlight Taylor’s understanding of human identity as something amorphous and suggest the importance of reading in replenishing the self. Ultimately, Taylor’s woman-child pairings demonstrate the positive potential of life’s shapelessness, reframing fluidity as healthy and healing.

### **Male Tricksters and the Illusion of Form**

Taylor’s second published novel, the 1946 *Palladian*, is self-consciously allusive, blending genres of realism and Gothic romance in order to test the balance between literary tropes and believability: as Joannou states, considering the intertextuality of *At Mrs Lippincote’s* as an “ironic” comparison of the situation of women through the ages, “Taylor’s uses of her literary intertexts are irreverent, affectionate and knowingly informed by her understandings of the contradictions of her situation as a fictionalizing exponent of earlier fiction” (*Women’s Writing* 81-82). The characters in this novel overtly parody figures from previous literature: the heroine, governess Cassandra, is the romantic damsel who likens her situation to Jane Eyre’s (32), while her employer Marion is, as noted by Hanson, “a rather effeminate figure modelled on Edgar Linton from *Wuthering*

*Heights*" (*Hysterical Fictions* 75). The novel is a patchwork of Gothic texts – Patsy Stoneman has outlined its allusions to *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* (147), and Hanson points out its similitude with Daphne du Maurier's more modern Gothic novel of 1938, *Rebecca* (*Hysterical Fictions* 75)<sup>2</sup> while, within *Palladian* itself, the character Marion describes the woods on his estate as "most Radcliffean" (77). However, these Gothic aspects are undermined by evocations of Austen's satire: Cassandra's first name is that of Jane Austen's sister, while her surname, Dashwood, is lifted from *Sense and Sensibility*, a novel that paints the figure of the romantic heroine as rather foolish, while her fixation on the idea of herself as a Gothic damsel draws a parallel with the naive preoccupations of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. Henry Fielding's satire is also subtly included in order to subvert the exaggerated images of the Gothic: when Cassandra is in the library with her ward, Sophy, she reads a passage from an untitled book describing a beautiful woman (21). This passage is, in fact, from Fielding's *Tom Jones* (95), and describes Sophia Western; thus, the celebration of Sophia Western's beauty underscores Sophy Vanbrugh's perceived plainness, while the allusion to *Tom Jones* itself foreshadows the confusion over parentage that will occur later in the novel.

*Palladian*, playing with tropes, incorporates a distinctive trickster in the character of Tom, Marion's roguish cousin. Tom describes himself as "a sort of glowering Heathcliff" (164), but might also be seen as reminiscent of Jack Favell in du Maurier's *Rebecca*: Favell is plagued by the death of Rebecca, with whom he had been conducting an affair since their youth, while Tom's state of despair is revealed to stem from the death of Marion's wife Violet, his secret lover since the age of eighteen. As Favell resents Rebecca's former husband, Maxim de Winter, so too does Tom bully Marion. Favell and Tom are both alcoholics, are close to the Mrs Danvers/Nanny figures and both consistently endeavour to make

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<sup>2</sup> *Palladian* shares *Rebecca*'s plot set-up of a young girl falling in love with – and, ultimately, marrying – the owner of a country estate, and feeling haunted by the shadow of his dead wife. Late in both novels, the dead wife is revealed to have been "bad". As the unnamed heroine of du Maurier's novel is victimised by the formidable housekeeper Mrs Danvers, so is Cassandra intimidated by Nanny, who raised Marion's first wife, Violet. Taylor's allusions to *Rebecca* seem deliberate. In addition to the similarities noted by Hanson (*Hysterical Fictions* 75), for instance, the child Sophy envisages herself as a young woman appearing at a ball in her deceased mother's dress, standing at the top of the staircase, the music stopping and the guests staring at shock at her resemblance to Violet (52). This is a vivid description of a key scene from *Rebecca*, in which the heroine stuns guests at a ball by appearing at the top of the stairs unknowingly dressed as the dead Rebecca (192).

the novels' female protagonists uncomfortable. Other than Heathcliff, there are few prominent examples of trickster figures in traditional Gothic romances, but Tom, more ambiguous than villainous, also echoes a less sinister literary trope: the Shakespearean buffoon. Like traditional boundary-crossers such as Falstaff, he is a member of the upper-class – and resides at Crophorne Manor – but spends most of his time drinking in the local inn with the villagers and conducting an affair with the landlady, succumbing to earthly pleasures. Indeed, while Marion and Cassandra spend their time cerebrally, debating literature and philosophy, Tom, like the folkloric and early modern stage tricksters, is grounded in the physical, both through his sexual pursuits and through the grotesque anatomical drawings which, having dropped out of medical school, he spends his time producing:

He lived at two levels, the life in the saloon bar; the life with the pen in his hand and the cynical, bitter, unamiable figures growing upon the endless pieces of paper – the harlot stripped of flesh but with eye-sockets coquettish above an opened fan, or the young man with his heart lying in his outstretched hand, but a heart from a medical book, with severed pipes and labelled auricles and ventricles, nothing romantic, nothing valentineish. (42)

Tom's split sense of self, his life of "two levels", resonates with the trickster's duality; similarly, his identity is confused in a manner that commingles truth and fiction: Cassandra initially mistakes him for Sophy's father and is corrected by the child (24), but it is later revealed that Tom, rather than Marion, may indeed have fathered Sophy (163).

Tom, also like the traditional trickster, is connected with images of healing: as well as once aspiring to be a doctor, he attempts to heal Sophy's cat early in the novel (40). And yet, Taylor underscores his ultimate failure to heal: the cat dies (41), and Tom has not become a doctor. He spends much of his time at Violet's grave, "keeping company with the dead" (75) – a habit which not only marks him apart from the world of the living, as do his macabre sketches, but also hints at his failure to heal the woman he loved. Furthermore, his final confrontation with Marion (162-166), which ought to be a scene of catharsis, is undermined by an uncertainty over whether or not Tom is speaking the truth about being Sophy's father – *Palladian* thus ends ambivalently, with the suggestion of future shadow surrounding Marion and Cassandra's marriage (191). Ambivalence and sterility are key to Tom's presence within the plot. He

repeatedly interrupts the Gothic romance unfolding between Cassandra and Marion – at one point breaking up a tender moment with an aggression that perplexes Marion, who sees Tom as “outside the stresses and compulsions of human intercourse” and thus deems the interruption to have had no “meaning” (137) – and acts as the abject shadow of his sentimental cousin. An anti-creative force, belittling the works of literature which inform the other characters’ interpretation of events around them, Tom threatens to expose the emptiness of the stories his companions weave for themselves; his nihilistic outlook, the sense that he is aware of a bleakness to which the other characters are blind, is underscored by his desperate weeping (171) and Marion’s observation that Tom “is drowning” (178).

Tom’s sarcasm, pessimism and vacillation between lies and shocking truths serve to undermine the sturdiness of the saccharine romance, hinting at a chaos beneath the fairy-tale façade, an ultimate shapelessness of reality, with humanity as unstable as the crumbling mansion in which the characters reside. In such an allusive novel, this seems to make a point about literary forms. Erica Brown suggests that the intertextuality in *Palladian* fills “the characters’ and the readers’ heads with books to give us the message, ironic in a novel, that fiction does not tell the truth” (88), while Jane Brown Gillette similarly argues that, more generally:

Taylor judges her characters less by their social interactions than by their ability to perceive ‘ultimate truths’ about the nature of ‘reality.’ Even though this reality includes the drawing room, its ultimate truths are ugliness, violence, loneliness, and death, a reality stark by anyone’s standards and difficult to accept. Hence, much of Taylor’s work concerns how people deceive themselves and others as they fall into and promote illusion. (94)

In *Palladian*, while Cassandra and Marion repeatedly envision parallels between their world and the worlds of classical literature, Tom – and indeed Taylor – suggest this inference of meaning to be illusory, at odds with reality. At the end of the novel, when one character remarks that Cassandra and Marion’s marriage is “like one of the fairy tales”, another comments that it is “not a fairy tale in which I should want to be the heroine . . . One begins to see what is meant by “they lived happily ever after”” (189), highlighting reality’s inability to live up to an imagined sense of resolution. By alluding to numerous texts, and blending genres rather than maintaining one, Taylor seems to suggest that reality consists of fragments rather than the solid forms found in art, and Tom’s repeated failure to

heal similarly indicates an ultimate lack of cohesion in life. Taylor once criticised “deeply religious” persons for “that large area of their minds which reason has handed over to faith” (qtd. in Beauman 69); in *Palladian*, her traditional sort of trickster similarly implies that characters’ faith in a larger – literary – structure clashes with a more shapeless truth.

A more apparently successful trickster-healer than Tom is found much later in Taylor’s career, in the 1971 novel *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*. Ludo is perhaps the most traditional of Taylor’s tricksters: he constantly tricks, is tricked, crosses boundaries and plays the fool. While Tom clearly rejects meaning, Ludo is portrayed as ostensibly angelic. For instance, the elderly Mrs Palfrey first meets him – as does the reader – when she falls down in the street outside Ludo’s basement flat:

She felt shaken – the breath shaken from her – and afraid. Every heartbeat threatened to be her last. She dragged herself up by the railings and leaned there, trying to quieten herself. I shall never get home, she thought, and tears, from her shocked dismay, threatened.

She was scarcely aware of a door opening in the area below the railing. Light streamed out across wet stones and ferns and a dustbin, and up the steps a young man came, hurrying. He took her in his arms and held her to him, like a lover and without a word, and a wonderful acceptance began to spread across her pain, and she put herself in his hands with ungrudging gratitude.

She felt blood making its way slowly down her leg, but dared not look. (25)

Ludo’s appearance seems akin to a heavenly visitation: an impression of light, a silent embrace and Mrs Palfrey’s sense of “wonderful acceptance” which prompts her uncharacteristically to place her trust in this stranger. Although the reader knows her knee to be cut, the “blood making its way slowly down her leg” also evokes menstruation, suggesting that Ludo has re-awoken Mrs Palfrey’s youth and instigated a new form of fertility, foreshadowing the new energy which is to enter her life and the maternal feelings she will develop towards the young man. Despite his angelic arrival, however, it is notable that he comes “up the steps” from a basement flat, rather than descending as an angel might, thus twisting the idea of the heavenly into something potentially more sinister. Similarly, while Ludo takes Mrs Palfrey indoors and binds her cut knee, he does so with a “dirty towel” (26) which later concerns the elderly woman (27), rather undermining his endeavour to heal. Ludo’s full name, Ludovic, perhaps alludes to Ferdinand Hérold’s opera of the same name, in which the hero’s deliberate wounding of the



woman he admires causes her to fall in love with him; this first encounter with Mrs Palfrey has similar undertones, in that a wound prompts Mrs Palfrey's devotion to Ludo, but here the hero is seemingly restorative rather than destructive. Throughout the narrative, he displays keen insight into other characters, understanding the priorities of "girl flat-dwellers" like Rosie (57), quickly measuring up Lady Swayne (83) and immediately empathising with Mrs Palfrey's situation at the Claremont (34), a skill presumably developed through his practice of writing fiction; his apparent understanding leads other characters to place their faith in him.

Ludo becomes a sort of saviour for Mrs Palfrey, comforting her throughout the novel and agreeing to pretend to be her grandson Desmond, which allows her to endure the social politics of the Claremont, her residential hotel. His angelic status is further embedded by the implicit sense that his role in the novel is to help Mrs Palfrey to die. For instance, their first encounter parallels the later fall that will kill Mrs Palfrey (192), causing the events between the two accidents to seem a strange postponement of her death in order to allow her to experience, through Ludo, the familial love which her life, until now, has lacked. At the end of the novel, Ludo remains by Mrs Palfrey's hospital bed, comforting her, and is the only person present when she dies (204). Finally, Ludo has been writing a novel, entitled "They Weren't Allowed to Die There", based upon Mrs Palfrey's experiences at the Claremont, thus paralleling Taylor's own writing of *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*. The day after Mrs Palfrey's death, at the end of Taylor's novel, Ludo also completes his work, and, "Having done so, he felt drained of all feeling, and tired, as if he had spewed up a whole world" (205). Ludo's novel seems homologous with Taylor's, and both must end with Mrs Palfrey's death, posing questions of Ludo's authority over the events around him.

Mrs Palfrey's actual grandson, Desmond, is also writing a book, on Cycladic art; thus, as Ludo pretends to be Desmond, projecting a lively disposition onto Mrs Palfrey's surly grandson, so does his work seem to be the colourful obverse of Desmond's, for, while Desmond presumably writes about the static marble figurines that constitute Cycladic art, Ludo creatively brings character-types to life in his depiction of the Claremont's residents. However, Ludo's appearance of angelic healing, creation and resolution is repeatedly problematized in the novel. To begin with, he is rooted in duplicity: although the

narrative informs us that he is “unable to hurt anyone” (69), his secret motive for spending time with Mrs Palfrey – to gather material for his book – seems, as Gillette notes, “rather cold-blooded” (109). On a more explicit level of deception, he twice attempts and fails to perform magic tricks for his girlfriend, Rosie (54 and 110); it is unclear whether Ludo has deliberately bungled these tricks in order to play the fool, but such behaviour places him alongside the traditional folkloric and stage tricksters, who may simultaneously be cunning and humiliated by their foolishness. Despite his solitary hobby of writing, then, Ludo is an entertainer, utilising tricks and impersonations: he inexplicably slips into an Irish accent (92), and reveals that he had once worked as an actor (71). This capacity for performance crystallises in his pretending to be Desmond, a challenge which Ludo relishes, easily improvising when his act is put to the test and smoothly fabricating knowledge of Desmond’s job at the British Museum (37). Indeed, Ludo’s presence tempts Mrs Palfrey to suggest this deception, and, as Paul Bailey comments, she “begins to enjoy her wickedness” (viii): such a corruptive function again makes the young man appear more demonic than angelic. His angelic status is arguably projected onto him by Mrs Palfrey, while evidence of human flaws – for example, his selfish wish to leave while visiting her in hospital (201) – are made clear to the reader. Even Ludo’s name suggests a board-game and thus indicates artificiality. Ultimately, he intimates that life is constructed from imagined shapes: his imitations of others highlight their behaviour as merely performative, replicable, while his new identity as Mrs Palfrey’s nephew, despite offering the old lady a sense of security and joy, is nothing but masquerade. Ludo’s imposing meaning onto Mrs Palfrey’s life through turning it into an art form – a novel – is flagged up as artifice by the fact that, in reality, her life is quickly forgotten, with her family not even bothering to enter an obituary in the newspaper (206). As Tom in *Palladian* illuminates the hollowness of literary structures, so too does Ludo depict art as an effort to project an illusion of shape onto the meaninglessness of life.

Taylor’s most nihilistic trickster is found in the 1949 *A Wreath of Roses*. Here, Richard Elton is a dark, threatening force, a Machiavellian sort of figure, for whom, as Helen Dunmore observes, “Reality . . . is what he wills it to be – at the time” (xii). In this book, the protagonist Camilla is drawn to the mysterious, seemingly exciting Richard; the reader witnesses his lies to her increasing until,

finally, he reveals his true identity as a murderer hiding from the police (201). These lies are deeply imaginative, to the extent that they seem to convince even Richard himself; pretending to Camilla that his childhood was spent in the village of Abingford, he takes her to what he claims was his former home, and even asks the occupants to show them around the house. Surveying the building for the first time, Richard pictures an abusive father and a beaten, now-deceased, mother, and sees himself as “a little boy, hid[ing] under the laurel bushes, clutching a dog, too scared to go indoors; but he could see his mother through the windows; she put up her beautiful, frail hands over her tired face and bowed her head” (153). These imaginings pass before him in “not a continuous unfolding . . . , but in a jerking series of pictures, clicking into place, assembled quickly like a kaleidoscope . . . He could not, when he was tired as now, differentiate between the real and the imaginary” (155). In reality, Richard’s parents are both living, and appear to be generous towards their son.

Richard, too, draws attention to the imaginary quality of form. Camilla observes his full name to be “so much the sort of name people don’t have. The sort a woman writer might choose for a nom-de-plume, perhaps . . . or for the name of her hero” (25); this reflection, given that Taylor has chosen the name Richard Elton for her anti-hero, seems an attempt to flag up the artificiality of the novel, the reliance on literary convention. Richard, in desperation, reaches for solid images in order to make sense of life, but these similes culminate in a sense of intangibility: he at one point feels that “We are all like icebergs; underneath where the greater parts are hidden it is dark and unreachable” (78), and claims that people “are like doors. They all lead you into empty rooms. You pass through and are left with yourself. Only death goes through ahead of you. . . . Life is left behind. Little bits break off in your hands and you drop them” (73). The sense of familiar objects masking that which is “dark and unreachable” and which “break[s] off”, suggests shape to be illusion, as are individuals: ultimately, Richard frets, “I think we all *are* the same” (72). He turns to death as the only thing that is “always real” (73), and the novel, which opened with Richard and Camilla witnessing a suicide at a train station (3), ends with Richard taking his own life in the same manner (206).

## **Identity as Amorphous**

Thus far, this chapter has considered Taylor's male characters who correspond to traditional trickster traits – manipulating, deceiving and crossing boundaries – as vessels for the idea that form, while integral to art and – in Richard's case – sanity, is fundamentally an illusion masking something shapeless and meaningless. Such traditional tricksters may be seen to embody the paradox of using shapes to understand that which is indefinable: Taylor's creating a character "type" to deliver the message that form is illusory seems self-defeating, underlining a sense of futility. In what follows, however, I shall suggest that, although the concept of fluidity was key to Taylor's understanding of human identity, she used a more unorthodox type of trickster – dispersed across two individuals – to present an alternative view of this fluidity as healthy and rejuvenating.

In a 1948 letter to her publisher, Taylor reflected upon the elusiveness of personal identity:

I find it difficult to talk about myself because I often feel I am only a mirror reflecting other people – real or unreal – always more blurred than the person I am talking to or about. I dislike 'adventure' and 'experience' and can never make any use of them or assimilate them. Change disrupts me and I cannot write. People are my only adventures and I hope never to have any others; and, though I do not use their characters in my books, their company constantly replenishes me and inspires me. . . . Life is strange wherever we uncover it and I should like to show the strangeness in everyday people, to do justice to them, to describe their lives passing; but (like my last book) all I manage is a photograph (at best) of a cloudy sky breaking and changing and dissolving. *Nothing stays*, as Frances says in that book [*A Wreath of Roses*]. And my novels are only what she thought her paintings were – a voice crying, 'I saw it. Before it vanished, it was thus.' (see Reeve 99)

Taylor's confession of finding it "difficult to talk" about herself touches upon her extremely private nature as "a writer who was concealing much of herself from the reading public" (Beauman xiv); and yet, this passage from her letter to Knopf reveals more than a dislike of self-promotion. Taylor describes a sense of reflecting a number of "other people", whose identities obscure her own; indeed, she seems to lack a fixed identity altogether, being "only a mirror" composed of fragments and flashes of others. She eschews "adventures" and "change" in favour of an experience of "people" and the "replenish[ing]" effect they have upon her psychological state; people seem to restructure her, their experiences becoming her own. But Taylor does not limit this fluidity to herself: "everyday

people”, she tells Knopf, are akin to “a cloudy sky breaking and changing and dissolving”. Personality appears brittle or amorphous – but, more than this, it seems to be something that can be shared between people, expanding from one to permeate another.

The notion of identity as unstable and able to pass between persons intimates a porousness of the boundaries of the self that is discernible in much of Taylor’s work. Her first published piece of fiction, a 1944 short story entitled “For Thine is the Power”, features a schoolteacher named Eva whose good opinion of her doctor is tarnished when she hears a rumour of his once “interfering with” a patient in Manchester (272). Following her next medical examination, Eva falsely accuses the doctor of molesting her – however, she seems only semi-conscious of her dishonesty, her own experience fused with imaginings about the girl in Manchester. During her examination, Eva experiences: “The way thoughts leapt up quite uncontrolled. What he had done. And how did she know? Out of what steaming stew of her mind emerged the cool and certain picture of what he had done, might do to her, lying here, defenceless and exposed” (273). Later, after accusing the doctor, Eva undergoes a moment of remorse, before “a surge of anger rose up in her, drove the colour up her neck into her face. ‘But he shouldn’t have done it,’ she thought, clenching her fingers up, going downstairs to the class-room. ‘Dirty monkey. Serves him right. He shouldn’t have done it’” (274). Eva’s inner self becomes fragmented, a “steaming stew”, as her own experience gives way to the imaginary experience of a stranger, which crystalizes into something “cool and certain”, until she feels the force of a personal outrage that was not, initially, her own.

Much like Richard Elton’s kaleidoscopic images “clicking into place”, identity seems, for Taylor, to have consisted of fragments of experience that could fuse together in memory, pass between persons and make new patterns, to create an impression of selfhood: personality was unfixed and never wholly internalised. At the age of twenty, Taylor – then Coles – wrote to Virginia Woolf to thank her for helping her “to see the vividness and importance of every minute, the significance of every action” (see Reeve 97). Woolf’s work was informed by what she would later famously describe in her 1939 “Sketch of the Past” as “moments of being” (83, 86, 90, 91): moments which shock a person into comprehending their existence in the world. Perhaps this was the genesis of

Taylor's interest in moments and fragments. Certainly, Woolf recollected one of her "moments of being" to have been the sudden understanding of a flower's wholeness and its relation to the earth ("Sketch" 84), while, in the 1945 *At Mrs Lippincote's*, Taylor's first published novel, flowers are used to underscore the fragility of personal impressions. The novel contains images of trees that "had shed their sugary pink blossom into the dust" (51), of "lilac dead, laburnum dead, guilder roses dying, pink may . . . a little sickly, white may quite overpowering" (55). A woman is described as having skin of a "faintly foxglove colour" (124) – an image Taylor later reused in *The Sleeping Beauty*, again depicting a woman's skin as "a faintly foxglove colour" (79). These references to flowers come at tender moments, suggesting the ephemerality, the constant renewal, of experience.

The sense of identity as transferrable may also have prompted Taylor's inclusion of images of fairy-tales in her fiction, perhaps drawing on the idea of collective motifs and archetypes.<sup>3</sup> *The Sleeping Beauty*, for instance, plays with the inaccessible damsel and the Prince Charming, becoming "a dark modern version of the fairy tale, shot through with bleakness" (Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions* 89), while, in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, the mother of the deceased Mr Taylor seems a witch trying to entice Julia into her gingerbread cottage: "The voice was dangerous again, the eyes so penetrating that sweat broke out in the small of Julia's back. She felt herself hypnotised almost and, 'once I'm in there, I'm done for,' she thought in a panic. 'But she can't *make me!*'" (183). This scene, as well as evoking the archetypal witch, is also echoic of Elizabeth Bowen's 1941 short story "Look At All Those Roses", in which a young woman finds herself lured into a pretty cottage by a mysterious matriarch, and fears that if she eats their food she will be trapped there forever (*Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories* 578) – a story that Taylor would very likely have read, having already been a devotee of Bowen's work by this point (see Beauman 97 and 146). The similarity seems

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<sup>3</sup> As discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, Carl Jung believed that the images appearing in oral tales across different cultures evinced a universal psychic structure. While Taylor may have deemed there to be some verity in psychoanalysis – a diary kept during her schooldays records: "I am reading Freud. It only seems to be things I know already" (qtd. in Liddell 36) – she was sceptical of the spiritual and likely would have eschewed Jung's idea of psychic communion. However, I wish to suggest that she considered human interactions and reading to trigger a dissemination of experience and identity-shapes which was psychological rather than supernatural; shared images in literature, and literary allusions, were examples of how identity and experience were transferable in this way.

deliberate: Taylor is showing how images may pass between old texts and between new.

It is also worth noting here that, in naming her novels' characters, Taylor used "a variant of her own name (Beth, Liz, Betsy, Betty and Liz) five times", called "one of the characters in her first (published) book Mr Taylor, even though she was by then married and herself called Taylor" and gave "another, the child of seven, her father's name Oliver" (Beauman 2): she embedded fragments of herself in many of her characters, commingling her identity and experiences with those of other people, real and literary.

### **Woman-Child Trickster Pairs**

Taylor's adult male tricksters exemplify this fluidity of identity. Ludo, for example, as well as imitating others and finally being genuinely mistaken for Desmond by the dying Mrs Palfrey (204), also successfully endeavours to make Lady Swayne adopt his phrase "for my sins" (*Mrs Palfrey* 84), thus imparting identity as well as absorbing it. However, as demonstrated, these figures act to suggest porousness of boundaries and illusion of identity shapes as something rather desolate. In contrast, the woman-child pairings that recur in Taylor's writing trickily seem to rethink such liquidity as healthy and even empowering.

In her use of woman-child pairings to reconceive collective identity as positive, Taylor may have been inspired by the artwork of Elinor Bellingham-Smith, to whom she wrote to confess: "I feel such a curious affinity with your painting, and your pictures give me pleasure every day – I sometimes look at them – the word is, almost *watch* – for a long time, and seem to go deeper and deeper into them" (qtd. in Beauman 276). In another letter written by Taylor to Bellingham-Smith in the early 1950s, she claimed particularly to admire the artist's "special children, drifting, absorbed, caught up in dreams", and stated that "The nicest thing anyone ever said about my work was by a woman I do not know well who . . . said that your pictures reminded her of my stories. I felt simply wonderful and above myself" (see Reeve 102) – the curious description of feeling "above" herself suggests a dislocation of identity, and frames this dislocation as something "wonderful". Bellingham-Smith's son has since said that Taylor, who established a friendship with the artist, "knew more about Elinor and her way of

painting than most” (Moynihan 124): the friends found a thematic communion between their different art forms, and, as Beauman explains, Taylor “often saw herself as a painter who could not paint: Elinor was the painter she might have been” (276).



Figure 4. Elinor Bellingham-Smith; *Girls by the River*, n.d; oil on canvas; Newport Museum and Art Gallery; ArtUK.org; [artuk.org/discover/artworks/girls-by-the-river-156239](http://artuk.org/discover/artworks/girls-by-the-river-156239); accessed 30 Dec. 2016.

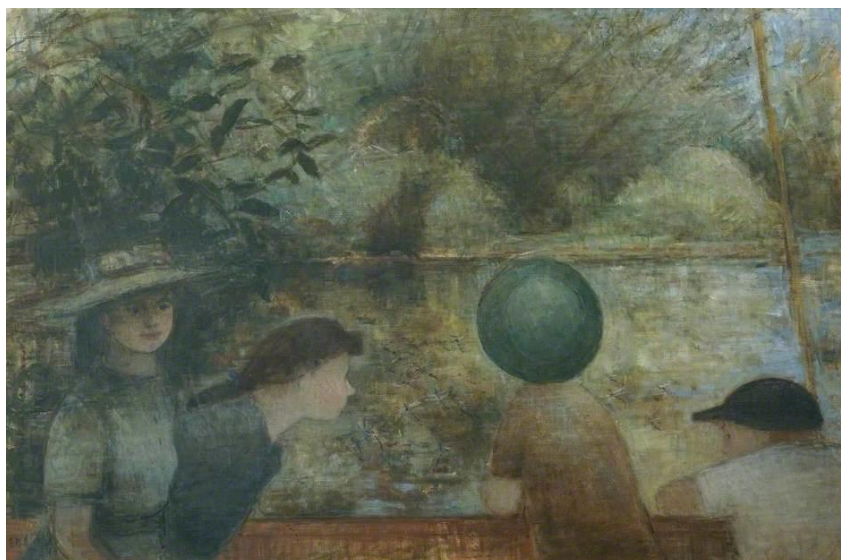


Figure 5. Elinor Bellingham-Smith; *Dragon-Flies*; 1947-8; oil on canvas; Tate; ArtUK.org; [artuk.org/discover/artworks/dragon-flies-197833/search/actor:bellingham-smith-elinor-19061988/page/1/view\\_as/grid](http://artuk.org/discover/artworks/dragon-flies-197833/search/actor:bellingham-smith-elinor-19061988/page/1/view_as/grid); accessed 30 Dec. 2016.





Figure 6. Elinor Bellingham-Smith; *River Scene with Figures*; n.d; oil on canvas; Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums; ArtUK.org; [artuk.org/discover/artworks/river-scene-with-figures-107890](http://artuk.org/discover/artworks/river-scene-with-figures-107890); accessed 30 Dec. 2016.

As shown in figures 4, 5 and 6, Bellingham-Smith's "special children" appear devoid of strong identity, tending either to have their faces hidden or wear impassive expressions, their eyes unfocussed, while the mottled skies and water behind them chime with Taylor's "cloudy sky" of personality, "breaking and changing and dissolving"; the paintings thus seem to echo the sense of identity moving outside the individual. It is worth noting that Gwen John, another of Taylor's favourite artists (see Beauman 276), tended to limit her subject matter to "an impassive woman or girl" or "small groups of children and nuns viewed from behind" (Langdale 386), producing paintings in which "detail is suppressed both in the monumental, impassive figure and in the background" (Langdale 387). In letters, John described a desire to capture "a more interior life" (qtd. in Langdale 386), and spoke of viewing her human model as "an affair of volumes" rather than an autonomous individual (qtd. in Langdale 387); John thus perhaps also appealed to Taylor's sense of persons as blank canvases constructing an idea of identity from scraps of others.

Echoing John and Bellingham-Smith, Taylor created her own type of "special children" in her fiction: funny, vivid characters depicted with extraordinary realism. Her daughter, Joanna Kingham, recalls that "She understood children

very well, and because of this they loved her. She found their conversations so interesting and would talk with them for hours” (194); these conversations obviously benefitted her work, for, as Hensher says: “Few novelists . . . can really do the speech of children; Taylor’s are always unnervingly plausible” (“The Other Liz Taylor”). Taylor’s child characters do not speak in a stereotypically infantile manner – rather, they appropriate adult phrases in the way that small children mimic their parents, as seen when Isobel, the difficult child in *Blaming*, announces “I have never *known* such a winter’ . . . in her mother’s voice” (115). Indeed, Taylor’s attention to children’s dialogue is evident in her remark that Ivy Compton-Burnett, in her 1963 novel *A God and His Gifts*, had “lost her ear for baby-talk”: that Compton-Burnett had previously “done it much better, and there was such a quantity of it here; I dreaded the child coming in” (qtd. in Liddell 97). She also noticed a difference between her own treatment of children and that of Elizabeth Bowen, musing that Bowen “didn’t understand, or much care for them. A great indifference seemed to fall upon her when they were mentioned. I later became a compulsive talker about my grandchildren; but not to her” (“A Memoir” 83). While Bowen did feature child characters prominently in novels including *The House in Paris* and *The Little Girls*, Taylor seems to be suggesting that she was not as interested – artistically or otherwise – in children as Taylor was herself. This dedication to and understanding of children led her to write a children’s novel, *Mossy Trotter*, in 1967.

The children bestrewing Taylor’s novels might, like those found in Bellingham-Smith’s paintings, be seen to reflect her sense of the movement of identity. In this, they do not act alone, but are repeatedly hinged with sensitive women characters. In the 1953 *The Sleeping Beauty*, the character of Emily has been disfigured in a car accident and has had her face remodelled by a plastic surgeon to give her “a perfect, even beauty; mask-like” (18). Her confidence has been lost along with her face, and she has transitioned from being a vivacious social butterfly to an aloof, blank figure, seemingly empty of personality. At the start of the novel, Emily spends all her time caring for her silent niece, Philly, who is described by another character as “not right in the head” (11) and considered

“not quite whole” (44).<sup>4</sup> Attention is paid to Philly’s “unfocused eyes” (80), “unmoving eyes” (142), eyes that “did not move” (81). Those around her, with the exception of Emily, feel uncomfortable in her presence: her mother embraces her “with a sensation of overwhelming revulsion” (81). Emily, likewise, is eschewed for being “passive” (48), for her “lack of expression” (48). She recalls looking at herself in a mirror after her reconstructive surgery and seeing “no vestige of me” (154), while other characters react with shock to her appearance, not recognising her, often appalled by her vacant beauty. We are told that she “felt locked away in herself, but ignorant of her identity, and often she awoke suddenly in the night, without any idea of who she was” (45); as Baddiel comments, she is “so closed off that she doesn’t speak until a third of the way through the novel” (ix). Emily and Philly spend their days together, unthinking, sitting “in strange isolation . . . as if they were very old and could achieve a slumberous contentment from a warm fire and sweet drinks” (81), experiencing “long stretches of peace and lethargy” (82). Each appears apathetic and devoid of thought and identity.

This blankness indicates Emily and Philly, like Bellingham-Smith’s figures, to be empty canvasses awaiting an impression of identity. During the course of the novel, the problematic “hero”, Vinny, revives a sense of personality within Emily, who insists that he has authored her new self: “I am nothing without you,” she said. ‘I should not know what to be. I feel as if you had invented me. I watch you inventing me, week after week” (169). Hanson in *Hysterical Fictions* posits that Emily has been “turned into the embodiment of male desire”, and that “If the surgeon has created Emily’s appearance, Vinny takes over the (re)construction of her personality” (90). She adds that “In leaving the twilight life she has led with her sister to marry Vinny, Emily merely seems to be exchanging one sort of imprisonment for another” (91).

Certainly, there is a definite impression in *The Sleeping Beauty* of Vinny projecting ideals of femininity onto Emily, intending to puppeteer her personality. However, there are also indications that Vinny cannot wholly control the patterns of identity shifting inside Emily. He is dismayed, for instance, to discover that she has encountered an old friend from before her accident and accompanied him to

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<sup>4</sup> Strangely, Taylor’s choice of the name “Philly” for the mentally impaired child echoes that of her character Phyllis in *At Mrs Lippincote’s*, a woman who is similarly impeded and acts as a disorienting presence in the novel. Taylor’s sister-in-law was named Phyllis, but it is unclear why she may have chosen this name for her more unconventional characters.

the Golf Club, where she has made new friends who have helped sculpt her new sense of self: Emily tells Vinny that, consequently, “I am a different person from last week”, prompting him to bemoan that “She has managed it all without me” (168). Far from being restricted to Vinny’s projections, Emily is absorbing personality from other persons, as well as reawakening aspects of the woman she used to be. Even her words of “I watch you inventing me, week after week”, intended to reassure him of his authority, in fact intimate her fractured identity, suggesting that there is a part of her that is not being “invented” but merely observing the process. Philly, it may be argued, represents this detached part of Emily that is untouched by Vinny; during the course of the novel, the reader is gradually allowed insight into Emily’s mind, but Philly remains obscure, observed almost exclusively from the outside. Remote and ambiguous, Philly is “not quite whole” because she embodies an extension of Emily’s identity – a part which refuses to conform to social expectations and resists the fixed self demanded by the male gaze.

In her study of female tricksters in twentieth-century American culture, Landay states that “The tactic of the private self operating in pursuit of her desires while the public self impersonates an appropriate spectacle of femininity is indicative of the strategy of the female trickster in the 1920s” (49). She proposes:

when modern female tricksters impersonate other ‘types’ of women in order to take advantage of people’s belief in social hierarchy, as they do in twentieth-century representations up to World War II, they create their own doubles . . . After the war, postmodern female tricksters present a myriad of public personas, fluidly shifting between different impersonations as the situation dictates . . . (11)

Like Landay’s female trickster, the dispersal of identity between Emily and Philly in *The Sleeping Beauty* suggests that Taylor’s tricky women may use the fragmentary nature of the self to resist objectification. Emily, who, before her accident, relied heavily on her looks in constructing a social self, feels lost when her physical appearance proves to be unfixed, and society likewise punishes her for being changeable. Yet, by exposing identity as mutable, Taylor perhaps indicates a tool by which women may ultimately evade the impositions of a patriarchal society. Her woman-child duos are thus subversive outsiders, flagging up a creative potential in the fragmentation of the self, and may consequently be seen as the author’s original type of trickster.

Taylor's final novel, *Blaming*, published posthumously in 1976, similarly indicates there to be danger in society's proclivity to view persons and personalities as static. Here, the American novelist Martha is inquisitive, intuitive and empathetic, ready to absorb and impart personality; in this, she is at odds with the protagonist, Amy, who is, in Martha's words, "simply not interested in other people" (75). *Blaming*, as Gillette suggests, "straightforwardly condemns Amy's self-centred lack of imagination, in contrast to the intelligent sympathy of Martha" (108). Upon her first visit to Amy's house, Martha shocks her hostess by going into the kitchen and conversing with the servant (69). Amy, irked by what she regards as the American woman's vulgar extravagance, fails to recognise her generosity until late in the novel, when Martha presents her with a thoughtful and expensive gift (141). Martha's eventual suicide seems a reaction to the lack of sympathy of those around her: while she has observed and absorbed the experience of people, the rest of the novel's characters appear selfish and unyielding, engendering a stifling atmosphere and making no effort to understand Martha. Her husband claims not have realised her unhappiness (185), and Amy has deliberately avoided her in her depression, fearing being made a confidante. Taylor's decision to base Martha upon her own close friend, Maud Eaton, who was also a lecturer in literature who took her own life (see Beauman 188), allows her to blur her own history with fiction and thus further imply the fragmentation of experience. Meanwhile, Martha's fondness for Elinor Bellingham-Smith perhaps underscores her being a person of mutability and communion, like the figures in Bellingham-Smith's paintings. Indeed, Martha's husband's insularity is illuminated by his disregard for her "very beautiful" Bellingham-Smith painting "of rimy branches" (123): impervious to the painting's beauty, he seethes at its costing "two hundred pounds" (124).

Like Emily in *The Sleeping Beauty*, Martha is twinned with a child, highlighting her freedom and childlike ability to fully appreciate every moment. During her first visit to Amy's home, Martha picks up some decorative onyx eggs and "held them to her cheeks, then let them rest coolly in the palms of her hands"; this prompts Amy to consider her "just like a tiresome child" (75), failing to grasp Martha's attention to sensation which appears evocative of Woolf's "moments of being". When Martha meets Amy's granddaughter, Isobel, her method of addressing the child as an equal rather than humouring her, as Amy does, elicits

a positive response: Amy finds that “Martha and Isobel were laughing now . . . Martha, probably from all her fidgeting, had perfected a balancing trick with cutlery. Briefly Amy glimpsed Isobel in relation to another child, and not her granddaughter, open, amused, and neither scheming nor temporarily devastated” (112). Martha and Isobel unite against the sensible Amy, and Martha, whose birthday it is, becomes like a child herself, asking: “For a birthday treat, could we take a cab and drive round Hyde Park?” (113). During this taxi ride, while Amy dwells on the cost of the excursion, Martha and Isobel soak up their surroundings, Martha searching for inspiration for her next novel, and Isobel “entranced” by the scenes around her (115). This woman-child pairing serves to highlight the importance of moments, empathy and sensitivity, in contrast to the fixed, ordered world of Amy.

### **Reading to Heal the Self**

Taylor, like her special woman/child tricksters, likely framed the idea of identity being fragmented and collective as potentially positive. Her letter to Knopf stresses that the experience of other people “replenishes” and “inspires” her: the circulation of identity shapes was thus healthy, and it was rather the imposition of a fixed image of the self that could be dangerous. I want to suggest that Taylor considered the experience of reading to be revitalising due to the manner that, in writing, an author compresses many fragments of identity – their own, those of persons they know and those of their imagining – into the narrative, which are then transfused into the reader as a fresh current of experience that adds to or shifts their sense of self; furthermore, she used her sensitive female tricksters to present reading as restorative in this manner.

Taylor professed that, in writing, “I wouldn’t describe anything that was not what I had gone through and understood myself – in my experience or out of my imagination” (qtd. in Liddell 16); she described her fiction as a sort of imbrication of impressions gathered in life:

Seeing a curious house, or walking through a strange street, I have begun to wonder what sort of people could live there and seeds of conjecture are sown, which may later begin to form a story . . . I seldom, though, draw from a real model. My explorations store up a kaleidoscope of impressions

in my head. They shift about and form their own patterns. ("Setting a Scene" 69)

Exemplifying how such kaleidoscopic "impressions" from life could mutate to become something different in fiction, Taylor recalled seeing her familiar Thames Valley flooded, feeling "haunted" by "the stillness and the silences" of a world submerged by water – from this image, she stated, "grew the idea for [the short story] *The Thames Spread Out*. Although the story is about spiritual isolation, it came into my mind because I had felt the strangeness of the physical isolation of being cut off by the flood" ("Setting a Scene" 71). Here, then, a visual experience was recycled into a story about "spiritual isolation", which would further diffuse into fresh ideas within her readers. In reprocessing personal experience in her stories,<sup>5</sup> Taylor's approach was the opposite of that of the eponymous novelist in her 1957 *Angel*, an insular character who writes purely from imagination rather than experience and, walking past city buildings, feels "very little curiosity about any of the lives that were lived inside these places where she had never been. She could perfectly, she thought, imagine what went on . . . Experience was a makeshift for imagination; would neither be, she felt sure, half as beautiful, or half so terrible" (Taylor, *Angel* 49). *Angel*, according to Victoria Stewart in "The Woman Writer", was based on the novelists Amanda Ros (25)<sup>6</sup> and Marie Corelli (22), who wrote in a far more circumlocutory style than Taylor; as Hilary Mantel states, *Angel* has a "tyrannical imagination that excludes experience, even excludes the spirit of enquiry" (4) and, consequently, while "Taylor is a writer of impeccable taste, . . . Angelica Devereil is a high priestess of schlock" (Mantel 2).

Taylor, who distorted personal experience in her own writing, articulated a feeling that literature existed as an assemblage of fragments waiting to be absorbed and rearranged by the reader:

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor's stance on experiences of reading and of life blurring together to form something new in one's writing seems akin to Elizabeth Bowen's ideas expressed in her 1953 essay "Sources of Influence", in which she claims that the "creative writer" is "susceptible to environment, to experience, and, in the same way and not less, to styles and energies in already existing art. From all three sources he is attracting influences; all of which will leave their mark on his work" (206). These influences, Bowen states, should be subtly fused together: "True action of experience on the creative powers is erratic, indirect and slow – also, in so far as writers do make use of their individual experience as persons, they almost invariably transform it" (208). Indeed, Bowen's overall sense of the make-up of identity appears to be similar to that of Taylor: in the 1946 essay "Out of a Book", she spoke of consisting of "layers of synthetic experience" and "layers of fictitious memory" (48), suggesting that the experience of reading had contributed greatly to her sense of self.

<sup>6</sup> Ros's "tortured" narrative style is criticised in Taylor's *Palladian* (113).

To writers, much of the mystery, the excitement of their work lies in the fluidity, the continual shifting of their raw material. For words vary. They vary from time to time, from place to place, and from one man to another. It seems sometimes as if the true meanings of words lie in a no-man's land between writer and reader ("The Etiquette" 89).

Her sense of words having a nascent potential to instigate personal change in the reader is discernible in her early letter to Woolf, which praises the "force and beauty and liquidity" of the language in *The Waves* (see Reeve 97) – a book which is also concerned with ideas of shared and collective identity. Identity then, was not only fluid, but healthiest when perpetuating the cycle of receiving, refiguring and dispersing, and Taylor repeatedly returned to the idea of reading being rejuvenating. For instance, she recalled the act of reading *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a child having been "an extraordinary experience of dropping and floundering, of growing and diminishing" ("Bookmarks" 95): while this description traces Alice's experiences of physically "dropping", "growing" and "diminishing", it also suggests a movement taking place inside Taylor herself.

Taylor's first novel, *At Mrs Lippincote's*, features a woman-child pairing that demonstrates the power of reading to initiate movements of identity. Here, Julia Davenant and her young son Oliver are scorned and patronised by the other members of their family – Roddy and Eleanor – for their sensitive natures. Julia weeps repeatedly and openly in the novel and is treated like a child, despite her sharp intelligence, and is twice connected with famous figures of tragedy: we are told that Julia's dress makes her look "like Mrs Siddons" (78), an eighteenth-century tragedienne, while another character offhandedly likens her to Shakespeare's Juliet (133). This both blurs her identity and underscores society's hostility towards empathy. Meanwhile, Roddy is "disappointed" in his son, Oliver: "He did not see Oliver's essential toughness, nor realise that thin wrists can be like steel. He could not be sure that he was going to be good at games, nor even that he would want to be" (31). Julia and Oliver are perceptive, imaginative and well-read, and are not understood by the more practical Roddy and Eleanor. Their attitudes are influenced by what they are currently reading: Oliver, for example, "did not merely read books. He snuffed them up, took breaths of them into his lungs, filled his eyes with the sight of the print and his head with the sound of words. Some emanation from the book itself poured into his bones, as if he were absorbing steady sunshine. The pages had personality" (14). The boy allows the "personality" that he has physically "absorbed" from these books to colour his



mood and his actions: during his first morning at Mrs Lippincote's, after reading Charlotte Brontë, "he buttoned his vest with his blue fingers (Jane Eyre), and thought he would take a look at the neighbourhood before a typical Lowood breakfast of burnt porridge and unclean milk" (15); later, upon locating his intended new school, he "stood at the gate and sent his spirit (or rather Jane Eyre's) forth to inspect the house" (18).<sup>7</sup> One chapter ends with a jarring shift in scene: "In the next room Alan Breck Stewart lay parched on a flat stone in the grilling heat, while the red-coats moved in the bracken all around. Presently, sleep came to him, but the dreams that came with the sleep were the dreams of Oliver Davenant" (73) – Oliver's reading of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* has imbued his own personality with that of Stevenson's character. These glimpses into Oliver's allusive inner life are threaded through the narrative of *At Mrs Lippincote's*, hinting at a fluidity of identity that is dissonant with – and healthier than – most of the other characters' ostensibly fixed, stagnant outlooks on the world.

Julia is as powerfully influenced by the fiction she has read, but this is more infused within her sense of self. Upon being complimented on her baked apples at a dinner party, she claims to have taken the recipe from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*,<sup>8</sup> adding "I like to get my recipes from good literature":

'One of the best meals I ever ate in my imagination was the Boeuf en daube in *To the Lighthouse*,' said Julia. 'I see it now and smell it – the great earthenware dish and its' (she closed her eyes and breathed slowly) "its confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats, and its bayleaves and its wine."

They laughed at her and she took up a spoon and was surprised that the taste was of fruit, not meat. (155)

Julia's recollection of Woolf's dinner-party, with the direct quotation from Woolf (*To The Lighthouse* 93), seems to temporarily eclipse the scene around her, in the same way that Oliver's experiences of fiction filter in amongst his perceptions of the world. Such collected experiences allow Julia to be empathetic and a rejuvenating force on the sensitive persons around her, as seen in her sympathy

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<sup>7</sup> This echoes the way in which Jane Eyre's spirit seems momentarily to separate from her body near the end of Charlotte Brontë's novel, when she knows she has to return to Mr Rochester: in prayer, she feels she has "penetrat[e] very near a Mighty Spirit; and my soul rushed out in gratitude at His feet" (448).

<sup>8</sup> This appears to be a reference to the passage in *Villette* where the character Lucy inhales the scent of baked apples and reflects that "Goton had a very good method of baking, or rather stewing fruit, putting in a little spice, sugar, and a glass or two of vin blanc" (333).

towards the dying Mr Taylor, which provides him with a sense of relief – he tells her, “Your laughter does me good” (102) – and her unlikely friendship with Mallory, her husband’s Wing Commander, which is established over their shared regard for the Brontë sisters. This literary love emerges during Mallory and Julia’s first encounter, when she rather impertinently likens him to *Jane Eyre*’s Mr Rochester, adding “Oliver would think so, too” (48). Joannou has suggested that “The literary games-playing in *At Mrs Lippincote*’s allows Julia and Mallory the temporary exploration of identities and selves available to them only in their imagination” (*Women’s Writing* 83); however, it might also be argued that these literary “identities and selves” are as much aspects of Julia and Mallory as their more everyday interactions, latent rather than “temporary”.<sup>9</sup> Taylor is thus perhaps illustrating how the experience of fiction may become part of the self, triggering fresh fusions of identity. Writing of *At Mrs Lippincote*’s, Humble argues:

The Brontë references are part of that elaborate intertextuality in the middlebrow women’s novels of this period . . . , whereby they establish themselves, through a web of cross-reference and echo, as a sort of sub-genre, and in doing so establish a distinct identity for their readers. This intertextuality is rarely a ‘dead’ echo – it is produced through an elaborate engagement with other texts on the part of both characters and the text itself. (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 178)

By incorporating the Brontë references into her novel, then, Taylor is drawing upon the reader’s own past literary experience to include them in the communion of minds which seems so central to her understanding of identity: experience passes from Brontë to her characters, to Taylor and Taylor’s characters, to the reader, mutating in the process.

Valerie Martin has suggested that Julia “expends her energy on not allowing herself to apprehend the true state of her marriage and of the world in which it is foundering” (xii); indeed, though highly empathetic, Julia might be accused of using her preoccupation with fiction to deny apparent realities. She appears oblivious to her husband’s infidelities, ignores the ongoing war and takes no interest in the politics that so absorb her cousin-in-law. In some cases, literature seems to replace her own past: for instance, when Oliver is ill, Julia is

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<sup>9</sup> In Taylor’s *A Wreath of Roses*, Camilla and Liz reconcile after a quarrel by engaging in a similar literary game which they have played since childhood (29-30), imagining a tea-party involving famous female novelists from history; in these imaginings, Camilla and Liz are not only enacting other identities, but are reconnecting with each other and with parts of themselves buried in memory.

brought to tears by the memory of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, expressing a fear that her son will be taken away from her and placed in a sanatorium (29). Later in the novel, it emerges that she once lost a daughter, an occurrence which Julia dismisses: "Oh, the child was dead in no time,' she said in a shocking, light voice" (147). Julia's concern over her son's health, which she attributes to her reading, thus might in fact be predicated on more personal experience; consequently, fiction could be seen as a tool by which Julia constructs a fantasy of denial. However, Taylor might rather be making a point about the power of reading to engender a sense of identity: while static characters such as Roddy and Eleanor are shaped only by their own experiences, Julia's reading allows her to continuously expand and reform – she is able to recreate her past, to heal, to recover happiness and to inspire positive change in those around her.

Julia and Oliver are closely bound by their love of fiction and their concomitant understanding that a feeling of identity may be pieced together from disparate sources. This creative bond is evidenced when Oliver is ill in bed and Julia fetches him three books – Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy*,<sup>10</sup> and Amy Catherine Walton's *A Peep Behind the Scenes* – along with "a basket of leaves and twigs from the garden and an old tray", using which, "Oliver embedded a miniature green wood in plasticine and lay back on the pillows, looking listlessly at it and, having diminished himself to the size of an ant, walked coolly through the green reflecting tunnels and stared up at the brilliant light raining down through the veined leaves" (31). Through his empathetic imagination, Oliver achieves respite from his ailments, demonstrating a therapeutic potential in embracing new fragments of experience. It also seems pertinent that Julia selects books by female writers to bring to her suffering son: while male characters such as Oliver and Mallory participate in literary games and, to some extent, evince a collective sense of experience, Taylor seems to frame the healing potential of dispersed identity as ultimately feminine, taking inspiration from Elinor Bellingham-Smith, a female artist, focussing *At Mrs Lippincote's* literary allusions around the Brontës and, throughout her oeuvre, using woman-child pairings to depict inner fragmentation

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<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that the first two of these books focus largely on the bond between a child and an adult. Incidentally, Bowen's *Eva Trout* also contains a passing reference to "the little Lord Fauntleroy" (190).

as positive rather than bleak. Oliver's conscious enacting of scenes from fiction is explicit and comical; in Julia, however, allusions are subtler – she has absorbed many experiences from literature, which constantly ripple through her to shape her interpretation of life, making her changeable and complex in a way that resonates with Taylor's understanding of real people. She is Taylor's "mirror reflecting other people", the "cloudy sky breaking and changing and dissolving."

Julia's identification with fictional characters poses questions about the communion of minds that may help illuminate Taylor's concept of identity. Ratcliffe, in her study of literary sympathy, outlines approaches towards empathising with fictional characters:

Those who believe that simulation is possible could be aligned with those who favour the traditional, character-based humanist approach to texts, which aims to uncover authorial intention . . . [Conversely] an extreme theory-theorist might argue that an experience of reading cannot be seen to further our sympathetic understanding of other minds, as we do not meet 'characters' or 'authors' when reading – we only ever meet our own mind, and theory, when encountering the text. (47)

If Taylor believed that reading might trigger new patterns in oneself, authorial intention seems rather irrelevant: words, and the characters they describe, might prompt new visions and behaviours in a reader regardless of the author's intention. Yet, her emphasis that writers take inspiration from real experience which then shifts and mutates "in a no-man's land between writer and reader" suggests that fictional characters are, to an extent, vessels through which separate minds may meet. Thus, for Taylor, reading was arguably a way to absorb parts of other people; however, it seems that she also believed it to have the power to resurrect one's own personal memories – that we may, as Ratcliffe puts it, "meet our own mind" in new ways through the text. In a 1951 letter, Taylor spoke of something she had experienced while reading Vladimir Nabokov's memoir *Conclusive Evidence*:

I can't remember now who said that after the age of twenty-five we have no real memories of childhood – only memories of memories. Searching back, as I suppose writers do, I find that nothing comes to light any more. John Van Druten once wrote to me because, reading one of my books, he was suddenly startled by a *new* memory – as a child pulling the Virginia creeper from a store sill . . . I thought it would be nice to have a new memory myself, and this book gave me one. That extraordinary humming, singing sound small children have in their ears, a strange vibration, high-up, like telephone wires on a still, hot day. I remembered hiding behind a

sofa as he did. It was a wonderfully early memory to be given. (see Reeve 103)

Here, Taylor intimates that Nabokov's book has revived a part of her life that had previously been buried somewhere inaccessible. Thirteen years later, after reading Bowen's 1964 novel *The Little Girls*, she wrote to the author to praise the "strange, beautiful, funny book" and describe how reading it "brought so much back to me – not stale memories of memories, but new treasures out of the past which might otherwise have gone forever. For instance, a very Sheikie<sup>11</sup> of my own – with those neat fair plaits & straight parting, even the dancing" ("Letters to Elizabeth Bowen" 117). Again, the act of reading has restored memory and refreshed an aspect of herself.

Taylor's perceived difference between "new" memories and stale "memories of memories" might shed light on her interest in children in relation to identity. Children's experience consists predominantly of fresh encounters: like Bellingham-Smith's figures, they are blank and ready to be impressed with patterns of life. In contrast, adults were likely to allow stale memories to congeal, unstirred, creating an illusion of a fixed self; for instance, in *Blaming*, Martha questions the insular Amy on her experiences during the war, but Amy will not attempt to remember, announcing "I believe one only remembers those sort of happenings when one goes on talking about them" (68), refusing to disturb her static sense of identity to recover a buried moment. Thus, by pairing children with sensitive women, Taylor perhaps sought to reflect both the genesis of experience and the different returning shapes it may make later in life. *Blaming's* Martha and *At Mrs Lippincote's* Julia are both avid readers, and, as such, emit a fluid sense of identity; *At Mrs Lippincote's* tells us that "Julia had a strange gift of coming to a situation freshly, peculiarly untarnished by preconceived ideas, whether of her own preconception or the world's" (26), and, at one point, after Julia receives some shocking news, an image from childhood comes unexpectedly upon her: "She saw her mother holding a glass of tea – against the white light, saying 'It must be transparent like beer'" (184). Julia's openness to "new" memories, like Martha's sympathy with art and sensation, evokes Woolf's "moments of being" and underscores the importance of reading to awaken experience.

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<sup>11</sup> Sheikie is the nickname of a character in Bowen's novel.

## Women, Fluidity and Post-War Optimism

Taylor, therefore, appears to have used tricksters ultimately to highlight the fluidity of identity and the way that experience can pass between persons, but has represented this fluidity in contradictory ways through two very different types of trickster. Her adult male tricksters are rooted in tradition, being duplicitous buffoons, manipulators and boundary-crossers: they depict the fragmented nature of identity as troubling, suggesting a bleak vacuum behind the illusion of form. In contrast, Taylor's woman-child pairs constitute a new, original form of trickster, seemingly serving to rethink this fragmentation as complex in a way that may be potentially rejuvenating and healing. In making this distinction between male tricksters, who resonate with traditional narrative types, and female tricksters, Taylor seems to indicate a break from inherited patriarchal modes of thought, suggesting a new space in which women might re-sculpt their identity in imaginative ways.

The sense of identity being amorphous arguably complements the atmosphere of Britain during and immediately after the Second World War, when previous social – and, indeed, physical – structures were seen to crumble, leaving the country in a state of fracture which debunked past impressions of solidity. Muriel Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means*, a novel set in 1945, opens with a vivid description of an England physically wrecked by war: "The streets of the cities were lined with buildings in bad repair or in no repair at all, bomb-sites piled with stony rubble, houses like giant teeth in which decay had been drilled out, leaving only a cavity" (7). David Kynaston, meanwhile, relates a feeling among the British people of deserving "a new start after the war" (21), without concrete ideas of what this start might involve or how it may be implemented; instead, men and women struggled to readapt to former social roles within a devastated landscape. In particular, there was uncertainty concerning the position of women. Plain points out that, in wartime, "women exist in a contradictory space in which their symbolic representation is frequently at odds with the practical demands of the war economy" (x): during the Second World War, Plain states, necessity meant that women were required to work in ways that clashed with their "association with a domestic sphere detached from the politics of public life" (ix), perplexing the men coming home from war "in the expectation of finding them fundamentally

unchanged" (x). The media and government, in general, endeavoured to remind women of their supposedly fixed social role: Kynaston notes, for instance, how public efforts were made to uphold the image of the conventional "family unit" and preserve "the art of motherhood" (98).

On the surface, Taylor largely adhered to this traditional gender role, being a wife and mother with a passion for cooking; she was, as Beauman puts it, regarded as a "woman's writer" rather than a "modernist" because, unlike Woolf, she "wrote about women and children and housework and dailiness" (120-121). And yet, she has since been viewed as a writer of "feminist novels" (Brannigan 89), who "is critical of all patriarchal values and symbols" (Joannou, *Women's Writing* 91); indeed, Elizabeth Maslen cites Taylor as one of a handful of mid-century women writers whose books were "urging women to enter the struggle to better their lot and fulfil the hopes of the suffragettes" ("Legacies" 26). Many of Taylor's thoughts on the status of women seem to be explored through *At Mrs Lippincote's* Julia, a character who, in the novel, advocates classical education for women (107), announces that her mother was a suffragette (103) and forms a friendship with the lower-class Mr Taylor, while being repeatedly patronised by her adulterous husband and his unmarried female cousin, Eleanor, who is treated more seriously, despite appearing less intelligent and sensitive than Julia. This chasm between the treatment of Julia and Eleanor underlines society's refusal to allow women simultaneously to be wives and to operate within the public sphere.

And yet, Taylor's woman-child pairs, with their emphasis on fluidity being subversive and revitalising, suggest that the post-war sense of fracture might be used to shape a new sense of identity for women, with the children perhaps symbolising the potential of future generations. John Brannigan, in an essay on the shifting portrayal of national identity in post-war British fiction, touches upon a similar idea when he argues that, "for Julia Davenport in Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945), the post-war period signifies something which is welcome, yet fearful too, which is the steady disintegration of social, cultural, and gender boundaries" (89). Life after the war, Taylor seems to intimate, might herald a new boundary-crossing agency in women, rejecting previous patriarchal structures and shapes. Repeatedly, the protean nature of the self is presented as positive when connected with sensitive women. Jacqueline Wilkottz observes that "In *Palladian*, Cassandra's courage and kindness show in her sympathy with

Sophy's imagination . . . It is to men . . . that Cassie feels the need to defend this version of the female imagination" (32): imagination is presented as a feminine tool, which, along with empathy, may be used to heal. The rejuvenating power of reading, too, is portrayed as something feminine in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, with Julia mainly reading books by female authors; in this, Taylor is connecting with the tradition of associating the novel as a genre with women – a tradition noted, for example, by Anne K. Mellor (5) and by William Ray, who speaks of "Enlightenment criticism linking the subject matter and affective aesthetics of fiction with feminine sensibilities" (421). Taylor repeatedly interpolates aspects of herself into her female outsider characters: Emily in *The Sleeping Beauty*, for instance, is acutely aware of the "shining scars" on her body (130), much as Taylor herself was conscious of the scars on her neck which she obtained in a firework accident as a young woman (see Beauman 56), while *Blaming's* Martha is a novelist who emphasises everyday objects and writes in a sparse style (see *Blaming* 47) which could be seen as akin to Taylor's own – indeed, Gillette has stated that Martha's "prose resembles Taylor's in her last novels" (108). *At Mrs Lippincote's* Julia has been recognised by Beauman as having been an "autobiographical" character for Taylor, even appearing in early drafts of the novel as "a would-be novelist" (137). By inserting images of herself into these figures, Taylor weaves a sense of female solidarity into her novels, while also underscoring their being made up of fragments of identity and experience.

## Conclusion

This chapter opened with Taylor's letter to Elizabeth Bowen, praising the solid characters and clear narrative form in *The Heat of the Day* – an opinion which seemed at odds with Taylor's profession to admire writing that captured the incongruity of life and people, and her dislike of literary models and moralistic writing. As has been illustrated, however, she appears to have had her own conception of patterns and shapes in people and in life, believing that identity was built from fragments of experiences – one's own, those of other people and those of literary characters – which could come together to give an impression of shape, but which were ultimately disconnected and collapsible. Art, therefore, needed to reflect these familiar shapes but also to suggest the underlying reality of life and character as amorphous. This idea is implicit in her novel *Palladian*, which



combines elements of different genres and texts in a mosaic to form a story of its own – and, indeed, it is worth noting that Taylor’s favourite artist was Pablo Picasso (see Beauman 332), whose paintings similarly piece together separate shapes in order to create an impression of a unified image.

Taylor’s feelings on the importance of incongruity seem akin to E. M. Forster’s attitude towards character, Forster being one of her favourite modern writers (see Beauman 124). In *Aspects of the Novel*, he notably divided characters into categories of “flat” – those who correspond to “types and caricatures” (76) – and “round” – those who are more contradictory and “give us a slightly new pleasure each time they come in” (79). While admitting Charles Dickens to be a writer who had managed to convey a “wonderful feeling of human depth” through use of “flat” characters, Forster argued that this was merely “a conjuring trick” enabled by Dickens’s masterful command of language (76) – ultimately, he contended that “round” characters were by far the more superior, and heralded Jane Austen as a writer who “unlike Dickens, was a real artist, [in] that she never stooped to caricature” (79). Forster, like Taylor, felt that characters should bring together disparate elements in order to reflect the true nature of humankind.

But Taylor did not totally reject the use of types in her fiction – rather, she often fused them with one another to show how identity might be pieced together, or used them ironically, to highlight the illusory quality of identity shapes. The latter appears to have been the case with her male trickster characters, who are strongly reminiscent of traditional trickster types in their duplicity, artifice and boundary-crossing behaviour. It is unclear whether Taylor would have thought of these figures as “tricksters”: certainly, she does not appear to have discussed tricksters, or even the topic of character-types, in essays. Nonetheless, she would surely have been aware of the roles of trickster characters in traditional narratives, having adored studying Greek at school and relished classical plays such as Sophocles’s *Antigone* (Beauman 24)<sup>12</sup> – many of which, as discussed in this thesis’s introduction, strongly featured trickster tropes such as the “*dolosus servus*”. Taylor’s male tricksters flag up identity as protean in a bleak sort of way which is made all the more fatalistic by the fact that, in exposing the artificiality of

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<sup>12</sup> Hanson has noted how Taylor’s *Palladian* complexly explores “the classical tradition” (*Hysterical Fictions* 76), indicating her work to have been influenced by this passion.

structures, they are undermining their own existence as a character type. Tom in *Palladian*, for instance, underscores the flawed nature of the trickster as a type through his inability to heal or function as he ought to within the narrative. In *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*, meanwhile, Ludo ultimately portrays art and meaning as illusory, imitating other characters and imposing a sense of importance onto Mrs Palfrey's bleak death through his writing; his angelic status is problematized and hinted to have been imagined by Mrs Palfrey and, indeed, the reader. Robert Liddell, a close friend of Taylor's, has discerned a scene in *A Wreath of Roses*<sup>13</sup> to convey the message that "one of the highest functions of art [is] to bring order out of chaos . . . Art must select to make its patterns, and must ignore what it cannot use" (38); Taylor's male tricksters expose art – and structures in life – as illusion, but do so in a way that seems nihilistic and hopeless.

This view, however, does not appear to have been Taylor's own. On the contrary, the fragmentary nature of reality and identity was, for Taylor, an opportunity for constant rejuvenation and expansion of the self.<sup>14</sup> She spoke of fluidity and the ways in which words and images might shift and change between persons as evoking a sense of "mystery" and "excitement", and it is this feeling that is conveyed by her unique woman-child trickster pairs. In *The Sleeping Beauty*, Emily and Philly's shared blankness suggests the changing state of identity to be a female tool to deflect objectification by men, while, in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, Julia, who is twinned with her young son Oliver, depicts reading as a healthy way to absorb experience and revive the self. *Blaming's* Martha, who eventually commits suicide, flags up a need for social healing, suggesting fixed notions of identity to be damaging and calling for more empathy and collectivity. Martha's immersion in life is highlighted by her parallels with the child Isobel, who similarly focusses on moments rather than larger plans. These characters can be seen as tricksters through their outsider stance and conveyance of subversive ideas; however, they are an original rethinking of the trickster, with Taylor splitting the trope in two in a way that warps the notion of a solid character-type and rejects traditional shapes, while also reflecting the patriarchy's demand for women to

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<sup>13</sup> This scene features a conversation between Frances, a painter, and Morland, an admirer of her work. Frances here frets that her art has been untruthful because it has focussed on small details and shapes and ignored the chaos of reality (Taylor, *A Wreath* 138).

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this positive stance on collectiveness was rooted in her political ideals: she did, after all, join the Communist Party in 1936 due to a belief that it would lead to "important liberties – of speech & thought & expression . . . [Through which] men & women might have an equal chance" – an idea with which she was later disillusioned (qtd. in Beauman 70).

fulfil multiple conflicting roles. The fractured sense of identity that Taylor's male and female tricksters depict was, this chapter has argued, echoic of the sense of structural disintegration in British society following the Second World War; while the male tricksters' bleak interpretation of such fragmentation suggests the dissolution of patriarchal frameworks, Taylor's woman-child pairings suggest a future in which exciting new shapes may be imagined, empowering women with a boundary-crossing agency.

## Chapter 4. “Artists are tricksters”: Stage Magic, Shakespeare, and the Reader in Iris Murdoch’s Early Fiction

### Introduction

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1947, Iris Murdoch wrote to her friend, the writer Raymond Queneau, to tell him: “I’ve asked a bookseller to send you Carrington’s ‘Telepathy’ which may amuse you. His theory, though wrong I’ve no doubt, is interesting. (The novel I am writing – or ‘writing’ – now is based on an idea cribbed from Carrington!)” (Series KUAS70/1). Hereward Carrington was a popular British investigator of psychic phenomena, whose pamphlet *Telepathy* described “the ability to impress the mind of another person with a definite thought or thoughts, without travelling through the usual avenues of sense” (“Telepathy” 110). Murdoch’s first novel, *Under the Net*, which was published in 1954 and dedicated to Queneau, does not explicitly reference telepathy, but includes several instances of characters being unconsciously influenced by other characters. The narrator, Jake, is able to discern “some other voice” in his ex-lover, Anna’s, words and ideas (46), alerting him to her connection with the character Hugo; he also feels the “unseen presence” of a third party during a private meeting with his current lover, Madge, sensing her speech and behaviour to be governed by another person (204). These characters have unconsciously been “impressed” upon by someone else’s ideas.

Murdoch’s letter to Queneau evinces her interest in the paranormal and its early influence upon her art. Indeed, Murdoch was seemingly far less concerned with realism than Bowen or Taylor, her novels being “constructed from an extraordinary amalgamation of the fantastic and the real” (Duncker vii). Despite providing shrewd insights into real human nature, her work is bestrewn with quasi-magical figures, and tends to organise characters around “bizarre family relationships” (Hague, *Iris Murdoch’s Comic Vision* 55), which touch upon the absurd or even the farcical. She certainly relished the fantastical in art, deeming Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* one of her favourite books (Bayley, *Iris* 118) and adoring the mythical scenes painted in Piero della Francesca’s “Resurrection” and Titian’s “The Punishment of Marsyas” (Bayley, *Iris* 129 and 133). But she was also eager to detect supernatural elements in real life: her husband, John

Bayley, recounts how “When UFOs became the fashion she claimed to believe in their existence at once. And she was convinced of the reality of the Loch Ness monster” (*Iris* 201). While critics have observed the debt that Murdoch’s supernatural elements owe to religion (see, for instance, Bove’s *Understanding Iris Murdoch*, Rowe’s “The Dream” and Leeson’s *Iris Murdoch, Philosophical Novelist*), to fantasy (see Berthoff’s “Fortunes of the Novel” and Jack Stewart’s “Metafiction”) and myth (see Slaymaker’s “Myths”), there is yet to be a comprehensive study of her predilection for modern, fashionable forms of “magic”, such as psychic practices fuelled by the early-century spiritualist movement. This predilection can, however, be noted in a 1964 letter in which Murdoch wrote of attempting to practice “telekinesis” (see Horner and Rowe, *Living on Paper* 260), again demonstrating the curiosity towards psychic power that she had mentioned to Queneau.

Furthermore, modern trends in magic appear to have been more than a minor intrigue for Murdoch – indeed, they may have become crucial to her understanding of art. In her essay “Art is the Imitation of Nature”, she suggests that “Art is very much to do with accident, with contingency, with detail, with self-expression, with trickery of all kinds, with magic,” adding: “I think the idea of magic, here, perhaps sums up the extraordinary ambiguity of art” (247). The strange fusion of “magic”, “trickery” and “ambiguity” implies the work of art to be some form of supernatural “illusion” – a word which Murdoch used to describe art during a 1978 interview (“Philosophy” 231). Such an analogy touches upon a nexus of “magical” metaphors being used by early- and mid-twentieth-century writers to describe the nature of fiction: Leigh Wilson has spoken of “[Virginia] Woolf’s attempts to articulate what happens during artistic creation hover[ing] around the transformations of magic” (12), while Elizabeth Bowen, who became a close friend and confidante of Murdoch, began her book *Pictures and Conversations* with the intent of probing “the question ‘Is writing allied to witchcraft?’” (Ritchie 451).

This chapter will illustrate how Murdoch framed fiction as akin to artificial stage-magic and depicted trickster characters engaging in magic spells, rituals and performances in her early novels as a means of exploring this. This model further enabled her to analyse problems surrounding authorship and character autonomy that she found philosophically, artistically and ethically troubling.

Through the wider fields of magic, Shakespeare and authorship, I shall argue that Murdoch, partially influenced by W.H. Auden, used trickster figures in her fiction to scrutinise the relationship between character, author and reader.

Firstly, however, it is important to establish that Murdoch is a writer whose innovative use of character has been much discussed. Notably, Peter Conradi's seminal work, *The Saint and the Artist*, promulgated the idea that her fiction centres upon a dichotomy between saintly figures, who live "by a constant sacrifice of the will", and figures of artists, who live "by the will and by a hunger for aesthetic form" (25). This theory has since been engaged with by a profusion of critics, including Maria Antonaccio ("The Aesthetic Impulse" 87-99), Bran Nicol ("The Curse of *The Bell*" 100-112), Jack Turner ("Iris Murdoch" 300-317) and Karan Singh Yadav and Jyoti Yadav (155-170) – and, certainly, Murdoch herself briefly outlined the concept of the saint and the artist in an interview by Michael O. Bellamy ("An Interview" 134-135). Conradi's descriptions of saints and artists often have affinities with the definitions we might expect to find of the traditional trickster: he speaks of them as "only fools and holy fools" (*The Saint* 44) and "outsider' figures" (*The Saint* 45). And yet, no scholarly attempt has been made to situate Murdoch within a trickster tradition, other, perhaps, than critic Brandabur briefly noting that three specific characters of hers – Millie in *The Red and the Green*, Hannah in *The Unicorn* and Morgan in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* – "function as variants of the Irish goddess known as the Morrigan, . . . a trickster and shape-changer whose seductive deceptions create complicated plots" (62-63). This gap in criticism is significant, considering that Murdoch's work has a recognised debt to fairy-tales (see Fiander's *Fairy Tales*), Shakespeare (see Todd 121 and Sanders 100-131) and the picaresque novel (see Hague's *Iris Murdoch's Comic Vision* and "Picaresque Structure"): types of literature in which tricksters are prominent. Meanwhile, Yadav and Yadav have taken a different approach to character, suggesting that the cast of Murdoch's novels can be separated into four "types": passionate "young women", "weak, older men", "enchanters" and "older women who fall in love . . . with the most unlikeable characters" (156). Finally, Patricia Waugh rather pertinently describes Murdoch's protagonists as "usually artist/magician/trickster figures who attempt to manipulate other people into conformity" (*Feminine Fictions* 81) – though not

expanding further on the idea of the “trickster”, Waugh here seems to suggest the relevance of Murdoch’s work to a trickster tradition.

This chapter will blur boundaries previously established in studies of Murdoch’s character-types, using the trickster figure to think about character in a more varied way. Murdoch’s body of work is often read as somehow separate from other writers of the period, but, by placing her alongside Bowen, Taylor and Spark, this thesis will illustrate that her characters provide crucial examples of the trickster paradigm occurring in mid-century British writing. While, for instance, Bowen explored the trickster in relation to facets of intelligence, Murdoch seems to have brought the figure to play on dynamics of writing and reading. This clearly chimes with Taylor’s treatment of the trickster, but, whereas Taylor’s tricksters were used to suggest the restorative effect of reading and writing on one’s self, Murdoch’s tricksters come at reading and writing from a different angle, seemingly allowing their author to disentangle anxieties about the ethics of fiction.

### **Art, Magic Ritual and a Scene in *The Sandcastle***

As well as being inspired by the paranormal and incorporating it in her fiction, Murdoch arguably used what might be termed “stage-magic” as a way of framing her creative process. In another letter to Queneau, dated August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1947, she described finding

great difficulty in judging my own work. While I am writing it, it’s always surrounded by such an aura of creative aspiration and joy and clairvoyance and whatnot, it seems better than it is. Then afterwards the light is withdrawn and it seems quite dead and worthless. Just now I’m still in clairvoyant stage and knowing the secrets of the seas. (Series KUAS70/1)<sup>1</sup>

The terms “clairvoyance” and “aura” evoke an impression of the mystical, but this is decidedly human rather than celestial, subscribing to an image of the ostentatious psychic with props and tricks, while phrases such as “it seems better than it is” and “afterwards the light is withdrawn” intimate Murdoch’s creative experience to be an illusion. Murdoch emphasised the idea of art being magical,

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<sup>1</sup> Possibly a reference to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “The Secret of the Sea”, from his 1850 collection *The Seaside and the Fireside*, in which a helmsman sings a song that can only be understood by those who have braved the sea.

but simultaneously suggested this to be a tricky type of theatrical magic instead of something truly otherworldly.

Horner and Rowe have noted that Murdoch perceived art to be manipulative in a way similar to magic (“Introduction to ‘Part Seven’” 467). I want to suggest that, more specifically, she visualised the contrivance of fiction specifically as stage-magic, and that, as well as discussing her art with recourse to this, used trickster characters to include images of it in her narratives. This is evident in a curious beach scene in her 1957 novel *The Sandcastle*, in which the sensitive schoolgirl Felicity, a minor character, performs a magic ritual that she has designed to separate her father from his lover, Rain Carter. As shown in the following quotation, Felicity’s is a magic heavily reliant on theatrical props:

The paraphernalia had all been collected beforehand and now lay spread out on top of a large flat rock which was just at the water’s edge. . . . In the right-hand apex of the [salt] triangle stood a copper cup containing white wine, a new penknife . . . , some camphor and aloes in a packet, a large bottle of lighter-fuel, a live beetle in a matchbox, the supersonic whistle . . . , and a pack of Tarot cards. . . . In the left-hand apex of the triangle lay an image of a human figure about eight inches high, which had been made out of Miss Carter’s nylon stockings stuffed with paper. (221-222)

Meanwhile, the ritual itself involves Felicity purifying herself in the sea before concocting and sipping a potion containing her own blood and the beetle, reading the Tarot cards and immolating the effigy of Miss Carter. The scene occurs late in the novel, is disconnected from the rest of the plot and appears to be a veiled representation of the act of creating fiction, its most pertinent element being the Tarot-reading. We are told that:

In relation to the Tarot Felicity had developed her own private symbolism. She had identified various figures in the pack with people that she knew, the more important people in her world usually appearing in two roles. Her father was the Emperor, and also the King of Swords. Her mother was the Empress and the Queen of Swords. [Her brother] Donald was the Juggler and also the Fool. She herself was the Queen of Cups. (224)

Felicity has assigned her acquaintances specific cards, almost stepping outside the narrative by instinctively recognising her peers as character-tropes with functions. For example, in A. E. Waite’s notable 1911 guide to Tarot,<sup>2</sup> the Emperor is described as a figure of authority and intellectualism (42) – an apt symbol for Felicity’s schoolmaster father – while the Queen of Cups is “one who

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<sup>2</sup> Waite’s guide has been suggested to have been used by T. S. Eliot (Gibbons 564).



sees visions” (114), echoing her own psychic ritual. By drawing cards at random, Felicity seems to unconsciously predict *The Sandcastle*’s outcome. The Tarot reading pairs Miss Carter, represented by the Moon card, to the Hanged Man, which traditionally stands for “sacrifice” (Waite 58), and these two cards are divided from the Empress and King of Swords – Felicity’s parents. Felicity herself is “not able to interpret the Hanged Man” (224), perhaps alluding to how “all significance [of this card] is veiled” in Tarot (Waite 58), but, when the schoolgirl’s character-allocation of the cards is read alongside a traditional guide to Tarot, the ritual apparently foretells – or may even magically determine – the subsequent narrative events: Rain Carter’s sacrificing her affair with Mor in order to preserve his marriage (306). Felicity also draws the Broken Tower card, portending her brother’s later disastrous climbing of a school tower (260). Like Murdoch herself, the girl has an outsider’s glimpse into and possible control over narrative direction, observing the novel as an artefact rather than being blinded by her immersion in it.

In addition to the Tarot-reading, we are told that “Felicity had made a careful study of magic from as many original texts as she could lay her hands on” (220), which chimes with the manner in which Murdoch drew from traditional works of literature when crafting her highly allusive fiction. Felicity waits for her imaginary familiar, Angus, to manifest himself before she can begin the ceremony; as well as representing the artist’s muse, Angus might be suggested to depict the shadowy presence of the future reader in the mind of the writer, as Felicity creates magic for him much as Murdoch creates fiction for us. He has a fluid identity, appearing to Felicity in various different forms throughout the novel, perhaps alluding to an unknown and varied readership. Furthermore, Felicity has built an effigy of Rain Carter for the spell much as Murdoch has textually constructed Rain’s character. Issues of novelistic creation seem latent in Felicity’s very terrestrial form of magic: her theatrical, prop-reliant ritual alludes to Murdoch’s plotting the end of the novel.

This scene thus marries the act of writing with occult practices, and its similarity to the scene in Bowen’s *The House in Paris* in which Henrietta – another lonely child – uses a pack of cards to predict Leopold’s future (63), demonstrates Tarot’s lingering impact from the spiritualism popular in previous decades. Ideas of Tarot and the occult had been influential in literature of the early twentieth

century, with the poet W. B. Yeats being a particularly prominent figure in such circles and purportedly treasuring his own Tarot pack (Raine 112). Kathleen Raine details how Yeats believed that “poetry [was] a kind of magic, and the object of both alike was evocation of energies and knowledge from beyond normal consciousness” (130), an idea akin to Murdoch’s view of the affinity between art and occult magic. It has been proposed that Murdoch used Yeats’s poem “Easter 1916” as a “model of sorts” for her novel *The Red and the Green* (Gerstenberger 56), due to the two writers’ sharing complex attitudes towards the Easter rising, and is thus possible that she also took inspiration from his notions on art and the occult. However, unlike Yeats, Murdoch engaged with prop-reliant magic specifically to think about the artificial aspect of art and its distance from truth. In her essay “Against Dryness”, she contended that many twentieth-century novels belong to a self-contained, “crystalline” type (291), lacking vibrant or allusive characters and instead relying on “small myths, toys, crystals” (292). Felicity’s dependence on physical props, then, might chime with the tendency in modern writing to focus upon insular structures and themes rather than fusing into a greater literary legacy, illustrating the chasm between the artifice of modern literature and a literary ideal. In order to explore this chasm further, it is necessary to examine another important influence on Murdoch’s sense of art and magic: Shakespeare.

### **Twisting Shakespeare**

Leigh Wilson has demonstrated that, during the modernist movement of the early twentieth century, magic was perceived as “a discourse of the material world rather than necessarily related to the metaphysical or transcendent” (4), crucially diverging from “religion” in that it was concerned “with the matter of the world rather than the transcendental” (8). Material magic operated on a different level to divine power. Similarly, while Murdoch connected most art with an earthly or illusive form of magic, there was an obverse to this: a transcendental purity to which art could aspire. In discussing two characters from her novel *The Sea, The Sea*, she explained: “James and Charles are parallel cases of magic. I mean Charles has spent his life in magic in the theatre; James has spent his life in magic, in religion. They never, of course, understand each other” (Interview by Christopher Bigsby 105-106) – a stance that distinguishes between human magic

and religious magic. Bove has noted that Murdoch felt art required “the efforts of a greater genius, like Shakespeare, to illuminate the truth as distinct from magic or illusion” (86), and, indeed, if she deemed a preponderance of art to be embedded in tricky magic, then Shakespeare was a rare exception, his work comprising a purity akin to celestial magic.

Shakespeare was of colossal importance to Murdoch throughout her life. She spoke of him as “the greatest of writers” (“The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” 261), and, in later years, avoided trips to the theatre except to see his plays (Meyers 24). As A. N. Wilson observes, he was one of “the truly important men in her life” (65). Furthermore, Murdoch acknowledged Shakespeare to be present in all of her work (Martin and Rowe ix), much of which draws overtly from his plays: for example, *The Italian Girl* alludes to *King Lear* and *The Black Prince* to *Hamlet*, while *The Sea, The Sea* and *An Unofficial Rose* both reflect *The Tempest*. Many of her characters can be clearly traced to Shakespearean sources, and yet, these figures appear to have been reinterpreted in ways that skew and undermine the playwright’s originals: a curious way for Murdoch to treat the creations of such a revered writer. For this reason, while Antonaccio contends that Murdoch aspired to Shakespeare’s standard (*A Philosophy* 199), I want to suggest that, in contrast, Murdoch often rebirthed specific Shakespearean characters as tricky beings as a way of deliberately highlighting her artistic distance from the playwright. Far from striving for his numinous form of magic, she intended to flag up her own work as artificial, imperfect and degraded: occult performance rather than transcendence. She seems to have hinted at this endeavour when musing: “One may of course try to ‘incarnate’ the idea of perfection by saying to oneself ‘I want to write like Shakespeare’ . . . . But of course one knows . . . that one has got to do the thing oneself alone and differently” (“On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” 351). If Shakespearean perfection was unattainable, then Murdoch coped with this by making her relative imperfection the very point of her work, warping the traditional characters into problematic replicas.

This theory can be supported through exploring some of Murdoch’s Shakespearean-drawn characters, beginning with Miranda in her 1962 novel *An Unofficial Rose*. Anthony D. Nuttall has noted this girl’s deviation from Shakespeare’s virtuous Miranda of *The Tempest*, remarking that “this is a

*Tempest* in which . . . Miranda is not good” (Introduction 3); indeed, in contrast to Shakespeare’s character, Miranda here is aggressive, manipulative and destructive, a vile inversion of her namesake. Furthermore, she is infused with images of artifice and witchcraft, which separate her from Shakespearean transcendence. For instance, her collection of dolls, objects that are clearly mimetic by nature, parallel Felicity’s effigy of Miss Carter in *The Sandcastle*. In addition to this, Miranda engages in a scene towards the end of the novel that, like Felicity’s beach spell, seems akin to a magic ritual. The scene in question exposes to the reader Miranda’s infatuation with her mother’s friend, Felix – an unrequited twin of Miranda’s love for Ferdinand in *The Tempest*. After furiously watching Felix’s car drive away, the girl “pulled the curtains, locked her door and knelt down to rummage under her bed. She dragged out a large wooden box, a box designed for books with a strong lock on it. She searched the table drawer for the key and opened the box. She tilted it over until its contents streamed on to the rug” (253). The box contains a profusion of Felix’s photographs and letters, which Miranda destroys, rather like Felicity’s burning the effigy, as part of a curious ritual. She impales the doll Felix gave her with a dagger, which she plans to “drown . . . in the Marsh” (257), compounding the sense of a spell being sealed, and violently smashes the rest of her dolls. Throughout the scene, the girl is described in demonic terms: she feels she has been writhing in “flames” and longs to “possess” Felix (254). Miranda’s performative witchery is conterminous with the construction of fiction, and, according to Murdoch, her dolls represent “her protecting herself from the world with various images and so on” (Interview by Frank Kermode), suggesting an echo of the way that modern writers employ “myths, toys, crystals” to avoid grappling with weightier allusions. As a highly flawed version of Shakespeare’s Miranda, the girl illuminates modern literature – indeed, Murdoch’s own fiction – as spurious and distanced from Shakespeare’s transcendent art.

The 1964 *The Italian Girl*, a novel which Nick Turner has recognised as conveying “an atmosphere of Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (44),<sup>3</sup> contains a more adult model of Miranda in the character of Flora. This

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<sup>3</sup> I would add to this that *The Italian Girl* more strongly echoes Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, evident through its narrator being named Edmund, in another character’s name being “Learmont” (202), in its themes of blindness and in servant Levkin’s calling his master “Nuncle” (127), which is the term Shakespeare’s Fool uses to address Lear.

young woman's name places her as a creature of nature, and she is perceived by the narrator as "like some little ageless nymph of the woods, some gracious sprite from an Italian painting" (46) and "a sprite composed of light and water" (138), crowned by "long reddish hair" (25). Flora seems a reconstruction of Shakespeare's Ophelia of *Hamlet*: she confides her pregnancy to Edmund beside a pool in the woods during a scene that conflates images of water, flowers and suicide – "'I shall drown myself in this pool.' She hurled a little handful of daisies out onto the tense black surface of the pool" (65) – much as Ophelia is described by Queen Gertrude as having drowned in a "weeping brook" (Shakespeare, *Ham.* 4.7.150) wearing a garland of "crow-flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples" (Shakespeare, *Ham.* 4.7.144), her death later being considered a suicide (Shakespeare, *Ham.* 5.1.6-7 and 5.1.210-211). However, unlike the heartbroken Ophelia, who is labelled an "angel" (Shakespeare, *Ham.* 5.1.231), Flora is malevolent, manipulating those around her and being exposed as a "demoness" (Murdoch, *The Italian Girl* 181). Rather than drowning herself in the pool, she aborts her baby with a callousness that shocks Edmund – in Murdoch's 1968 stage adaptation of *The Italian Girl*, Flora spits: "my instincts told me to tear that thing right out of me. . . . If I'd had it, I would have killed it" (Saunders and Murdoch 44).

Miranda and Flora are examples of Murdoch corrupting Shakespeare's virtuous female characters by switching their statuses from angelic to demonic. However, she often performed the reverse process, appropriating Shakespeare's bad characters – usually the male ones – and convoluting them by giving them morals. In this practice she repeatedly reached for Caliban as the abject monster to elevate into something more human. While Caliban in *The Tempest* is depicted as unconscionable, having attempted rape, eschewed acts of kindness and plotted murder, Murdoch's brooding outcasts are more defensible, often being misunderstood or ultimately good. Her most obvious Caliban is the character Penn in *An Unofficial Rose*, whose intertextual role is elucidated by Nuttall: "Penn will play Caliban to Miranda Peronett . . . Penn attempts to rape exactly as Caliban did" (Introduction 3). But, as Nuttall notes, in this warped version of *The Tempest* "Caliban is good" (Introduction 3), simply a naïve boy who is taunted into a frenzy by the wicked Miranda. A less immediately discernible Caliban is found in *The Unicorn's* Denis Nolan: a quiet, serious character whose otherworldliness is

conveyed in his ability to navigate the moor's hazardous bogs and his reputation for being "invisible" (47). Denis is described as "a great fish man" (20), uncannily able to communicate with these creatures, which harmonises with Caliban's repeatedly being likened to a fish by Trinculo in Act Two, Scene Two of *The Tempest*. This may seem rather a tenuous link, but the character parallels strengthen when we consider Denis's alleged effort to molest Alice (48), which has led to his being socially shunned. As Penn is the good Caliban pressured into a confused attempt at rape, Denis is the gentle outcast, who is later vindicated by the revelation that it was in fact Alice who forced herself onto him (214). Denis further alludes to Caliban through his innate darkness; as Kim F. Hall observes, Shakespeare's play "locates Caliban on one side of a binarism in Prospero's final pronouncement on Caliban, 'this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine'<sup>4</sup> . . . clearly marking him as a slave who is associated with darkness and dirt" (142). Similarly, in *The Unicorn*, we find the following description of Denis: "The faces of the others were gilded. Denis's was black. . . . [His] features looked like blackened iron. . . . His eyes were black and his mouth a black line. . . . He did not return Marian's smile, and she could not even make out the direction of the fierce darkened eyes" (172). The darkness might be argued to signify Denis's connection with the Shakespearean monster, and, ultimately, while Caliban fails in his quest to kill Prospero, Denis succeeds in murdering his employer, Peter (302). Yet, this murder appears partly justified by Peter's tyrannous nature: it is a moral, heroic act. Denis's character is further problematized by his trait of innocence, for, while Caliban threatens sexual violence, Denis is the virgin seduced by the novel's protagonist, Marian (230).

Nick Fawley in the 1958 *The Bell* is yet another of Murdoch's Calibans. Nick functions as the shadow of Michael, who is the religious community's leader, hinged to him by their secret romantic history; while Michael is a popular and respected figurehead, inwardly tormented by his homosexuality, Nick is a drunken outcast, distrusted and banished to live in the lodge. He is thrice called a "poor fish" (46, 118, 125) and once a "black sheep" (125), echoing descriptions of Caliban and Denis Nolan. While Nick does not attempt rape, he is responsible for the greatest act of violence in the novel, attacking the young Toby (266). Perhaps less exonerated than Penn and Denis, pervaded by a sense of

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<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare, *Tmp.* 5.1.275-276.

bitterness, Nick is nevertheless a clearly troubled individual whose morality has been eroded by society's treatment of him, and his final act of suicide marks him as a figure of deep suffering.

All of these "Calibans" arguably suggest a considered warping of Shakespearean material, and a deliberate distancing of Murdoch's art from the playwright's: they seem to show Murdoch embracing tricky re-writings rather than aiming to achieve Shakespeare's perfected art. The reasons for her apparent sense of inferiority to Shakespeare, and her need to acknowledge it, can be explored further in terms of her thoughts on the freedom of characters.

### **Auden and the Freedom of Characters**

Murdoch's treatment of Shakespearean characters reflected her artistic relationship to his work, and she used their shortcomings to produce disruptive ripples through her storylines, complicating her plots. Her narratives are sinuous, interpolated with "bizarre and artificial elements" (Scholes 106), and whereas Shakespeare's plays achieve a final sense of resolution, Murdoch's "stories do not end and her books . . . go uncompleted" (Berthoff 316), her novels' endings often seeming deliberately ambivalent. What Murdoch was attempting to do with Shakespeare in her work can be read in conjunction with an analogous twentieth-century rewriting of his characters: that of W. H. Auden, whom Murdoch seems to have thought about in relation to Shakespeare, art and magic.

Murdoch was familiar with Auden from a young age, first meeting him in 1937 when he visited her school to read an excerpt from his work. As Head Girl, eighteen-year-old Murdoch "sat next to Auden, finding him 'young and beautiful with his golden hair.' She soon enlisted in his help in writing a foreword to *Poet Venturers*, her own brainchild, a collection of poems by Bristol schoolchildren" (Conradi, *Iris Murdoch* 78). Questions of magic and freedom were pertinent to the writers' first encounter, prefiguring a later artistic overlap. Murdoch's description of Auden as a beautiful youth with golden hair is something of a fairy-tale image and, years later, she would reach for him when contemplating magic: "Perhaps only Shakespeare manages to create at the highest level both images and people . . . Only the very greatest art invigorates without consoling, and defeats our attempts, in W. H. Auden's words, to use it as magic" ("Against

Dryness” 295).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in his foreword to *Poet Venturers*, the school poetry collection that Murdoch was editing, Auden wrote of the individual’s responsibility to “earn the right to be free” (3). Both Auden and Murdoch went on to use Shakespeare as a way of analysing fictional characters’ freedom and the relationship between art and magic.

Drawing from this, I want to propose that *The Sea and the Mirror*, Auden’s long poem of 1944, may be used to shed light on Murdoch’s own artistic concerns. This work takes characters from *The Tempest* and assigns them dramatic monologues as if spoken after the final act of the play; however, Caliban is the only character to become fully conscious of his status as a fictional being. Speaking of *The Tempest* in a letter to Theodore Spencer, Auden wrote: “Caliban does disturb me profoundly because he doesn’t fit in; it is exactly as if one of the audience had walked up onto the stage and insisted on taking part in the action” (qtd in Kirsch xxx); in *The Sea and the Mirror*, then, Auden extends Caliban’s established position as an outsider *within* the play by making him also an outsider *to* the play. In Auden’s work, both Caliban and Ariel undermine Prospero’s authority, with Caliban in particular diminishing Prospero’s and, indeed, Shakespeare’s powers, and attempting to break loose of the artificial confines of the play and thus gain autonomy. Prospero, in contrast, is depicted as somewhat blind to his status as a character within a play: as McDiarmid and McDiarmid observe, “Although Auden’s Prospero professes to feel as if he were awake after a dream and sober after drink, the world he imagines around him is still that of the play; he has not even left the island, but is still packing his bags and chatting with Ariel” (357). Whereas Prospero is unable to imagine a world beyond Shakespeare’s fiction, in the third part of Auden’s poem, “Caliban to the Audience”, Caliban collapses boundaries between art and reality, recognising himself as simultaneously a monster on an island and one of a cast of actors “Sweating and shivering in our moth-eaten ill-fitting stock costumes” (51). He also crosses borders between audience, character and playwright, speaking as

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<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to Auden’s suggestion in “The Poet of the Encirclement” that, although art “is not Magic, i.e. a means by which the artist communicates or arouses his feelings in others, but a mirror in which they may become conscious of what their own feelings really are” (198), “no artist . . . can prevent his work being used as magic, for that is what all of us, highbrow and lowbrow alike, secretly want Art to be” (198). Murdoch is here advancing the idea that Shakespeare’s work is autonomous enough to evade audiences’ attempts to project their personal preoccupations onto the characters.



himself, as the audience and as Shakespeare, assuming different roles in order to conflate the presences complicit in the experience of the play.

Furthermore, Auden's Caliban views Shakespeare's fiction and Prospero's magic as synonymous, consequently probing what Hateley describes as criticism's "long history of symbolically equating Prospero with Shakespeare" (148). Speaking "as" Shakespeare, he calls playwrights "gay apprentice[s] in the magical art" (36), terms writing "the conjurer's profession" (36) and describes the play's ending as "the breaking of the childish spell" (41). Here, Caliban is expressing the belief of his author, for, as Kirsch states, "Auden unquestionably identified profoundly with Prospero [the magician] as an artist" (xxi). Like Murdoch, then, Auden perceived art as an artificial type of magic – the magic of "conjurers", crafted by "apprentices" rather than experts – but, unlike Murdoch, he did not exempt Shakespeare from this analogy or deem Shakespeare's work to be perfect magic, but rather framed *The Tempest* as another "childish spell", tricky and limited.

Both Murdoch and Auden twisted Shakespearean characters in order to examine the nature of art. In particular, Auden's freeing of Caliban, and highlighting of his "ill-fitting stock costume", uses a rewriting of Shakespeare to underscore the idea of characters' freedom – an ethical problem by which Murdoch was also deeply troubled. As Yadav and Yadav note: "Iris Murdoch fervently advocates freedom for the novelistic characters in her philosophical essays. . . . For her, a novelist should respect the freedom and individuality of a character" (155-156). Similarly, A. S. Byatt goes to the extent of suggesting that "All Miss Murdoch's novels can in an important sense be seen as studies of the 'degrees of freedom' available to individuals" (6). In order to establish "free" characters, Murdoch proposed, a writer has "to create things which are not just part of one's mind in a narrow sense; they are as if they were separate from one's mind, they are different, they are not projections of me, they are entities on their own and they relate to each other in a free way" (Interview by Christopher Bigsby 102).

It was this separation between writer and character that underlay her reverence for Shakespeare, for she considered his plays to contain "free and eccentric personalities whose reality Shakespeare has apprehended and displayed as something quite separate from himself" ("The Sublime and the

Beautiful Revisited” 276). This was likely the crux of why she deemed him the only artist capable of portraying truth rather than trickery – a view that may otherwise have been confusing, considering that Shakespeare’s medium was the stage and therefore the traditional platform for performance, illusion and theatrics. Bajaj tells us, “Shakespeare, [Murdoch] believes, pays full attention to his characters and perceives fully what is really and completely going on without the imprisoning control of his ideologies or prejudices” (14), thus implying Murdoch to have felt that Shakespeare’s characters developed organically away from their creator, without having been built around his own preoccupations. This perspective was shared by Murdoch’s husband, the Shakespeare critic John Bayley, who spoke of Shakespeare as a writer who “endows all his characters with the greatest possible freedom to be themselves” and marvelled at how, “Having conceived [Caliban] . . . , Shakespeare simply accepts him, as he might accept the person standing beside him in the street” (*The Characters* 194). To Auden, Shakespeare’s work, like all art, stifled its characters’ freedom, with Caliban needing to be lifted from *The Tempest* in order to gain autonomy; for Murdoch and Bayley, however, Shakespeare’s characters were substantial enough to be free within their original narratives.

Murdoch further argued freedom to be intrinsically linked with love, in that one cannot love someone without accepting them as different and distanced from oneself: “Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real” (“The Sublime and the Good” 215). She extended this to her conceptualisation of fictional character, delineating “an analogy between loving somebody in real life in such a way that you can really will them to be independent of you – leave them free – and loving one’s characters. I do love my characters, and the difficulty is the same difficulty: that one must be able to leave them free, to make them independent. This is not easy” (Interview by Frank Kermode). Bayley again expressed a comparable opinion, explaining: “What I understand by an author’s love for his characters is a delight in their independent existence as *other people*, an attitude towards them which is analogous to our feelings toward those we love in life; and an intense interest in their personalities combined with . . . a respect for their freedom” (*The Characters* 8).

But Murdoch felt that the creation of free characters could be hampered by the requirements of narrative form; an idea that she discussed in an interview with Frank Kermode. Introducing this interview, Kermode told viewers:

Novels, [Murdoch] seems to say, have to do two things that can't easily be done together. They have to give the reader a sense of the depth and freedom of his own personality by involving him with fictional characters who have mysterious depth and freedom themselves; but, novels also have to provide the satisfactions that come from anything that has artistic form. In the case of a novel this is not only clever plotting but the sort of subtle balances and suggestions that we need to recognise before we're willing to think a book is more than entertainment. And this second duty – plot, form and shape, and so forth – tends to conflict with the first, if only because it does limit the freedom of the characters. (see Murdoch, Interview by Frank Kermode)

He added: "Miss Murdoch says that creating free characters in a novel gives the writer a feeling that is close to love for the characters. But presumably the more elaborate and subtle you make your plot, the more you allow form to deprive them of their freedom, the less worthy they are of love" (see Murdoch, Interview by Frank Kermode). During the interview, Murdoch described her belief that "form is frightfully important in art, but in a novel of course it can, I suppose, possibly conflict with really free development of character, [so] that one finds a sort of tension between producing a very satisfactory pattern and letting some character have his way" (Interview by Frank Kermode). Such an ideal of freedom is pondered by the character Marian in *The Unicorn*: "No one should be a prisoner of other people's thoughts, no one's destiny should be an object of fascination to others, no one's destiny should be open to introspection" (227) – a statement showing clearly the tension between allowing character independence and creating the type of plot central to novel-writing, as Murdoch's characters' destinies inevitably become "object[s] of fascination" to the reader. This quotation also echoes Murdoch's early fascination in telepathy and the ability to mentally control the personality of another.

It is worth noting that Elizabeth Bowen, in contrast to Murdoch, believed her characters to be innately independent of her, regardless of her method of narration:

Are characters, then, to be constructed to formula – the formula pre-decided by the plot? Are they to be drawn, cut out, jointed, wired, in order to be manipulated for the plot?

No. There is no question as to whether this would be right or wrong. It would be impossible. . . . The term 'creation of character' (or characters) is misleading. Characters pre-exist. They are *found*. They reveal themselves slowly to the novelist's perception – as might fellow-travellers seated opposite one in a very dimly-lit railway carriage.

The novelist's perceptions of his characters take place *in the course of the actual writing of the novel*. To an extent, the novelist is in the same position as his reader. But his perceptions should be always just in advance. . . .

The character is there (in the novel) for the sake of the action he or she is to contribute to the plot. Yes. But also, he or she exists *outside* the action being contributed to the plot. ("Notes on Writing a Novel" 250-251)

Bowen, perhaps due to her religious convictions, seemingly saw her characters as pre-existing, already having been created by something other than herself, and believed it the writer's duty merely to excavate these characters enough to forward the plot. Ethics did not enter into the process.

Meanwhile, Murdoch clearly felt a sense of dissonance between wanting freedom for her characters and being compelled to follow a pattern when plotting fiction, viewing her creations as defined and restricted by her narratives. Indeed, Yadav and Yadav, speaking of what they call Murdoch's "great betrayal of character in her novels" (168), contend that she ultimately failed to produce free characters: "Murdoch tends to sacrifice character to mental concepts or the intellectual pattern of her novels. . . . [Her characters] are either ambushed by plotting or swallowed by their weird isolated setting" (168).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, they state her to have been aware of her defeat in this matter (168). If, as this chapter has argued, Murdoch twisted Shakespearean figures in order to underscore her distance from him, she perhaps did so with the ultimate intention of acknowledging that, unlike him, she could not fully engender freedom.

However, it seems odd that she should deem Shakespeare the artist most capable of bestowing characters' freedom when we consider the strict forms imposed upon his plays: the five-act structures and reliance on stock characters such as the lovers, fool or scheming villain. Murdoch, in general, expressed a

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<sup>6</sup> James Wood expresses a similar view: "Iris Murdoch has written repeatedly that the definition of the great novel is the free and realised life it gives to its characters, while making her own characters as unfree as pampered convicts" (13). Likewise, Patricia Waugh views Murdoch's insistence that characters should not embody the preoccupations of their author as somewhat hypocritical: "Ironically, however, despite her argument for preserving the contingent opacity of characters, she often reveals an attraction of complete abstract significance, to the 'crystalline', which, as she herself has said, results in 'far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality'" (*Metafiction* 118).

disdain for stock characters: “The great novels are victims neither of convention nor of neurosis. The social scene is a life-giving framework and not a set of dead conventions or stereotyped settings inhabited by stock characters. And the individuals portrayed in the novels are free, independent of their author” (“The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” 271). Here, stock characters are depicted as flat stereotypes which inhibit the freedom of characters and thus the creation of “the great novel”. Bayley, too, felt that “The inevitability of the great author’s vision creates its own truth, while the lesser contrives it out of method and convention” (*The Characters* 14), elaborating that writers such as Gerhardt, Henry Green and Aldous Huxley attempted to build complex and realistic characters by forcing together contradictory character-traits, but that this method was too “mechanical” (*The Characters* 14) – a sentiment echoing Bowen’s thoughts on Huxley being too “intellectual” in his construction of character.

Murdoch’s engagement with Shakespeare therefore acted, like Auden’s *The Sea and the Mirror*, to at once suggest the importance of characters’ freedom and to acknowledge the complexity of achieving it. Shakespeare’s brilliance, for Murdoch, appears to have been his ability to craft characters so rounded that they resist the limitations of trope and structure; or, perhaps, tropes and structures organically arise in Shakespeare’s cast of characters – much as Elizabeth Bowen believed that “prototypes” of people naturally appear in communities (“Out of a Book” 51) – instead of characters’ personalities being designed to fit preconceived types. Crucially, Murdoch appears to have construed this relationship between character form and freedom through the figure of the trickster; for, in what follows, this chapter will illustrate that she deliberately drew upon tricksters from traditional sources, such as the early modern stage, in an attempt to collapse boundaries between form and freedom, grasping at the trickster’s paradox of being simultaneously a “type” and, by definition, mutable. By viewing specific characters as tricksters, Murdoch was able to grant them a certain amount of freedom based upon their traditional proclivity for standing outside the narrative and engaging with the reader. In “Against Dryness”, Murdoch suggests that “we have never had . . . [a satisfactory] theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world” (290); the trickster trope allowed her to probe the contradiction of being an independent being while also functioning within an overarching paradigm.

## Traditional Tricksters and Authorial Control

Murdoch's artistic strands of magic, Shakespearean references and ideas of characters' freedom, come together in her use of the trickster figure. Indeed, there seem to be three types of trickster present in her early novels, often overlapping but allowing her to explore her artistic concerns in different ways. The first of these is the young female outsider, seen, for instance, in Felicity from *The Sandcastle* or, as will be explored, Dora from *The Bell*, who occasionally steps back from the narrative to engage with tricky magic and illuminate the artificiality of the text. These sensitive characters seem unconscious of their trickster status, merely compelled by a natural strangeness and marginality; they have a curious affinity with Elizabeth Bowen's emotional schoolgirls and Elizabeth Taylor's intuitive woman-child pairings, but, unlike Bowen's and Taylor's tricksters, they probe the nature of their author's fiction.

The second type is the twisted facsimile of a specific Shakespearean character. While these also may be outsider figures within Murdoch's narratives, their ultimate trickiness is exposed through their literary allusion; when held against their Shakespearean homologues they serve to highlight Murdoch's art as apparently flawed, distanced from the freedom of Shakespeare's fictional worlds.

Finally, there are characters that are clearly modelled on trickster tropes from traditional literature, for instance the buffoon of the early modern stage, or the picaresque hero. These characters show Murdoch to have had a strong understanding of the trickster figure as a character-type, and to have deliberately incorporated him into her novels. An example of such a trickster may be seen in *The Italian Girl*. I have previously addressed this novel's echoes of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, but its title hints at another form of traditional theatre, from which its most prominent trickster character is adapted. Italy's commedia dell'arte, which was established in the sixteenth century, contained a character trope called the "zanni": the trickster servant, described by John Rudlin as one placed at the "Bottom of the pecking order", a "regrettably eternal unfortunate, the dispossessed immigrant worker" (67). The zanni's actions are spritely, "always urgent. He appears nervous, talks

a lot, his head moves constantly” (Rudlin 70), and he has an extremely strong “survival instinct” (Rudlin 71). He is loud and always ready with a coarse pun, rather like the Shakespearean buffoon. In *The Italian Girl*, we find the character of David Levkin, a Russian immigrant worker in England, who shares many similarities with the zanni. Levkin’s actions are fidgety: he springs into the air (83 and 117), gesticulates wildly (117), skips (127) and darts (128). Like the zanni, he is determined to prosper, telling the novel’s narrator “I will work. I will succeed” (86), and has an extremely bawdy nature, sleeping with multiple women in the narrative and gleefully boasting about it. Upon Levkin’s final appearance in the novel, the narrator relates that “He had wept so much that his whole profile was altered, his cheeks and nose shining and swollen. The mask of his expression was different too. The lines of his face were dislocated and incoherent as if the inner spring were broken which had used to wreath his narrowed eyes with beaming wrinkles” (186). This description, with its emphasis on artificiality through words such as “mask” and “inner spring”, could easily be applied to the sort of mask often worn by the zanni in Italian theatre, which is usually distinctive through its long nose and furrowed brow and cheeks; Levkin’s large nose and wide nostrils are described earlier in the novel (14). Frances K. Barasch explains that “Typically, a *commedia* company included First Zanni, who was responsible for plot intrigues and tricks to fool the master, and Second Zanni, who was ignorant and naïve, and was usually exploited and beaten by his cohorts. Divisions between the two were never firm, and all were stereotypically greedy, thievish, deceitful, and lecherous” (“Commedia dell’Arte” 239). While Levkin conforms most strongly to the First Zanni, being preoccupied with duping his master, he is also beaten by Otto and ultimately is shamed in a manner befitting the Second Zanni.

Much of *The Italian Girl*’s plot stems from Levkin’s typical “zanni” actions – he is a key catalytic force behind the narrative, and his disruptive acts of selfishness and greed form a structure around which the novel takes shape. Levkin’s counterpart is his master, Otto: foolish, naïve, but standing at the core of his family, Otto’s role is to respond to Levkin. Otto is redolent of another trope of traditional trickster, one that has been explored in this thesis’s introduction: the Shakespearean buffoon, as seen in carnivalesque, physically grotesque characters such as Sirs John Falstaff and Toby Belch. Such buffoons are

recognisable in theatre for having “eaten and drunk too much, chased women in keeping with their misogyny, made fools of themselves, and, ultimately, lived pathetic, even tragic lives of humiliation and self-parody” (Murphy 1125); Otto, too, is the epitome of gluttony, lust, and emotional excess. Usually drunk, he stands at six foot three (13), with a “bull-like frame turning to masses of fat” (49) and eating habits so messy that “Feeding Otto was like feeding an elephant or a gorilla” (47) – he even labels himself “a sort of gluttonous buffoon” (50). Otto cries repeatedly and publicly (29, 53 and 161), beats his wife (30) and is easily tempted into a sexual affair with the servant Elsa (78). His unrepressed urges form a stark contrast to the self-control of his brother, the “puritan” (64), “vegetarian” (48) Edmund. As Edmund states: “Otto is a wet-lipped man. I am a dry-lipped man” (51) – a point further compounded by Otto musing to his brother: “you’re the one that watches and I’m the one that eats. I eat and eat and drink and drink. I try to swallow the world” (50). His grotesque indulgences often subvert social conventions and reader expectations in the spirit of Renaissance carnival, such as when he unexpectedly hits Edmund rather than his adulterous wife (157), and when he drinks champagne at the hospital after hearing of his lover’s death (181). The novel’s action is largely based on the farcical interplay between Levkin and Otto, with Otto wholly blind to Levkin’s tricks, and Levkin fixated on his master and how to manipulate him; indeed, in the stage play of *The Italian Girl*, there is a scene which depicts this manipulation physically, with Otto lying unconscious while Levkin “places Otto’s hands in a praying position and surveys ‘the object’. He . . . picks up a whisky bottle . . . [and] puts it between Otto’s legs. He moves downstage . . . and lines-up the bottle with Otto’s hands” (Saunders and Murdoch 7) – when asked what he is doing, he explains that “Some people arrange flowers, I arrange my Lord Otto” (Saunders and Murdoch 8).

While *The Italian Girl*’s Levkin chimes with the zanni, other characters of Murdoch’s reflect the type of trickster servant found in English Renaissance drama: the sort of wise spectator, such as Puck or Feste, who comments upon the deeds of the other characters. These characters raise important issues of servitude and authority; like the tricky slave on the traditional stage, Murdoch’s servants often seem freer than their masters, able to cross boundaries and blur their identity. They also contrive their own history, as is seen in Levkin’s



ambiguous tales of his past and in the anecdotes like “fairy-tale[s]” recounted by the Lusiewicz brothers in *The Flight from the Enchanter* (66) – two more zanni-esque immigrant workers. Examples of Murdoch’s tricky servants include Finn in *Under the Net*, Maggie in *The Italian Girl*, Jamesie in *The Unicorn* and Nancy Bowshott in *An Unofficial Rose*.

Bayley wrote briefly on Shakespeare’s tricky character-types and the potential they might offer a novelist:

Shakespeare’s plays are full of observers, self-appointed commentators on human folly who would be invaluable to the novelist, they remain subordinate and do not show up what they survey, or determine its value or status. . . . ‘No man is a hero to his valet’, remarked Hegel of Napoleon’s *mot*, ‘not however because the hero is no hero, but because the valet is a valet.’ (*The Characters* 189)

The Hegel quotation is taken from *The Phenomenology of Mind* (673), a work which Murdoch mentioned reading in a 1946 letter to Queneau (Series KUAS70/1); the following year, she wrote to Queneau again to tell him: “I’m still very much involved with Hegel . . . – will be all my life, I daresay” (Series KUAS70/1). Murdoch, like her husband, would have been familiar with Hegel’s valet quotation, and seems to have deliberately included tricky servants with irreverence towards authority in her novels. In *The Unicorn*, the servant Jamesie is repeatedly described with allusions to sprites, being prone to inexplicable peals of laughter and “impish” facial expressions (11), and being called a “cherub” (11), “Puck” (239) and “Peter Pan” (239). Like the trickster-sprites of the Renaissance stage, Jamesie revels in ambiguity, being of a confused social rank – both in service to the Crean family and distantly related to them – having an abstruse age (11) and pursuing sexual relationships with both men and women. The boy’s flamboyant, almost caricature-like appearance and demeanour allude to Shakespeare’s carnivalesque servants or jesters: the narrative describes “his dandified fancy-dress appearance” (239) and the way that his features look “grotesque” (277) in the candlelight. Certainly, Murdoch’s servant-characters’ tendency to seduce their employers reflects the Renaissance spirit of carnival, which includes such “moments of inverting the role of masters over servants” (Yaneva 95). It is also notable that Jamesie’s penchant for detective novels (146) evokes the “amateur detective of modern fiction” which Northrop Frye has described as a descendent of the tricky servant (173).

Meanwhile, *Under the Net*, Murdoch's first novel, includes tricksters from varied sources. Like *The Italian Girl*, this story centres upon two tricksters orbiting one another: Hugo, an elusive dreamer, and Jake, the narrator, both of whom have been described by Conradi as "'outsider' figures" (*The Saint* 45). The novel's action is predominantly impelled by Jake's attempts to locate Hugo, and our first glimpse of the latter takes place when he is onstage as one of a group of masked actors. Here, he is described as "a huge burly central figure, wearing a mask which expressed a sort of humble yearning stupidity . . . being mocked by the other players. . . . [A] burly simpleton" (41). The mask suggests Hugo to be a stock-character, while his central position onstage mirrors his being placed at the centre of the novel's narrative. If a stock-character, he is reminiscent of the lucky "natural fool" rather than the cunning "artificial fool": clownish, mocked by other characters, but nevertheless serendipitous and successful, Hugo displays a sensitive form of intelligence dissonant with common-sense.<sup>7</sup>

If Hugo is the natural fool, then Jake is an artificial fool, and his character shows how the trickster-type might allow Murdoch to reach as close as possible to her ideal of characters' freedom while still maintaining form. Identified by Hague ("Picaresque Structure" 210) and Bove (36) as a picaresque hero, Jake is an outsider figure, homeless and a wanderer, and adheres to Hague's definition of the picaresque hero as one who, "in order to survive in the chaotic, menacing world around him, must become a trickster. He soon moves, however, from using tricks as a means to an end to gratuitous trickery; the trick becomes an artistic activity for the picaro, an indication of his attempts to 'conquer reality'" (*Iris Murdoch's Comic Vision* 37). A desire to "conquer reality" suggests an impulse to break through the confines of the narrative, and, much as Auden's Caliban tries to escape from *The Tempest* by breaking the fourth wall and interacting with the audience, Jake, as narrator, addresses the reader directly. He repeatedly emphasises that he is telling us a "story" (10, 176, 228 and 282), thus identifying himself as a character within a narrative, and, indeed, Jake's status as writer further adds an aspect of metafiction to *Under the Net*. His sole published book, *The Silencer*, has been unsuccessful, criticised for being "unintelligible" (75) – too

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Richard C. Kane has noted that "Murdoch often allows some of her most profound thoughts to pass through the mind of a character who seems least able to understand or act upon them" (59), a trait highly redolent of the wise fools of the early modern stage, who deliver astute observations which are dismissed as insane ramblings.

obscure and tricky to appeal to a mainstream readership. It is this book, a rendition of philosophical conversations, which provides the hinge between Jake and Hugo: Jake feels guilty for having plagiarised Hugo's ideas in *The Silencer*, thinks that Hugo is angry, and is searching for him in order to make amends. When they finally meet, Hugo is delighted to see his friend and had not recognised his own ideas in Jake's book, hinting at Murdoch's interest in the "telepathic" transference of ideas between persons: Hugo's deep thoughts have been made strange to him by being appropriated into the language of another person and conveyed through text, which, it is worth remarking, seems to reverberate with Elizabeth Taylor's sense of identity passing and changing between persons.

Jake performs many tricks within the story, and these all revolve in some way around the theme of freedom: he escapes from a locked building (100), lies his way out of a police arrest (171), breaks Hugo out of hospital (263) and – possibly his biggest trick – steals a performing dog, liberating him with some difficulty from a small cage (150). Jake tells us, "I am thinking perhaps about God, freedom and immortality" (24), and later states to another character that "After all, freedom is only an idea" (30). Murdoch used Jake to test the limits of characters' freedom: his position as a picaresque trickster enables him to stand outside the world of the other characters, to acknowledge his fictional status and to use tricks to exercise freedom, while also keeping him and his actions confined to a specific character-type.

The final traditional trickster trope to be found in Murdoch's fiction is the Machiavellian puppeteer, redolent of such Shakespearean figures as Richard III, Prospero, Iago and *Measure for Measure's* Duke. This thesis has shown Bowen's and Taylor's novels to include omniscient presences that occasionally exert influence over other characters; in Murdoch's works, these presences are more sharply defined and far more controlling. Her quasi-supernatural characters, constantly manipulating those around them, might be analogous to the "strange god-shapes" that Stonebridge and MacKay have discerned in Murdoch's novels (4); they are mysteriously powerful characters, often comparable to the figure of the author. John Bayley outlines this as a similarity between authors and Shakespearean schemers: "Creation by selective insight is usually the novelist's method, and such creation cannot conceal from the reader how tyrannical and

manipulative is the bond between the author and his creature, the bond akin to that in which Iago tries to secure the other protagonists of *Othello*" (*The Characters* 188).

An early example of such a character in Murdoch's work is Mischa Fox in the 1956 novel *The Flight from the Enchanter*. Mischa, the "enchanter" from the title, is based upon the writer Elias Canetti, Murdoch's former lover and a person she perceived as elevated in terms of authority – she even once wrote to tell him "I had a dream last night in which you were Socrates. I've never made this identification before, but it seems a good one" (Series KUAS6/1). Conradi has discussed Canetti's presence in this novel:

Canetti's qualities, positive and negative, are so contradictory that it is hard to see how they belong within the same person. No accident that, when Murdoch portrayed him in *Flight*, she gave him one brown and one blue eye and then, to boot, divided him into two: cunning Mischa Fox, effortlessly superior, and god-like, and Calvin Blick, his Smerdyakov-like double, manipulative and wicked. ("Holy Fool and Magus" 130).

Here, Conradi uses Canetti to illuminate Mischa's doubleness – a trait typical of trickster figures (noted, for example, in Landay 2 and D. Williams 113), who, as the introduction to this thesis has outlined, are consequently often split between two characters. Indeed, Mischa's surname, "Fox", nods to a crucial anthropomorphic trickster from European folklore – the cunning Reynard the Fox – perhaps suggesting him to have roots in trickster folk-tales as well as in the omniscient figures of the Shakespearean stage. Calvin Blick pertinently resides in Mischa's basement (165), and, as argued by Duncker, functions as Mischa's shadow-self: "[Mischa] is, in fact, a split personality. . . . If Mischa is a kind of god, then Calvin is his demon prophet" (ix). Much as traditional tricksters are ambiguous, capable of both good and evil, Mischa and Calvin act together to encompass both extremes; Calvin's wickedness can sometimes be glimpsed through Mischa, who, despite being viewed as numinous and perfect by the other characters, is revealed to have killed animals in his youth as the result of a troubled mind (208). At one point in the novel, the character Rosa reflects:

There was a demon in Mischa which she had never been able to know and which had never allowed them to be at peace. Always at the last moment and without apparent reason there would come the twist, the assertion of power, the hint of a complexity that was beyond her, the sense of being, after all that had passed between them, a pawn in Mischa's game (241)

Mischa's "complexity" is perceived by most of the novel's characters, who believe him to have an overarching plan for each of them: a control over their destiny which is simultaneously divine and demonic. He is rumoured to collect "creatures" (143) – men and women who willingly place themselves in his power – and makes the young Annette feel "like a puppet" upon her first meeting with him (80). Twice in the narrative, characters pause to study ants on the ground (123 and 273), signifying their conception of themselves as "pawns" being observed by a higher being whom they cannot fully comprehend.

It is ambiguous in *The Flight from the Enchanter* whether Mischa Fox does have some godlike plan for the other characters, or whether this is merely an illusion. In either case, however, he flags up ethical questions surrounding authority, and his presence indicates the presence of the author. Whereas Felicity in *The Sandcastle* unknowingly predicts the end of that novel, Mischa is shown to have a clearer comprehension of later events in *The Flight* and thus access to Murdoch's writerly knowledge – seen, for example, in his accurate prophecy that a bilingual stone will soon be found to decipher Peter Seward's hieroglyphics (209).

Speaking of a similarly godlike character in *An Unofficial Rose*, Nuttall tells us: "Emma Sands who brings about a seemingly spontaneous love relationship, is a half-sinister Prospero" (Introduction 2); this statement recognises the character as drawn from one of Shakespeare's magician figures. Emma, described in the novel as "witch-like" (171), is assigned divine status in the first chapter by the adoring Hugh, and continually manipulates the experiences of those around her, engineering romances and allowing the other characters to orbit her. Much as Randall, one of Emma's victims, worries that his affair with the beautiful Lindsay is a trick concocted by Emma (124), so is the reader never certain how far Emma's teleological manipulation has extended into the plot and how far we too are being tricked by her in our understanding of the story. She is also a writer of detective novels, forging an allegiance with Murdoch as author.

These authorial presences in Murdoch's fiction underscore her anxieties over writers' hegemony and characters' freedom. Jack Stewart has hinted at Murdoch's failure to engender a Shakespearean level of freedom in *The Unicorn*, commenting that the character of Hannah Crean-Smith:

has played the God-game, submitted to the very temptation that might seduce an author into omniscient control. For subliminally it is the author who plays God with her characters, although Murdoch wants (impossibly) to release them into their freedom, breaking the spell of Gaze Castle at the end of the novel, as Prospero breaks his wand at the end of *The Tempest*. (88-9)

Authorship, for Murdoch, was ethically tricky, entangled with issues of egocentricity and artifice. In “Art is the Imitation of Nature”, she wrote that “Art is an attempt to achieve omnipotence through personal fantasy” (251), and added that, due to concealing their own obsessions in their work, “artists are tricksters” (251). But the tricksters in her novels are also artists, engaging with the construction of the text and using their boundary-crossing abilities to probe varying degrees of character independence.

Murdoch’s tricksters are thus luminous amidst her characters and fundamental to her narratives, from the sensitive marginal figures engaging with magic, to the mutations of particular Shakespearean characters who highlight a perceived deficiency in Murdoch’s work, to the figures modelled upon traditional trickster tropes, who are the driving forces behind her plots. Ultimately, each of Murdoch’s trickster-types brings an element of metafiction to her work, metafiction being “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh, *Metafiction* 2); characters such as Felicity, Denis Nolan and Mischa Fox flag up Murdoch’s work as a literary object, testing the narrative’s limits and posing important questions about the nature of art. They aided Murdoch’s understanding of the nature of fiction, in particular probing the separation between author and art – an endeavour which is perhaps clearest in a scene from *The Bell*.

### ***The Bell* and the Presence of the Reader**

Like Felicity’s spell in *The Sandcastle*, this scene represents the author’s act of creating fiction, being situated towards the end of the novel, merging magic and artifice and portending the later narrative events. As Felicity performs magic on the beach, this scene takes place by a lake, with the meeting of land and water signalling the boundary between fiction and reality. In *The Bell*, two characters – Dora, pertinently an artist and an outsider to the religious community in which she

has found herself, conforming to the first type of trickster considered in this chapter, and Toby, a troubled youth – haul a huge, ancient bell, rumoured to have magical properties, from a moonlit lake. After they have done so, the bell chimes once (229), which, according to local legend, as we have been told earlier in the novel (39), portends a death; this curse is later fulfilled with Nick Fawley's suicide. Thus, in their clumsy capture of the bell, Dora and Toby unwittingly seem to exert a magical influence over later narrative events, similar to Felicity's drawing of Tarot cards and chiming with the authorial control of plot.

The relic's discovery therefore parallels the manufacturing of Murdoch's fourth novel, and, indeed, the novel's being named *The Bell* further intimates the physical bell to be analogous to the literary artefact. The scene suggests a twisted nativity: "A heaving struggle began. . . . A fearful dragging could be heard, or perhaps felt, in that pandemonium it was hard to say which, upon the floor of the lake. Enormous bubbles were breaking the surface" (226), until, eventually, "an immense bulk rose slowly from the lake" (227). This is a description of a birth, and the bell's "muted boom" (229) upon being brought to land is an infant's first cry. However, while many writers would likely compare the creative process to a difficult birth, in *The Bell*, the product of the midnight nativity is something manmade and pre-existing, undermining the naturalness of birth and subscribing to Murdoch's perception of art as magical in a problematically synthetic way. While Peter Edgerly Firchow has spoken of Murdoch's bell as "undoubtedly the traditional symbol of religious or spiritual expression" (179), I would suggest that the object, in contrast, signifies the tricky form of magic with which Murdoch associated most art. It is carved with biblical scenes (228) and bears a reference to the Angel Gabriel (229), but this spiritual element is undermined by Dora and Toby's having sex inside the bell (229): a very earthly, human act. Its presence thus seems to instigate physical transgression rather than spiritual rapture, and there is something demonic about the bell, from its carvings depicting eyes staring "out of square faces and a scene of squat figures" (228), to the description of the event as a "pandemonium" hinting at the Hell of *Paradise Lost*, to the bell's situation in local folklore and superstition. As art, for Murdoch, was an illusion of truth, so is the bell an illusion of religion: a synthetic object which might as easily be used as a theatrical prop as theological tool. Dora and Toby consider it "a thing from another world" (228); rather than this indicating the bell to have come from

Heaven, such a description might suggest the bell to be separated from the characters' world due to its metafictional quality: moving from water to land, it is from the world of the author and reader, and it symbolises the narrative of *The Bell* as an artefact, drawing attention to the materiality of the novel.

In a later scene, returning to visit the bell, Dora “was struck again by the marvel of its resurrection and she felt reverence for it, almost love” (275); this feeling soon turns to fear, however: “[Dora] had thought to be its master and make it her plaything, but now it was mastering her and would have its will” (277). Adhering to Murdoch’s notions on freedom, Dora’s “almost love” for the bell indicates her nearly comprehending its separation from her, but she is subsequently overwhelmed and repelled by the idea that something other than herself can be real. To Murdoch, a good work of art should become autonomous, breaking away from its creator to embody qualities that are not present in the artist; there should be a space between the writer and his writing, which Murdoch found in Shakespearean plays and coveted in other fiction.

The gap between author and fiction – in particular, fictional characters – has repeatedly been considered throughout this chapter. Murdoch and Bayley deemed it necessary for characters to break from their creator in order to achieve freedom, but also regarded this as difficult and magical. This point is also important in relation to the reader, for the text occupies a space between author and reader and consequently includes aspects of both – an idea discussed in Murdoch’s essay “Art is the Imitation of Nature”:

One might say that art is the prime producer of illusory unities. It seems to unify the personalities of both the artist and of his client, and this, I think, is one of the deep attractions of art, that it gathers together the personality of the creator and the personality of the reader into a sense of unified significance which may, of course, be very momentary. (251)

Such a concept further complicates the issue of freedom of characters, suggesting both artist and receiver to be complicit in the creation of art: thus, even if characters are realistic enough to be autonomous of their author, there is still the danger that they will be imprisoned by the mind of the reader, who will impose their own preoccupations and interpretations onto the characters. Consequently, “The work of art is then a magical pseudo-object . . . placed between the artist and the client whereby they can both separately, pursue their private fantasy lives unchecked” (Murdoch, “The Fire and the Sun” 421). Murdoch called the artist and



his client “a wicked co-operating pair” (“Art is the Imitation of Nature” 251) and stressed that their interaction usually resulted in the artificial type of magic – an “illusory unity” – that hindered characters’ freedom. In *Under the Net*, the trickster Hugo likens art to a firework: “an ephemeral spurt of beauty of which in a moment nothing more was left” (61). His career as a fireworks manufacturer thus subtly parallels Murdoch’s career in art, and he is further signposted as involved in the production of narratives through his owning a film studio. A firework might be understood as tricky theatrical magic, or an illusion, and its ephemerality chimes with Murdoch’s perception of art as a “very momentary” collusion between artist and receiver. A fictional character, then, risks being a fusion of the personalities of author and reader: an illusion rather than an autonomous being.

Nevertheless, the trickster figure may have offered Murdoch a potential path to characters’ freedom. Earlier in this chapter, it was suggested that Felicity’s invisible familiar Angus, who is complicit in her act of magic, represents the presence of the future reader. The scene thus shows Felicity, the writer, and Angus, the reader, working together to create fiction. Yet, Felicity is also a character within *The Sandcastle*, and her ability to see Angus suggests her to have an awareness of the reader that might be crucial to her freedom. Indeed, many of the tricksters discussed in this chapter acknowledge the reader in some way, such as the twisted Shakespearean characters’ implicitly relying on the reader’s knowledge of Shakespeare. If these trickster characters are able to sense the presence of the reader, then this suggests them to have an element of separation from the reader, an aspect of self-awareness that potentially allows them freedom.

The trickster’s ability to perceive the reader or audience can be traced back to the Renaissance stage; indeed, Julie Sanders observes that:

There is a conscious construction in Murdoch novels of readers as onlookers, as audience to events, and as an active rather than passive audience, of whom judgement, with all its attendant confusions, is demanded. In early modern drama, the particular theatrical manifestations of this requirement include prologues, epilogues and other forms of direct address to the audience such as soliloquy, as well as the trope of the overhearing scene. (103)

As has been discussed in this thesis’s introduction, the early modern technique of directly addressing the audience is always performed by a trickster character; Richard Hillmann has described Shakespearean tricksters’ “notorious self-

disclosing . . . soliloquies – soliloquies that, as has often been observed, by taking the audience into the characters’ confidence, establish a potent complicity” (47). Echoing Murdoch’s thoughts, Hillmann outlines that such Shakespearean tricksters rely upon “the lexis of witchcraft” (188). While it is only Murdoch’s narrators who address the reader directly, Miranda’s destructive ritual in *An Unofficial Rose* might be seen as a form of soliloquy through its solitary and revelatory elements: it is not until now that we learn of her love for Felix. Thus, this scene is metafictional not only through its allusion to the construction of fiction, but also through its implicit acknowledgement of the presence of the reader: an acknowledgement that may indicate Miranda’s potential freedom. Caliban’s agency in *The Sea and the Mirror* reflects how Auden “cared a great deal about the interplay of the artist and audience in general” (Izzo 25) by highlighting the entanglement of author, character and audience in theatre, but in Murdoch’s work trickster characters involve the reader in order more specifically to reach for independence. By including characters that draw attention to the interplay between author and reader – so that, as Berthoff notes, reading Murdoch feels like “an act of participation” (332) – Murdoch allows such characters to stand apart from the creative process.

It is worth reflecting on the way that Murdoch’s interest in the reader’s role in crafting fiction – something she shared with Bayley, who propounded that “The relation between the writer’s consciousness and the reader’s is highly complex but highly important” (*The Characters* 12) – seems to complement the field of reader-response criticism, which became especially influential in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, Murdoch’s sentiments seem to parallel Roland Barthes’ belief that “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (*S/Z* 4); however, Murdoch did not deem the involvement of the reader to be a goal of the work of literature, but rather an inevitability. Similarly, Georges Poulet, as summarized by Tompkins, conceived the literary text as “a magical object that allows the interiority of one human being to play host to the interiority of another” (xiv); he argued that an “other” arose in his consciousness when he read, which was neither a part of himself nor wholly related to the text’s author, but rather a separate subject that “presides over the work [and] . . . can exist only in the work” (Poulet 46). While Murdoch considered the “magical” merging of author and reader often to limit

characters' freedom, her trickster characters suggest that this merging can, sometimes, beget the sort of autonomy discussed by Poulet – as seemingly recognised by Jennifer Green-Lewis and Margaret Soltan, who briefly state: “Writers like Georges Poulet and Iris Murdoch have argued that in the aesthetic transaction, one loses oneself . . . because one enters into a wholly other consciousness” (5). Thus, although differing from the views of Barthes and Poulet on certain key points, Murdoch’s notions of art have an affinity with reader-response criticism and suggest that the trickster could be useful in this scholarly field. Her philosophical essays mentioned in this chapter were published from the late 1950s through to the 1970s, but her novels of the 1950s demonstrate such concerns to have been always present in her fiction.

As a final point on Murdoch’s use of tricksters to express tension between the fiction and the reader or writer, I want to add that expanses of water in Murdoch’s novels often seem to signify the “real” world beyond the confines of the narrative, and that her trickster characters’ penchant for the borders between land and water reflects their liminal position between the fiction and the world of the reader or writer. Felicity casts her spell on a beach; Denis Nolan is a “fish man”; Dora and Toby rescue their bell from a lake; and Mischa Fox, in a moment of distress, drives to the coast and stares “at the waves like a man cornered by a strange animal. Terror and fascination were upon his brow” (*The Flight* 201). If Mischa, whose Italian house is also beside the sea (*The Flight* 271), does possess the divine knowledge that other characters attribute to him, then perhaps this knowledge is his awareness, like Auden’s Caliban, of his status as a fictional character poised between author and reader.

## **Conclusion**

Iris Murdoch thus appears to have consciously used trickster figures to address concerns over the ethics of creating fiction. Interested by modern trends in the paranormal, in theatrical rituals such as Tarot and telepathy, she viewed her creative process through a lens of tricky stage-magic and included magical scenes in her early novels as a means of visualising this. These scenes include Felicity’s ritual in *The Sandcastle*, Miranda’s destructive outburst in *An Unofficial*

Rose and Dora and Toby's discovery of the bell in *The Bell*: all of which incorporate synthetic props that allude to the formal contrivances of most writers.

In contrast to this magical trickery, Shakespeare's work was, to Murdoch, transcendent magic. In an effort to highlight her artistic distance from him and flag up the difficulty she experienced in writing her own fiction, Murdoch twisted specific Shakespearean characters to make problematized, "artificial" imitations of the playwright's originals. Her particular use of Caliban suggests that this endeavour may have been influenced by Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, which uses this Shakespearean figure to examine the relationship between art, magic and freedom of characters. Freedom was a crucial concern for Murdoch too, who believed that characters required an aspect of separation from their creator in order to be truly free: a difficult feat for a writer to achieve. Characters' freedom was made even harder to attain by the necessities of narrative form – an obstacle which perhaps only Shakespeare was able to fully conquer, his plays miraculously embracing both free characters and a strict artistic form. Murdoch felt that Shakespeare's characters overcame the constraints of form and preoccupations of their author to become independent beings, while her own characters were limited by her personality and the exigencies of narrative.

While Conradi has explored Murdoch's concern over form and freedom through the battles between saints and artists in her fiction, with neither figure triumphing, this chapter has shown there to be a strong trickster tradition in Murdoch's novels which enabled her to think about her artistic concerns in various different ways. Indeed, the tricksters in her writing can be separated into three types: the sensitive outsider, the warped Shakespearean character and the interpretation of a traditional trickster trope. Of these three, it is the last type of trickster that most obviously enabled Murdoch to probe the freedom of characters, through exploring the trickster's proclivity for being simultaneously a boundary-crosser and limited to a stock-character. Though at times nuanced, for example by Miranda's being both a Shakespearean mutation and engaging in tricky magic, the three trickster types in Murdoch's work used different methods to explore the limitations of artifice: the sensitive outsiders flag up the materiality of art, the twisted Shakespearean figures underscore Murdoch's apparent authorial restrictions, and "typical" tricksters probe the boundary between form and autonomy. Murdoch's tricksters are also used to ponder the problematically

magical collusion of the author and reader in creating fiction, and the risk of fictional characters being imprisoned by either or both of these personalities. My chapter finally suggested that the trickster's traditional ability to break the fourth wall and acknowledge the audience allowed Murdoch to conceive characters that could sense the presence of the reader and thus stand independent of him or her, acquiring a sort of freedom. Ultimately, Murdoch appears to have consciously apprehended the trickster figure and used him in her fiction in a more traditional way than Elizabeth Bowen or Elizabeth Taylor. Her tricksters shine through her writing, illuminating the artificiality of her text, blurring the boundary between fiction and reality and challenging the ethics of character-creation.

## Chapter 5. “Up the Garden Path”: Protection, Deception and Devilry in Muriel Spark’s Trickster

### Introduction

At the age of fifteen, Muriel Spark was presented with two books at a school prize-giving: *The Oxford Book of Ballads* and Walter Scott’s *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Spark would later recall reading these books “many times with increasing wonder; they entered my cognition as well as my emotional system, to stay there” (“My Book of Life” 58). In particular, she was drawn to the elusive characters she discovered on the pages:

The characters who peopled these ballads seemed to me, . . . microcosmic examples of real people whom I would expect to meet later in life, and essentially, did. They were a mysterious and irrational blend of people who could and would use their power to the utmost drop of blood, and those who, out of pure nobility, would refrain from using their power at all except for good. . . . I have learned, am still learning, much more from life, but the basics of the *Ballads* go through all my works and ways of apprehending. (“My Book of Life” 58-59).

Reminiscent of Elizabeth Bowen’s finding real-life “prototypes” in her childhood reading, Spark found in the ballads characters who could at once be “mysterious and irrational” and correspond to a particular type. These characters would shape her “ways of apprehending” people, both those met “in life” and those imagined in her fiction, as strange and contradictory yet also complying with a fixed model. Spark’s conceptualisation of character owed a crucial debt to types and themes found in traditional literature – in magical, timeworn genres such as these Scottish ballads.<sup>1</sup> She even looked to the Old Testament:

not so much for religious consolation, as I was brought up to think proper, as for sheer enjoyment of the literature. So much poetry, so many literary forms, such wonderful stories. And, from a novelist’s point of view, what clearly delineated characters. . . . Few works of world literature contain so many great, wild and precise characters as appear in both the Old and the

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<sup>1</sup> Her writer’s notebook for *Memento Mori*, a novel with an elderly cast of characters, contains a plethora of quotations on the topic of ageing from sources such as Plato’s *The Republic* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Accession 10989), including: “The satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams” (Shakespeare, *Ham.* 2.2.196-200). This particular quotation seems pertinent in that, at this point in the play, Hamlet is pretending to criticise a literary stereotype while actually endorsing its accuracy; Spark, it appears from the above quotation on Scottish ballads, also recognised truth in types.

New Testament. Students of creative writing should study them. (“The Books I Re-Read and Why” 144).

Here, Spark again relishes the characters that are “wild” yet also “clearly delineated” and “precise”. Her own novels are pervaded by highly tricky personalities that have been a source of fascination for critics, being viewed as “god-shapes” (Stonebridge and MacKay 4), “manipulators” (Whittaker 97) and “authorial puppets” (Gregson 104): problematic beings with roots in the supernatural or metafictional. Intimating a reliance on traditional tropes, Gregson has identified how “Spark enjoys placing her characters in reductive categories” (106), and yet her creations are rounded enough to have attracted a profusion of critical speculation around their autobiographical status; her characters are simultaneously stock-figures and nuanced beings.

Spark thus appears to have had a deep interest in the sort of character types that might be called tricksters and the contradictions that are found within them. This chapter illustrates that, furthermore, the figure of the trickster, with its apparently biblical and folkloric roots, was fundamental to her fiction as it provided a way for her to express her complicated perception of the morality surrounding truth and lies. The chapter begins by tracing an aesthetic of general trickiness in Spark’s life and art, exploring her notions about truth, fiction and authorship, and how these related to her ardent but unconventional form of Catholicism, before demonstrating the ways in which these unusual beliefs were confidently expressed through use of specific trickster characters. Focussing on her early novels, this chapter argues that the trickster, in various incarnations, allowed Spark to protect her personal life from the reading public, to defend her authorial position and, ultimately, to conceptualise evil and its position within society.

### **Privacy, Protective Trickery and Types of Truth**

In her 1992 autobiography, Spark described undergoing an inner transition towards the end of the Second World War, long before becoming a novelist. Up until this moment, she had sensed herself to be “‘gaining experience’ for some future literary work” (*Curriculum Vitae* 154), but now “felt the need to ‘give experience’”, explaining: “I wanted to offer more of my own personality than hitherto, and give something of the same effect of ‘experience’ that I received. . .

. I longed to write poems and essays or perhaps a play that would be an experience to the reader" (*Curriculum Vitae* 155). In the mid-1940s, Spark was contemplating something which seems to have been a concern for her throughout her writing career: the way in which a writer's self is represented and communicated to their readership.

But Spark's professed desire to offer more of her own personality is puzzlingly at odds with her later stance, for she became famously protective of her private life, fixated on controlling her public image, renowned for "her resistance to becoming a biographical subject" (Goldie 15). This defensiveness became a source of frustration for critics, and she acquired the reputation "of a recluse: a mysterious figure whose autobiographical file was anorexic" (Stannard xv). *Curriculum Vitae*, her long-anticipated autobiography of 1992, disappointed readers, failing to deliver the coveted answers about Spark's past and tracing her life no further than 1957. Brian Cheyette explains that the autobiography was written in response to Derek Stanford's largely-fabricated biography of Spark (*Muriel Spark* 4), and, certainly, Spark was frequently outraged by inaccurate portrayals of her, asserting, for instance, that both Stanford and former interviewer Lorna Sage had "put out malicious inventions and innuendoes" about her (Accession 11344). *Curriculum Vitae* announced that it would "put the record straight" (11), and, as Stannard notes, "reveals only as much information as is necessary for correction and discreetly clouds the rest with neutral facts" (xvii). The autobiography details trivial memories but downplays larger events such as Spark's Catholic conversion and nervous breakdown. This focus on minutiae is evident in enquiries Spark made while writing *Curriculum Vitae*: she wrote separately to two former schoolmates in order to confirm that the tree blossom outside their school had been a fusion of white and dark pink (Accession 11344), and told her editor, "I want to make a really accurate book" (Accession 11344). The published book claimed to contain "nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or eyewitnesses" (11), its tone being of reportage rather than confession. During an interview, Spark addressed the book's avoidance of personality, stating: "I decided not to put anything in from [just] my memory" ("An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark" 130) and admitting that "perhaps it's not emotional enough" for some critics ("An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark" 131). Indeed, the work was so impersonal that an old friend wrote to tell Spark: "you



give away little of yourself. You must be a very private person, and no one would guess at the real you behind the book. I think you are in hiding” (Cowell, Accession 11344).

Endeavouring to control and limit the public’s understanding of her, Spark refused many interviews,<sup>2</sup> declaring that “Discussions of my ideas and beliefs are not in my line” (Accession 11344), forbade any television adaptations of her autobiography, despite enjoying dramatizations of her fiction,<sup>3</sup> and rued inviting Stannard to write a biography of her (noted by Goldie 15 and Allen). When approached by a student wishing to ask about the veracity of Stanford’s biography, Spark promptly replied informing the student that Stanford’s work was “substantially false or mistaken” and adding: “I also think you should concentrate on my books rather than on my biography. I am sure you are intelligent enough to approach my work directly” (Accession 11344). Her work, she seems to have felt, should be read for its own merit, not as something informed by its author; and, in *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark distanced her fiction from her personal history, with the autobiography, as noted by Cheyette, tending only “to establish what Spark regards as purely factual links between her novels and her life-history” (*Muriel Spark* 4). Privacy was imperative to Spark even to the extent that she was dismissive of and uncomfortable with the thought of psychoanalysis (Gardiner and Maley 2 and Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* 138), seemingly wary of those wishing to probe another person’s background.

Yet, David Goldie has recognised Spark’s fierce protection of her personal affairs as “surprising” when placed alongside the numerous biographies she wrote of other writers (8), from Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë to John Masefield. It might be added that Spark’s biography of Mary Shelley identified persons from Shelley’s life as characters in *The Last Man* (*Mary Shelley* 182-183), clashing with her advice to Cottu to study fiction without drawing on the author’s biography. Further to this, her emphasis on privacy, and her call for distinctions to be made between herself and her work, seem at odds with that initial artistic impulse to write in order to put forward her personality and her experience, and her decision

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<sup>2</sup> Including for the BBC’s 1965 *Modern Novelists* series (addressed in Kermode, Accession 10607 Spark), and the BBC’s 1990 *Writer’s Revealed* series (addressed in Spark, Accession 11344 Coombes).

<sup>3</sup> Spark’s companion Penelope Jardine wrote that “Muriel likes to have her fiction dramatised, but she can’t cooperate with the idea of televising her autobiography” (Fax to Daisy Goodwin).

to interpolate obvious fictional representations of herself into her novels. In *The Comforters*, Caroline Rose's hallucinations mirror those experienced by Spark in 1954, while in *Loitering with Intent*, Fleur Talbot's experiences of writing her first novel and working for the shady – and pertinently named – Autobiographical Association in the early 1950s echo Spark's experiences working for the Poetry Society at the start of her literary career. Other notably autobiographical characters include Charmian Piper, the ageing novelist in *Memento Mori*, and Sandy in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, whose school life and conversion to Catholicism parallel those of Spark. In *The Girls of Slender Means*, the May of Teck Club is a depiction of the Helena Club to which Spark belonged. Spark's autobiographical mythos is difficult to ignore. Still, as Ali Smith has noted, "It never really helps to consider Spark's work autobiographically" (xi), as these characters are not Spark and, by close reading them as straightforward representations of their author, we are being tricked into establishing a false impression of her: as Goldie observes, "Spark's characterisation teases the reader into a game of recognition and misrecognition" (13).

It might be argued that Spark's decision to use quasi-autobiographical characters in this way stemmed from her unusual conception of truth. Stannard, in his biography of Spark, relates how:

Promoting *Loitering [with Intent]* in a rare TV interview<sup>4</sup> . . . Muriel had denied any connection between Fleur Talbot and herself. Frank Delaney, her questioner, was puzzled by this. 'But she did a lot of things which I suspect you must have done in your time.' 'Yes.' 'So therefore how is it not autobiographical?' 'It wasn't autobiographical because she didn't do the things, she did the *sort* of things.' Pause. Laughter from the audience. 'That's unfair.' 'It isn't really, because in a court of law . . . in fact this character did not exist. . . . I did not do these things that I say she did in the book.' Delaney left it at that with, 'Yes, I'm surprised you didn't call it *Up the Garden Path*' – and passed on. (483)

Delaney here expresses a sense of being tricked by Spark and her deceptively "autobiographical" character. Before she became a writer, Spark's career was rooted in deception. During the Second World War, while Bowen spied on the Irish for the Ministry of Information, Muriel Spark worked for the Foreign Office on a project named "Operation Overlord", which broadcast phoney German radio programmes to German troops, peppered with snippets of misinformation

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<sup>4</sup> This interview was broadcast by BBC2 on 21 November 1983.

designed to corrode the enemy's morale. They were, as Stannard puts it, "the department of dirty tricks" (65). In an interview with Benjamin Ivry, Spark described how her wartime work had shaped her ideas about truth: "I learned a lot about fiction, which is what making propaganda is, [and about] the nature of satire. I also learned about truth. Fiction isn't truth. It's a type of writing from which some form of truth emerges" ("Knowing at Second Hand"). Spark is here repeating a sentiment she expressed in an earlier interview with Frank Kermode: "I don't claim that my novels are truth – I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges" ("The House of Fiction" 142). Her contention that "Fiction isn't truth" but is instead issues a "form of truth" intimates truth itself to be something divisible; for Spark, there was an objective truth, presumably the empirical facts to which her "really accurate" autobiography was limited, but there also existed something else, a shadow of verity which could depart from fact. This was the form of truth found in quasi-autobiographical characters, who, by doing "the sort of things" that Spark herself had done, allowed her to express and explore her own personality in her fiction while simultaneously misdirecting readers from her actual biography, acting as decoy Muriel Sparks who allowed their author to retain her privacy. Lewis MacLeod's 2008 essay on Spark has suggested her works to depict numerous overlapping forms of truth, reflecting a postmodern "collapse of strong truth-claims" (590); however, this chapter will conversely suggest that Spark, impelled by her religious convictions, saw truth to separate into two distinct forms.

The idea that Spark saw the semi-autobiographical aspects of her fiction as a "form of truth" rather than trickery seems to correspond with her relationship to the Catholic faith. In particular, she was devoted to the works of John Henry Newman, referencing him as the cause of her conversion ("The Sermons of Newman" 179), which might suggest the source of her curious view of truth. Newman's controversial idea that "in certain cases a lie is the nearest approach to the truth" (Newman 229n4),<sup>5</sup> preached in an 1843 sermon and published the same year, was pounced upon by Charles Kingsley and used in a polemic against its author, condemning Newman's ambiguous theory of verity. As P. J. FitzPatrick outlines, the context of Newman's initial statement was "the problem of

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<sup>5</sup> In the same note, Newman indicated that it was in fact "an hyperbole" to call such a – tricky – form of approach a "lie".

communicating religious knowledge in a necessarily imperfect form to unbelievers or beginners. The teacher must sometimes state his message in a way which, though inaccurate by mature standards of discourse, will less mislead” (95). While Newman believed there to be an objective “truth” in life (see “Newman: Saint or Sinner?”), he apparently felt that novices were often most easily led to this truth by explanations not wholly accurate in themselves. Similarly, Spark’s semi-autobiographical characters, while ostensibly imprecise portrayals of their author, may in fact have communicated a greater truth about Spark. By doing the “sort of things” that she did rather than the actual ones, they explore the actions she may have taken in various scenarios and thus tap into a deeper essence of their author’s personality and capability, probing potential incarnations of Spark which may have been, had circumstances been different.

Spark appears to have taken the same approach when crafting characters based upon persons she knew. Writing to an old school-friend about her 1961 novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, she acknowledged that the eponymous character was modelled on their former schoolteacher: “The character was based of course on Christina Kay, though it was much mythologised for the fictional occasion. Even so, I think I caught some of the potentialities if not the actualities of Miss Kay” (Accession 11344). Jean Brodie, it seems, was intended to crystallise the essence of Christina Kay by encapsulating her potential rather than her biography. To another school-friend, Spark wrote: “You were right in recognising Miss Kay [in Jean Brodie]. . . . I loved her dearly. Naturally, for the purposes of fiction, the reality had to undergo a sea-change” (Accession 11344); here, the allusion to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*<sup>6</sup> frames Spark’s transformation of Miss Kay as rather magical and tricky,<sup>7</sup> with the fictionalised version of her implied to be a sort of untouchable figure. Spark further expounded on the nature of her transformation in a third letter: “my portraits of Miss Kay, Mr Couling, and a few others, are dramatized to meet the exigencies of fiction. At the same time, I feel that children are often more perceptive than their elders think. In this way I was conscious of depicting not an actuality, but a potentiality never realized, in the truly wonderful Christina Kay” (Accession 11344).

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Tempest*, Ariel – falsely – tells Ferdinand that Alonso is dead: “Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes: / Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange” (1. 2.400-405).

<sup>7</sup> Notably, Shakespeare’s Prospero calls Ariel “My tricky spirit” (*Tmp.* 5.1. 227).

The “form of truth” that emerged through fictionalised versions of real people was thus one of “potentiality” rather than of fact: a truth that could only be realised through fiction, echoing Newman’s idea of ostensible lies often being the clearest route to truth. In *Loitering with Intent* – a novel published in 1981, a little later than the focus of this thesis, yet relevant through its being a fictionalised account of Spark’s life in the early 1950s – the narrator, Fleur, discovers that the events of the novel she is writing – with characters based upon her own acquaintances – begin to come true, perhaps underscoring fiction’s ability to contrive a new sense of reality while also, as Haddox proposes, illuminating “the dangers and cruelty of confusing life with art” (49). Meanwhile, in Spark’s 1958 novel *Robinson*, the narrator, stranded on a desert island, repeatedly likens her new companions to her old acquaintances (53, 80, 117, 137), and tries to mimic their physical demeanours in order to gain an insight into their minds (116), later admitting that this method is “distorted, never quite untrue, never entirely true” (137): there is a sense of dispersed identity here which demonstrates how characters can capture aspects of other persons without actually being them.

Furthermore, Spark’s use of the term “sea-change”, with its connotations of magic, to describe rebirthing real persons into fiction implies her to have a strange, supernatural sort of skill as a writer. Cheyette has proposed that “Fiction, for Spark, is always essentially a distortion, a true lie that arbitrarily fixes meaning. This impure fusion of reason and intuition, truth and lies, remains at the core of her art and beliefs” (*Muriel Spark* 32-33); the word “intuition” seems salient here, paralleling Spark’s suggestion that she had retained a “perceptive” quality from childhood that allowed her to capture Christina Kay’s potential. One of her semi-autobiographical stories includes a passage with a similar theory about childhood knowledge:

all of the young of the human species are born omniscient. Babies, in their waking hours, know everything that is going on everywhere in the world; they can tune in to any conversation they choose, switch on to any scene. We have all experienced this power. It is only after the first year that it is brainwashed out of us, for it is demanded of us by our immediate environment that we grow to be of use to it in a practical way. (Spark, *Muriel Spark* 430)

This notion is redolent of the ideas found in fantastical children’s tales of the early twentieth-century, such as Travers’s *Mary Poppins*, in which Mary Poppins explains that all infants are able to speak to animals and to understand “what the

trees say and the language of the sunlight and the stars” until they grow up and forget (121), and Barrie’s *Peter Pan and Wendy*, in which children possess an understanding of the supernatural that adults lack. The passage seems to outline an intuitive form of understanding: a magical omniscience rather similar to Bowen’s fairy-tale form of discourse, which is at odds with the socially constructed need for practicality.

I want to suggest that Spark considered herself privy to a similar form of instinct – an almost supernatural intuition enabling her to tap into the potential of people she met and realise their core essence. Speaking of her disregard for Freudian analysis, she stated that “it left too much unsaid”, adding, “I had an idea that there was such a thing as a ‘literary sense’, with which some readers or critics were endowed in addition to the normal five senses, and it was by this ‘sense’ that one should judge literature” (*Curriculum Vitae* 138); this idea is rather like Elizabeth Taylor’s first reading of Freud while a school pupil, which, as mentioned in a footnote in Chapter Three of this thesis, caused her to declare that Freudian theory was merely “things I know already” (qtd. in Liddell 36).

Thus, good fiction stemmed from instinct rather than study, and Spark certainly believed herself to be endowed with this “literary sense”. In her essay “How I Became a Novelist”, she professed, “I soon found that novel-writing was the easiest thing I had ever done” (76), and stressed that her initial drafts generally needed minimal revision (77); as Anne Lamott puts it, Spark “felt she was taking dictation from God” when writing (22). Her sense of being able to tap into a divine understanding through fiction seems to have been intensified by her conversion to Catholicism, which she claimed helped make it “possible” for her to become a novelist due to allowing her “to see life as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected happenings” (“How I Became a Novelist” 75). But Spark also felt herself to have been unusually intuitive since childhood, gaining a reputation amongst her acquaintances as having an almost supernatural strangeness. Stannard tells us:

This ‘strangeness’ about Muriel was often remarked on by those who knew her. Some described it as a kind of ‘second sight’. They noticed the coincidence of her presence at serious accidents, the composure with which she dealt with them. Her Catholic friends believed her prayers to be particularly efficacious. Evelyn Waugh told his children to protect her because she was a saint. Shirley Hazzard always . . . believed that somehow things happened, odd things, when [Muriel] was around. (36)

Meanwhile, Spark's lover Derek Stanford would write to her requesting "that lock of your hair you mentioned to me. I need so many talismen [sic], and yours are the strongest I could carry with me. I am, as you know, like yourself, superstitious". Stanford's letter implies him to have viewed Spark as magical, and it also mentions her superstitious beliefs – a tendency likely inherited from her mother, who, Stannard notes (27-28), was highly superstitious and engaged in pagan practices.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it was her witnessing of these magical rituals that prompted Spark, as a child, to become "subversive" – "a problem creator . . . [who] revelled in paradox" (Stannard 22). Stannard seems to suggest that she deliberately cultivated her reputation for being strange and magical, describing "her multiplicity" (xxv) and "her capacity to reinvent herself . . . During any one day she could flick on and off between various personae. . . . She broke all the rules, the mistress of constant surprise. She liked to astonish and to entertain, refused to be whatever anyone wanted her to be" (xxv-xxvi).

Spark, therefore, promoted the idea of herself as tricky, intuitive and able to access a form of truth unavailable to most people. In *Robinson*, the narrator observes a magazine advertisement for "MURIEL THE MARVEL with her X-ray eyes. *Can read your very soul*" (61), perhaps hinting at Spark's supposed ability to capture a person's core essence. She certainly appears to have viewed herself as gifted in instinct, and, furthermore, her career in fiction to have been fated. This can be seen in her treatment of the event that she claimed first led her to become a writer: an event which she also revisited as a means of exploring her communion with the truth of potential.

McQuillan summarises how:

one night during the summer of 1944, while unable to return to her lodgings in the countryside due to the cancellation of trains, as the result of an air raid, Muriel Spark spent the night in the house of the poet Louis MacNeice. . . . Spark had been offered a night's accommodation by a fellow traveller, who was the nanny to MacNeice's children, while the owners of the house were away for the weekend. At the time of the invitation to this house Spark was unaware of either the name or profession of the house owner. It was only during her stay there that she realized (from letters, book inscriptions, photographs) who owned the house. In subsequent writing Spark says that this singular experience in the house of Louis MacNeice encouraged her to start her career as a professional writer. (78)

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<sup>8</sup> In Spark's *Robinson* (8), the narrator's grandmother recites the same superstitious chant to the new moon as the one Stannard has recorded Spark's mother to have spoken (27).

Spark would explore this incident through both fiction and non-fiction, in her 1960 short story “The House of the Famous Poet” (see Spark, *All the Stories*) – which she started writing in 1952 (Spark, “Comment” 66) – and her 1960 essay “The Poet’s House”. The essay, written for radio, was a factual account of the experience, while the short story transformed the night in MacNeice’s house into a magical tale, in which the narrator leaves the poet’s house only to discover the following day that it has been destroyed in an air-raid along with the poet and the servant who admitted the narrator. Spark seems to have been experimenting with two different forms of truth in relation to this incident: the factual essay conforming to the exigencies of objective truth, and the fictionalised version tapping into the greater essence of the experience. In the story, the destruction of the house following the narrator’s departure depicts the night’s events as fated, meaningful, an ephemeral glimpse into fairyland. While the narrated experiences deviate significantly from what actually happened to Spark, the tale more aptly expresses what the night had meant to her, crystallising her sense of being at the centre of something magical. In a drafted author’s note on these two pieces of writing, Spark explained:

For the factual piece I feel more ‘responsible’ than for the fiction. Or, rather, it would be more accurate and explanatory to say that, in writing generally, I am conscious of a responsibility towards society’s normal tenets of truth, while in fiction I feel that a deep and secret verity is involved, and that ‘responsibility’ here exists only in a kind of diligent and faithful surrender. (Accession 10989)

Thus, there was a difference between “society’s normal tenets of truth” and the “deep and secret verity” which could only be approached through fiction. Stannard, speaking of *Loitering with Intent*, suggests that “while it was true that literally the events of the novel were fictitious, it was also true that they accurately represented the spirit of crucial emotional events in Muriel’s life” (483); in the same way, “The House of the Famous Poet” tapped into an instinctive, emotional truth, rather than the truth of fact.

Nevertheless, Spark emphasised that the form of truth stemming from potentiality, which she deemed herself gifted in realising, must only be explored through works acknowledged as fiction; to insert subjectivities and assumptions into pieces claiming to be biographical was deception rather than truth. While Spark’s wartime work required her to create such deceptions, this was, she believed, for a cause that was ultimately good; outside of war, in the sphere of



biographical writing, "Lies are like fleas hopping from here to there, sucking the blood of the intellect" (*Curriculum Vitae* 11). Perhaps it was Spark's confident sense of understanding truth, its two distinct branches and its moral rubrics, that led her to feel qualified to write biographies, while not trusting others to write her own life story. At the same time, this view also appears to have been something that developed throughout her career, so that the convictions she held later in life rather contradict her suggestion, in 1950, that:

The sort of biographical writing that adheres relentlessly to fact, faithfully recounting all that undoubtedly happened and nothing that perhaps happened, can give a terribly distorted picture of the subject and times in question, because facts strung together present the truth only where simple people and events are involved; and the only people and events worth reading about are complex. ("Pensée: Biography" 112).

Such a statement clearly clashes with her 1992 autobiography's attempt to include nothing but verifiable fact. Her biographies were mainly written in the early 1950s; it seems likely that Spark's notions of truth altered later in this decade, when she discovered Catholicism and began to write novels, instigating a conceptual split between the objective truth required in life and the intuitive truth that could be probed within the confines of fiction. It might be suggested that Spark's religious conversion prompted her to consider real occurrences to be a part of God's narrative,<sup>9</sup> so that to embellish upon fact was to tamper with something divine and challenge God's authority, hence being a morally reprehensible act. Certainly, this is the idea articulated in a section of dialogue in Spark's 1959 novel *Memento Mori*, when Charmian, herself a writer, tells Guy that: "'the art of fiction is very like the practice of deception.' / 'And in life,' he said, 'is the practice of deception in life an art too?' / 'In life,' she said, 'everything is different. Everything is in the Providence of God'" (187-188). In order to understand this quotation more fully, it is important to explore Spark's stance on how writerly authority related to divine authority.

## God, Authority and *The Comforters*

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<sup>9</sup> In *Robinson*, the Catholic convert January Marlow deems it pointless to regret her choice of action (39), but does seem to repeatedly regret her choice of words (64, 71, 82), suggesting that, while God controls the unfolding of events, human authority may be had over the realm of language.

Muriel Spark's emphasis on privacy, and hesitation to be a biographical subject, was entwined with her notion of truth. To Spark, objective truth was imperative in real life, and, throughout her novelistic career, she came to condemn those who lied or made assumptions about other persons. In contrast, fiction seems to have had the liberty to expose a different form of truth: a truth of potentiality that enabled a person's ultimate essence to be expressed, and which Spark felt herself proficient in intuiting. This provided her with a way of exploring her own personality in writing and, simultaneously, protecting her private life from the public: she was able to probe possible incarnations of herself through characters who, though not Spark, did the "sort of things" that she might do.

If Spark, a committed Catholic, deemed God to author the events of real life, this presents questions about the ethics of writing fiction and "playing God" over her own characters. This thesis has illustrated Iris Murdoch's non-religious anxiety over the ethics of characters' freedom; meanwhile, numerous critics have focussed on Spark's treatment of freedom and authority, and debated how this related to her Catholicism. Her confident, detached mode of narration has led Randall Stevenson to reflect that "Of all later twentieth-century British novelists, it is probably the high-handed Spark who brings omniscient narrative into closest alignment with old faiths in an omniscient God" (101), while Haddox states that "At the center of Spark's aesthetic, . . . is an analogy between the control of an author over her work and the omnipotence of God" and considers Spark to be suggesting "that there is something morally problematic about fiction for that very reason, that an author's manipulation of her fictional characters comes perilously close to claiming a divine authority" (48). Bradbury, likewise, argues that an "analogy, between God and the novelist, is the basis of much of [Spark's] fictional speculation" ("Muriel Spark's Fingernails" 271). Conversely, Nicol posits that "God is not one of [Spark's] 'themes'" and "the figure of the author in Spark is in fact far from God-like. What we have instead is a deposed, humanized figure rather than a transcendent one; a small-scale, prurient, menacing entity, more like a stalker than a deity" ("Reading Spark" 113).

While agreeing with Nicol that the authorial presence in Spark's fiction is conveyed as too petty-natured to be divine, I want to suggest that this was precisely because of the religion that informed her writing: that Spark initially presented herself as flawed and human in order to highlight her distance from

God and thus settle any anxiety she might otherwise have felt over narrative authority – consequently, the analogy between God and the novelist was less important in her work than has previously been supposed. Waugh notes that “In most of Spark’s novels the author is flaunted as God in the novel, though necessarily a humanly fallible one” (*Metafiction* 120), and Lanchester adds that “The need to gesture at the fictionality of her fictions is . . . rooted in Spark’s Catholicism, and particularly in her wish not to compete with God” (viii). Yet, while Lanchester implies Spark to have had an anxiety over competing “with God”, no sense of anxiety appears explicitly in her work. Whereas Murdoch’s novels are peppered with musings on freedom which suggest an authorial concern, Spark’s fiction, with its confident omniscient tone, contrastingly intimates her enjoyment in testing her power over characters. Frank Kermode has observed that Spark’s first novel, *The Comforters*, “looks into the question of what kind of truth can be told in a novel” and indicates that “the novelist is, unlike God, free at the expense of his creatures” (“Muriel Spark” 268). Kermode also remarks that “None of the other books [by Spark] is so obviously an inquiry into the way fictions work” (“Muriel Spark” 269). Lodge, meanwhile, has stated:

The conclusion Mrs Spark seems to have drawn from that highly experimental first novel, however, is that since playing at being God is inherent in the business of making fictions one might as well make the most of it. Furthermore, there is all the difference in the world between pretending to omniscience in fiction and pretending to it in real life. (“The Uses” 141)

Although concurring with Lodge that Spark distinguished between authority in fiction and in life, I would argue that, far from accepting that she was “playing at being God”, Spark in *The Comforters* firmly established her artistic separation from God and her dealing with a different form of truth, thus liberating herself to experiment with characters and their destinies in subsequent novels without feeling anxiety.

In *The Comforters*, published in 1957, protagonist Caroline Rose begins to hear the narrative being read aloud by a disembodied voice – potentially Spark’s – which she terms the “Typing Ghost”. The early chapters of the novel seem deliberately to draw parallels between the Typing Ghost and God, before later undermining them in an apparent attempt to startle the reader into consciously registering the author’s humanness. At the start of *The Comforters*, Caroline’s recent conversion to Catholicism makes it seem probable that the

voice she hears is a divine one, thus placing Spark in the position of God. Furthermore, the novel's title, as noted by Carruthers (492), clearly alludes to the Book of Job – Caroline is patronised by her friends as Job is poorly comforted by his – which hints that, as the cause of her character's suffering, Spark is to Caroline as God is to Job, analogising the author with the Creator. Yet, whereas God's motives for testing Job are, Spark argued, entirely "good" and removed from human comprehension ("The Mystery" 196), the Typing Ghost is revealed to be incompetent, sullen and spiteful. Caroline rebels against the notion of being a fictional character, critiquing the Ghost's writing style and attempting to disrupt its plot – to which the Ghost responds with indignation. Ali Smith observes how:

The early and middle parts of the novel reveal Caroline's hurt feelings at the Typing Ghost writing off her reality – and also the Ghost's hurt feelings at Caroline's criticism of its lack of writerly talent. When Caroline challenges the Ghost's power as author and decides to go her own way, regardless of the plot, the Typing Ghost's vanity is ruffled. . . . Only Spark could so slyly, so hilariously, bend her form so as to have, on one page, her main character criticize her author for being too unimaginative to describe a hospital, then to follow it a page later with a full and unnecessary description of a hospital. (xiii)

The reader thus becomes aware of Spark's trick – is jolted into realising that, although Caroline may be hearing the voice of her creator, this creator lacks the divine benevolence of the Christian God. In an interview, Spark explained that she had initially considered the novel to be an "inferior" art form, and had thus written *The Comforters* "to work out the technique first, to sort of make it all right with myself to write a novel at all – a novel about writing a novel" ("The House of Fiction" 141). Perhaps this book also made it "all right" on an ethical level: by establishing at the start of her novelistic career that her form of creation was restricted to the world of fiction, and that she was not attempting to play God but was rather a tricky form of authority, Spark could then freely explore themes of omniscience and character manipulation throughout her oeuvre. Her second novel, *Robinson*, maintains a certain element of anti-realism in its central characters' surnames all being towns or cities – Marlow, Wells and Waterford – and through, as Gardiner notes (29), the title reflecting Spark's "son" being named "Robin": presumably reminders that this is fiction and does not intrude upon God's narrative. However, the novel does not include Spark's tricky authorial presence in the same way as *The Comforters*, but rather depicts characters struggling with one another for authority. There is a sense of trickiness that is dispersed amongst

the main characters in *Robinson*: Robinson plays Prospero on his island, manipulating those around him, causing January to comment that he has “held the wires that made us move” (165). While the other characters are named after places, Robinson’s island has been named after him, suggesting an autonomy and influence that the others lack. January, meanwhile, is ultimately able to ensnare Robinson with his own methods (167), and, as narrator and a writer of biography (78), holds wires of her own. Then there is the blackmailing Tom, who attempts to control others in a less omniscient manner. Spark here explores themes of power, but without underscoring her distance from God: her first novel proved the humanness of her authority and she is now at liberty to tease her characters.

This sense of lacking moral responsibility for her characters is evident in Spark’s profession to love them “most intensely, like a cat loves a bird. You know cats do love birds; they love to fondle them” (qtd. in Stannard 129). Spark here suggests her stance towards her characters to be rather predatory – an idea echoed in her 1963 novel *The Girls of Slender Means*, where the character of Joanna is declared to love poetry “rather as it might be assumed a cat loves birds; poetry, especially the declamatory sort, excited and possessed her; she would pounce on the stuff, play with it quivering in her mind, and when she had got it by heart, she spoke it forth with devouring relish” (11). As Joanna toys with her poetry, Spark, relinquished of moral anxiety, teased her characters, perhaps enjoying giving them a little freedom before pouncing and devouring them; indeed, she ironically does this with Joanna, having the girl die in a fire and thus exposing her as a “bird” rather than a “cat”.<sup>10</sup> Kermode has commented that “There is certainly a remoteness, a lack of ordinary compassion, in her dealings with characters” (“Muriel Spark” 267), while Gregson similarly remarks on how Spark “holds her own characters at a disdainful arm’s length” (102); Spark was fascinated by her characters but, unlike Murdoch, was unsympathetic towards them.

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<sup>10</sup> A similar treatment of an author-figure is found in *Loitering with Intent*. Here, Fleur Talbot identifies characters around her as adhering to certain “type[s]” (19), labelling Mrs Tims and Dottie “English Rose[s]” (20 and 22), and feeling satisfied upon later discovering them both to possess cosmetic products with this name (21 and 22). Ironically, however, Fleur’s name also alludes to flowers, which is perhaps Spark’s way of slyly implying Fleur ultimately to be of the same species as Mrs Tims and Dottie – a fictional character – despite Fleur’s claims to authority and her insistence that her name does not suit her (8).

Spark therefore appears to have used tricksters in her fiction as a way of protecting both her privacy and her morality. Her curious sense of truth and trickery prompted her to create quasi-autobiographical figures who did the “sort of things” she did and thus could convey her experience without compromising her privacy or becoming deception; furthermore, her first novel focussed on the interplay between character and author in a way that emphasised Spark’s human status and established her to be creating intuitive truths within the realm of fiction, rather than to be tampering with God’s narrative through lies. Strands of truth, deception, intuition and creation came together to form metafictional tricksters who could absolve her of certain artistic concerns. And yet, Spark did not feel a sense of debt or even sympathy for these characters; despite being fascinated by contradictory, magical figures akin to those she observed in traditional ballads and parables, she retained a distance from them, studying them without feeling for them. Like Iris Murdoch, she departed from the realist genre by her use of such overtly metafictional figures, but, unlike Murdoch, Spark seems to have had a very confident sense of where these characters stood in relation to her.

Having established that Spark’s outsider figures were born from a general sense of trickiness, I shall illustrate in what follows that Spark used specific trickster characters in her early novels as tools enabling her to think through metaphysical concepts. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Spark’s treatment of the trickster is unique in that she seems to have made characters into tricksters – self-conscious and liminal – in order, ultimately, to “play with” them, viewing them as prey. Ironically, then, Spark’s trickster figure is, in this way, less free than her other characters, elevated from the narrative but merely offered an illusion of independence. For all his wiles, he is fundamentally the victim of his author’s trick. An example of this sort of trickster is the character Lise in Spark’s 1970 novel *The Driver’s Seat*.

### **The Trickster and Narrative Self-Consciousness**

Lise, the protagonist of *The Driver’s Seat*, seems disturbingly aware of her role within a fictional narrative. A highly mysterious character, her backstory and even surname remain elusive to the reader as we witness her journey to an unspecified country where she scouts out a man to murder her. Although her macabre

intentions are not exposed until the end of the novel, Lise's hysterical determination is evident throughout as she tricks her way towards her fate, telling each person she meets a different tale about herself and thus reflecting the anagram of her name: "lies". Addressing the airport luggage clerk, for instance, "Lise answers in a voice different from which she yesterday spoke to the shop assistant when buying her lurid outfit, and has used on the telephone, . . . she now speaks in a little-girl tone which presumably is taken by those within hearing to be her normal voice" (19). Retrospectively contemplating the story, the reader realises that Lise has been deliberately fabricating an insuperable puzzle for the police and journalists who she knows will shortly investigate her murder.

As well as being a shape-shifter within the narrative, Lise's real trickiness lies in her apparent collusion with her author, as they work together or, perhaps, compete with one another, to bring about her death. Lise has an inexplicable insight into her fate, apparently understanding that she has to orchestrate her own murder within twenty-four hours, considering each man that Spark places in her path with a conviction that one of them will be her killer. She also appears to be in a state of anguish, pushed beyond sanity by the comprehension of her creator's plans. Desperately she works with Spark to engineer her dramatic demise, as though this is preferable to being a passive victim of what she knows to be an authorial control over her. Alternatively, Lise may be contriving her own death as a way of rebelling against Spark's authority, as Ian Rankin suggests when he observes that Lise is "desperate to control her own destiny in a world where her life so far has apparently been controlled by other people and other forces" (146). Lanchester has similarly explained that "The book poses the question: who is in the driver's seat? One solution to the question might be to say: Lise. We could also say, Spark; or even, God" (xii); indeed, the apparent struggle for control is echoed in the ambiguity over whether the narrative voice is Spark's or Lise's. Waugh in *Metafiction* has noted "the analeptic use of the future tense which reveals [Lise's] 'end' to the reader" (121): that is, the recurring snippets of information about the following day, such as "She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie" (25), or "[The waiter], too, will give his small piece of evidence the following day, as will also the toilet attendant, trembling at the event which has touched upon her life without the asking" (87).

While Waugh interprets such snippets as Spark's narrative voice (*Metafiction* 122), Rankin proposes that "the time-shift, the twist, is being thought by Lise herself. After all, she knows she is going to die. Might she not speculate as to the aftermath of her own murder?" (148). If this is the case, then we might surmise that Lise has been the narrator throughout, describing her own actions in the third person. Furthermore, it may be argued that, rather than merely speculating on the aftermath of her murder, Lise in fact knows what will happen after her death – that she has an insight into the mind of her author, rather as, in the Torah, Moses described his own death in the third person as it was foretold to him by God (Deuteronomy 34). Spark thus exposes her mind to Lise, while never delving into Lise's mental process; whereas *The Comforters'* Typing Ghost has access to Caroline's thoughts, Lise's "behaviour is never explained, merely described. She has no clear intentions as far as the reader can make out. Her feelings are never intimated; the reader can only make wild guesses at them" (Sproxtton 137). Spark, favouring instinct over analysis, told Kermode: "I think that the novelist is just out to say what happened. . . . Things just happen [in the novelist's mind] and one records what has happened a few seconds later" ("The House of Fiction" 143); in *The Driver's Seat*, she takes this technique to its extreme in order to engender an unsettling confusion over narrative authority.

Before finally departing into the night with her murderer, Lise gives the hotel porter the book she has been carrying all day, telling him "You can have the book as well; it's a whydunnit in q-sharp major and it has a message: never talk to the sort of girls that you wouldn't leave lying about in your drawing-room for the servants to pick up" (101). This is clearly a description that could be applied to *The Driver's Seat* itself, which is concerned with the "why", rather than the "who", of the murder. The bizarre implication here is that the book Lise has carried with her is, in fact, *The Driver's Seat* itself; Lise's interaction with the book as an artefact thus places her in a highly liminal territory and signals her departure from the world of fiction – as she discards her book and leaves with her murderer, she is already becoming unglued from the narrative. In speaking to the porter, Lise nebulously addresses the reader – for, if aware of her fictional status, she must also be aware of the reader's presence. Her use of the term "whydunnit" further implies that her strange actions have not merely been an attempt to confuse witnesses, but also to perplex the literary consumer. In *The Comforters*,



after hearing the Typing Ghost, Caroline muses that “There seemed, then, to have been more than one voice: it was a recitative, a chanting in unison. It was something like a concurrent series of echoes” (35); possibly she, too, hears the voices of her readers alongside that of her creator but, unlike Lise, lacks comprehension. For the Catholic Caroline, the beings outside of her fictional world are supernatural shadows whom she must banish in order to maintain her grasp on reality; her faith in God salvages her from the machinations of trickier forms of authority.

Certainly, while Caroline refuses to view herself as a fictional character, humorously subverting her author’s intentions, Lise appears tragically aware of her entrapment within a novel, and works feverishly to ensure her release from the fictional world: knowledge of her creator’s plans has, it seems, driven her to madness. MacKay remarks that Lise’s

narrator has given her complete freedom, . . . and yet the product of that freedom is that Lise remains unknowable . . . Ironically, instead of freedom creating the liberal ideal of rounded character, . . . Spark gives autonomy to a character who consequently becomes depthless and unmotivated. The driver’s seat is the death of character. (“Catholicism” 232)

Lise is overtly trickster in her deceptions, her cunning, her narrative control and her clownish behaviour – she is described as being “dressed for a carnival” (69), and Cheyette has noted her subversive “carnavalesque laughter” (*Muriel Spark* 78) – and yet, she is ultimately a victim of her trickster-status, desperately suicidal from having comprehended Spark’s mind and, as MacKay propounds, limited by her autonomy. Spark seems to have rather coldly created Lise in order to play with metaphysical themes in her novel, perhaps probing an idea which she discussed in “The Mystery of Job’s Suffering”. Spark’s essay posits that people cannot begin to speculate upon the intentions of their divine creator; however, in *The Driver’s Seat*, the creator is human, and thus may potentially be understood by a character – as appears to have happened with Lise. In this novel, then, Spark uses her trickster to suggest the dangers of looking too closely at one’s creator, teasing Lise with an illusion of freedom as a cat might tease a bird.

Spark’s trickster figure is therefore oddly hindered by her mutability, more contrived than the characters of Bowen, Taylor and Murdoch. Yet, few of Spark’s tricksters suffer to Lise’s extent, and Spark’s playfulness does not always harm her characters; in the 1960 novels *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The*

*Bachelors*, for instance, she more cautiously uses her tricksters' ambiguity and authority to conceptualise evil as an external, supernatural, influence upon humanity. Randall Stevenson has suggested Spark's and Murdoch's works' concern with "the god-like roles assumed by authors and artists" to reflect a post-war anxiety over authority's connection with fascism (103); yet, while Spark's tricksters of 1960 – Dougal Douglas and Patrick Seton – are likely influenced by her encounters with former Nazi Adolf Eichmann, the hints of fascism in her novels are, I wish to propose, primarily impelled by her interest in a meeting between the human and the supernatural.

### **Demonic Tricksters and the Nature of Evil**

Richard C. Kane has noted demonic figures to recur in Spark's fiction, and proposes that these were intended to "jolt readers into an awareness of real evil" (150), to remind a liberal post-war society of the existence of true wickedness. Certainly, her novels often revolve around Machiavellian characters whose cruel intentions appear largely motiveless, stemming instead from a seemingly otherworldly mischief. The most obvious of these is the Scottish Dougal Douglas in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* – a character whom Kane fleetingly calls "a trickster who may be the Devil himself" (65), despite not enlarging on the term "trickster". The novel, its title reaching for the Scottish ballads in which Spark found such intriguing characters,<sup>11</sup> centres upon Dougal's disruptive arrival in Peckham. Stannard aptly summarises Dougal's role in the narrative:

A deformed Scot with one shoulder higher than the other and two bumps on his head, he is a shapeshifter, an attractive, manipulative flirt with second sight who dances throughout, alone and in company, delighting in the embarrassment he causes. He . . . divides everyone, tempting them with freedom and advising that they take days off. He does no work himself other than to unearth his colleagues' secrets and to create fictions. (221)

Dougal's "shapeshifting" tendencies allow him to control how others perceive him, and make his identity ambiguous to the reader; he claims to be

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<sup>11</sup> While Dougal does not seem drawn from any one specific character from a Scottish ballad, he does appear to allude to several of the popular ballads Spark encountered in her early reading. For instance, his surname nods to "The Douglas Tragedy", while his elfin mischief reflects that of "The Young Tamlane" – both these ballads are found in, respectively, volumes Three and Two of Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. The repetitive nature of his name, meanwhile, chimes with "Edward, Edward" from Quiller-Couch's *The Oxford Book of Ballads*, in which the wicked Edward places "The curse of hell" on his family.

Scottish, but is twice taken to be Irish (19 and 63), his Gaelic origins as abstruse as his name, which he spontaneously changes to “Douglas Dougal” (70) and to “Mr Dougal-Douglas” (75). According to Hanks, Hardcastle and Hodges’s *Dictionary of First Names*, “Dougal” traditionally means “dark stranger” (80), while “Douglas” means “black stream” (402):<sup>12</sup> Spark has chosen a name for her protagonist with devilish undertones. Dougal, with his “highly crooked” shoulder (15), seems to connote Shakespeare’s “Deformed, unfinish’d” Richard III (*R3* 1.1.20), in particular through his constant manipulations of those around him, while his repeated reference to his “fatal flaw” (24, 29, 42, 61, 64, 74, 111, 122) suggests his desire to perform the role of a Shakespearean tragic hero.<sup>13</sup> His identity is comprised of self-conscious performance, which he often employs to retain authority in situations. When being interviewed, for instance, he “changed his shape and became a professor” and then “leaned forward and became a television interviewer” (16); during another interview “He was a divorce judge suspending judgement” (65). These subversions of authority result in his employers weeping upon their desks (67 and 74). Dougal’s puppeteering of those around him was emphasised in the cover design of *Ballad’s* first edition, which showed dancing silhouettes against a vibrant background, reminiscent of shadow-puppets; meanwhile, Dougal himself dances in a manner suggesting a marionette on a string: “He leapt into the air . . . and dangled his arms in front of his hunched body” (59) and “bent his knees apart, then sprang up in the air” (48). His mannerisms thus seem to parody those around him, but also reflect Spark’s puppeteering of Dougal, her tendency to “play with” the ostensibly freest characters in the narrative.

Dougal’s manipulation is inextricable from his work as a biographer. Throughout *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, he is ghost-writing an autobiography for Maria Cheeseman, an elderly music-hall star, much of which he invents or borrows from the lives of other people. To Maria’s initial complaints, he responds: “I thought it was a work of art you wanted to write . . . If you only want to write a straight autobiography you should have got a straight ghost. I’m crooked” (76). By the end of the novel, Maria has succumbed to Dougal’s deceptive form of

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<sup>12</sup> The wicked sprite in “The Young Tamlane” is closely connected with water, being, according to the ballad, found beside a well and in a marsh.

<sup>13</sup> Spark held Shakespeare in high esteem, reading his work “assiduously” during the seven years she lived in Rhodesia (Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* 139).

writing, declaring “You’ve re-written my early years so beautifully” (136) and imploring him to embellish her history further. Dougal’s irreverent attitude to memoir evinces Spark’s own anxiety about being misrepresented by biographers; furthermore, to Spark, lying in biographical writing was sacrilegious, a derision of God’s authority, and thus, in persuading Maria to sanction his lies, Dougal is tempting her away from God in a rather fiendish manner. The suggestion that Dougal has literally “rewritten” Maria’s history certainly frames him as somewhat supernatural, capable of manipulating characters in the past as well as the present – his statement of being more than a “straight ghost” also doubles as an insinuation of supernatural power.

Indeed, Spark likely deemed tampering with Maria’s recollection of events to be consubstantial with demonically altering her actual biography, for she was interested in what she considered Proust’s notion of time: “that the whole of eternity is present ‘now’” (Spark, “The Religion” 189). Spark felt that the manner in which “the taste, smell or texture of something evokes the past in a special and meaningful way” was akin to Christian Sacrament (“The Religion” 189), in which a physical substance encapsulates an eternal spiritual presence, and proposed that the past and present may thus exist synchronically – an idea which, Stannard observes, was also “developed by Eliot in *Four Quartets*” (149). Unconventional depictions of time are notably also included in Seán O’Faoláin’s novels *Bird Alone* and *A Nest of Simple Folk*, which use techniques of memory to “speak to several temporalities” (Delaney 198). O’Faoláin, like Spark, published on the subject of John Henry Newman (see his 1952 work, *Newman’s Way*), and she declared herself “a great admirer” of his work (Accession 11344). O’Faoláin’s *Bird Alone* contains characters that, according to Paul Delaney, represent “Faust and the Devil” (205); Spark, another Catholic writer, might be said to have taken such ideas further and intended Dougal Douglas to be a literal demon.

There is certainly ambiguity in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* as to whether Dougal is a clever fraudster or a dark supernatural being. He endeavours to persuade the other characters that he is demonic, making them feel the two lumps on his head where he claims his “horns” used to be (77 and 114), detailing a dream of being the Devil (50), professing to ride a broomstick (87) and insisting “I’m fey. I’ve got Highland blood” (67). His employer becomes convinced that “Dougal Douglas is a diabolical agent, if not in fact the Devil” (81), and the third-

person narration likens him to a “succubus” (28). At the end of the novel, Dougal goes to Africa “with the intention of selling tape-recorders to witch doctors” (142), compounding him as a figure who blends the modern with the supernatural, the material with the spiritual. Contrastingly, William Boyd argues that “To see Douglas as a devil or devilish sprite . . . is misleading” (vi), for “It is far too thumpingly obvious (and very un-Sparkian) if, indeed, Dougal is meant to have some sort of symbolic role in the novel – to be an urban, low-grade Lucifer. My own feeling is that there is no supernatural theme implied in the novel at all, that Dougal’s lumps are, purely and simply, cysts” (ix). And yet, pace Boyd, Dougal as a supernatural entity becomes more plausibly “Sparkian” when his overtly demonic allusions are read as a double bluff; by declaring his mysticism in such a “thumpingly obvious” way, Dougal invites both the reader and characters to discount the idea, thus illuminating society’s blindness to the existence of evil. When read alongside Spark’s vision of sacramental time, her physicalizing the concept of evil through Dougal gains further credibility. Crucial to this, however, is the idea that Spark perceived evil as a supernatural force rather than as something human.

Spark’s portrayal of evil appears to have altered during her career. In an interview for *The Guardian* in 1970, she professed not to “believe in good and evil so much any more” (qtd. in Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* 73), while Ruth Whittaker, in her seminal book on Spark, has contended that, although Spark’s work “seeks to persuade us that angels and demons are neither metaphoric nor outdated conceits, but exist here and now in convents, classrooms, and on the factory floor” (2), her later novels “lose their insistence on the force of the other world, and its positive place in the sometimes seedy realities of this one. Supernatural events no longer occur . . . Mrs Spark concentrates on portraying evil as it is manifested through the actions of an individual, or through the godlessness of contemporary society” (64). But, despite Spark’s later subscription to a more ostensibly secular view of evil, her early novels seem to frame it in a unique manner that relies upon the demonic presences in her fiction.

In April 1961, Spark voluntarily went to Jerusalem to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal, later explaining:

‘I’m half Jewish, or perhaps even a bit more. I wanted to do a book about the Holy Land, and I wanted to attend this trial. I found it absolutely

horrifying to see, as Hannah Arendt said, “the banality of evil”.<sup>14</sup> This little man being tried, Eichmann, was always perfectly horrible to his own lawyer, but he clicked to attention whenever the judge spoke to him. . . . Eichmann wasn’t a huge man with horns on his head. He was a sort of weasel, but you meet his sort every day on the street, like a grocer or banker. Eichmann could only come out with these banal phrases, he never grasped the evil he had perpetuated. That’s what was so shocking, that he was a little bad man, not a big bad man.’ (“Muriel Spark in Conversation” 158)

Here, Spark suggests adherence to a form of authority other than God’s to be disquieting, implying Eichmann’s respect for the judge to parallel his compliance to fascism. She also describes him as a “little bad man” without “horns”, emphasising his human quality; he is unable to comprehend “the evil he had perpetuated”, which intimates evil to be something greater than Eichmann, using him as a tool rather than being engendered by him. Spark’s horror thus appears to hinge upon the convergence of the human and a vaster structure of evil.

The description of Eichmann at his trial chimes with the medium Patrick Seton’s trial scene in Spark’s novel *The Bachelors*. Although *The Bachelors* was published in October of the year before her journey to Jerusalem, Spark clearly had a strong interest in war crime trials around this time, and may even have been anticipating the Eichmann trial while writing the novel, as the former Nazi was arrested in May 1960. The narrative of *The Bachelors* takes place in the weeks leading up to Patrick’s much-publicised trial for forgery, but the reader knows him to be guilty of the greater crime of intending to murder his pregnant girlfriend, Alice. Like Dougal, Patrick dissimulates his evil nature beneath a façade of charm which is intensified by his claim to have psychic powers. The question of these powers divides the novel’s cast of characters into those who believe in them and follow Patrick devotedly, and those who are sceptical of his alleged abilities. Rather as the reader seems encouraged to disbelieve Dougal’s supernatural status in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, in *The Bachelors*, Patrick’s clairvoyance initially appears wholly spurious due to his repeated deceptions – he has been previously imprisoned for forgery, for instance, and lies to Alice about being married (23) – along with the theatrical nature of his séances (37), the apparent foolishness of his followers and the more realist elements of the novel. However, as the narrative progresses we find unexpected indications that

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<sup>14</sup> This phrase was included in the title of Arendt’s book on the trial, published in 1963: *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Patrick may truly possess psychic powers. The supposedly impartial third-person narration announces that Patrick's medication "greatly improved both the spectacular quality of Patrick's trances and his actual psychic powers" (65), and that, upon waking from a trance in which he has revealed knowledge of Dr Lyte's criminal past, "Patrick rapidly appreciated that he had said something in his trance which had truly got its mark" (64): he appears unconscious of the secrets he has accessed.

If authentic, Patrick's mediumship, like Dougal's otherworldliness, is a trick upon the reader. And yet, Spark's decision to make Patrick genuinely magical seems surprising, considering her own distrust of spiritualism; Stannard explains that, despite her superstitious background, she "was no spiritualist. She never had a 'psychic' experience" (71), while, in *Curriculum Vitae*, Spark describes the concept of "psychic powers" as "entirely phoney" (115). I want to propose that Spark chose to make Patrick's clairvoyance genuine due to her conceiving pure evil as a supernatural influence rather than something inherently human; Spark, it appears, felt that although people may exhibit evil behaviour, they could not be entirely wicked but could only act as vessels for an external force. In the 1955 "The Mystery of Job's Suffering", she criticised Jung for analysing God as "an irrational union of opposites containing both good and evil" (193).<sup>15</sup> God's seemingly cruel treatment of Job, Spark propounds, "cannot be explained by human analogy. At the point where human reason cannot reconcile the fact of evil with the goodness of God, an anthropomorphic conception of God breaks down. Is this not the main point of the Book of Job?" (196); ultimately, "knowledge of God cannot be calculated from human standards" (196). While the human psyche was a blend of good and evil, the supernatural realm seemingly expressed these qualities in a wholly other form, and God's crucial goodness could not be comprehended by the adulterated human mind. If God was the essence of good, then the Devil was that of evil; humans, poised in the centre,

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<sup>15</sup> Spark's attack strikingly seems to contradict her 1983 essay, "The Books I Re-Read and Why", which considers the Old Testament's God as "A character so true and yet so contradictory. He basks unashamed in his own glory, and in his anger is positively blasphemous" (144). It appears that, in this later essay, Spark was reading the Bible from a writer's perspective, addressing the manner in which the text creatively presents God as a character. Her 1955 essay, meanwhile, argues that, while God's actions in "The Book of Job" seem morally ambiguous, this is simply because people lack the capacity to understand God – which is the point of the story.

could connect with but never fully embody either of these qualities.<sup>16</sup> Such a concept perhaps invokes Angus Wilson's influential essay "Evil in the English Novel", first published in instalments between 1962 and 1963, which posited that "our transcendent sense of evil is being destroyed all the time by our psychological knowledge" (192). Wilson argued that, while writers such as Samuel Richardson created demonic characters who rightly suggest "an evil which lies over and above all this world" (178), twentieth-century literature had witnessed a "shift from abstract evil to right and wrong [which] has removed the transcendent element, and so too much emphasis has been thrown . . . upon society" (178). Wilson's belief is congruent with Spark's apparent sense of evil being a supernatural state, and echoes her dislike of psychoanalysis – a dislike which, it seems, might partially stem from psychoanalysis's undermining the idea of transcendent influences upon the human. Spark again intimated that true evil requires a supernatural source in a radio essay written in the same year that *The Bachelors* and *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* were published, describing Emily Brontë's Heathcliff's "evil nature" ("My Favourite Villain" 121) and claiming to perceive him as "a devil" and a "demon-lover" with an inhuman influence over others ("My Favourite Villain" 122).

Patrick Seton and Dougal Douglas thus have otherworldly roots as a means of allowing them to be wholly evil figures. Writing of Patrick's powers, Rodney Stenning Edgecombe deduces that "In making him so far credible, Spark seems . . . to be suggesting that the evil he represents is as real as it is horrifying" (15); seemingly, while Eichmann was a "little bad man" due to his mortality and incomprehension of the wickedness he perpetuated, Patrick's and Dougal's supernatural statuses establish them as figures of knowing evil – malefic forces upon society. Indeed, *The Bachelors* establishes a connection between Patrick and the occult figure of W. B. Yeats (167), compounding his sense of mysticism, and Cheyette has identified that Patrick is an "evil" character "whose surname sounds suspiciously like Satan" (*Muriel Spark* 49).

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<sup>16</sup> It is tempting to read Spark's writings on Job alongside Stanley Diamond's essay of 1972, "Job and the Trickster", which considers the Book of Job's God as a trickster due to his apparent ambivalence. Kathleen M. Ashley has similarly used the Book of Job to argue that Christ and Satan are "a pair of tricksters who have evolved from one idea of the sacred, a God who paradoxically encompasses both good and evil" (127). Yet, Spark, though interested in the contradictoriness of people, firmly believed in good and evil as dualisms, and did not consider God an ambivalent figure. Her supernatural tricksters rather illuminate the pure states of good and evil, and demonstrate how they are diluted by humankind.



## Healers and Blackmailers: Good and Evil in Human Form

If Spark incorporated demonic presences into her early fiction as a way of suggesting evil to be an external influence on humanity, then it seems likely that she would also include entirely virtuous supernatural characters in order to establish goodness as an equally unearthly extreme. And yet, no such “good” characters are discernible in Spark’s work. Even her most genial figures, such as Caroline Rose, Fleur Talbot or *Memento Mori*’s Jean Taylor, are fallibly human, occasionally prone to pettiness – Jean, for instance, admitting to having been jealous of her former employer (171), and Fleur having “the whiff of something criminal about her” (Nicol, “Reading Spark” 119). Spark’s avoidance of angelic beings is, in fact, unsurprising, when we consider her desire to distance herself artistically from God, her moral outrage at biographers’ attempts to tamper with a divine narrative and her sense of God comprising a goodness that cannot be analysed by human methods; to attempt to represent God’s infinite goodness through her own characters, to presume to know Him, would surely be sacrilegious.

Yet, while her novels are devoid of angelic presences, Spark does include tricky figures who act as healing influences on those around them, arguably as a means to demonstrate that humankind can conduct goodness while being unable to embody it completely. In particular, she seems to have been drawn to the trope of the helpful servant, as demonstrated in her 1953 review of T. S. Eliot’s *The Confidential Clerk*:

Eggerson, the old retired confidential clerk, is in many ways the most intriguing character. He is seen at the beginning, an old man preparing for the ‘end of winter’; this ageing family servant is shown in a context of fruitfulness and fertility. In his retirement, Eggerson is the cultivator of a garden. He also cultivates the family up to their final deliberations. He seems appointed to conduct Coby, especially, into his promised land. (“Review of *The Confidential Clerk*”).

Eggerson in Eliot’s play is the typical trickster servant, illustrated in the introduction to this thesis to occur on the early modern stage, in characters such as *As You Like It*’s Adam, and recurring in early twentieth-century figures such as Wodehouse’s Jeeves and Travers’s Mary Poppins. As the carnivalesque tricksters of Renaissance comedy typically restore order at the end of the play,

so does Eggerson return at the end of Eliot's drama to resolve the chaos. Fascinated by the contradictory characters from Scottish ballads, Spark is here similarly intrigued by Eggerson, in particular his connection with "fruitfulness and fertility". *Robinson* contains a passing reference to Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (124), an 1890 work on magic, religion and mythology that influenced the theme of fertility in Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. Though published a little later than the works focussed on in this chapter, Spark's 1976 novel *The Takeover* also includes discussions of *The Golden Bough* (40, 42) and a plethora of references to Diana, the Roman goddess of fertility, who features in Frazer's book, implying Spark to have been interested in the same notions of fecundity that haunted Bowen. The novel is also set in Nemi, Italy, a location where Spark bought an apartment in 1974 and which is strongly connected with Diana and discussed in the opening pages of Frazer's work (Frazer 9-15). In 1990, Piers Plowright from the BBC wrote to her for help researching a radio feature on *The Golden Bough*, professing to have "read with great delight your novel 'The Take-over' and wonder if you could spare a moment to talk about what drew you to the Golden Bough in the first place". In her reply, Spark spoke briefly about the legend of the Golden Bough and described Diana as "the goddess of fecundity [who] was sought after by sterile women" (Accession 11344).

Spark seems to have been captivated by Eliot's trickster figure, with his restorative effect on those around him and his allusions to fertility – a topic which evidently interested her in myth. She, too, would create a healing trickster servant in the character of Jean Taylor; however, while Bowen used healing figures to flag up the sterility of the patriarchal order, Spark has likely used Jean to underscore the potential for a tricky form of goodness in society.

In *Memento Mori*, a number of elderly acquaintances begin to receive anonymous telephone calls in which they are each told: "Remember you must die". Most of the characters are disturbed by these calls, and furiously attempt to discover the perpetrator, whom they assume is a malicious prankster. The culprit is never comprehended, by the characters or by the reader, although Jean, a former maidservant, and one of the few persons not to receive a call, postulates that the caller is "Death himself" and that "If you don't remember Death, Death reminds you to do so" (175). As Cheyette observes, this is likely the intention of Spark herself: "The comic archness of [Jean's] bathetic statement, as well as the

necessity of coping with momentous facts, clearly has Spark's authorial approval" (*Muriel Spark* 40). Jean, with her spiritual insight and authorial commentary, "appreciates the moral value of old age" (Sproxton 122), and therefore does not experience a telephone call. And yet, though the shrewdest character in the novel, and one who "subdues her experience [of physical pain] through her faith and makes of her suffering a devotional offering" (Sproxton 122), Jean is nevertheless far from being the epitome of Christian goodness: exhibited, for instance, by her past affair with Alec Warner. Instead, she functions as a trickster within the story, having subverted class boundaries in her younger days by befriending her mistress and becoming romantically entangled with an upper-middle-class man, and now acting to expose characters' buried secrets (170) and offer moral advice. Her trickiness even extends far enough to warp the temporal frame of the narrative, for the memories of her affair are the only parts of the novel related through flashbacks; as Lise's enigmatic narrative fuses past, present and future in *The Driver's Seat*, and Dougal tampers with characters' pasts in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, so does Jean seem to reflect Spark's thoughts on sacramental time. She also acts as a confidante to numerous other characters, soothing their stresses as, one by one, they come to visit her in hospital, and offering a sense of catharsis and emotional healing through allowing the past to be bared. Jean enables healing through discussion – a very human form of therapy, although her insight and spirituality does suggest something quasi-supernatural. But she is not God, nor does she encapsulate His virtue; instead, Jean's form of healing demonstrates the human connection with God – she possesses a tricky goodness that can include mortal flaws but still convey a sense of the supernatural structure beyond the world of the living. It might consequently be noted that, through this, the character of Jean seems to clash with Whittaker's assertion that Spark's novels express "a bleak view of human nature" (97) and that "*Memento Mori* is a pessimistic novel" (58).

Similarly, Spark's novels include characters who, unlike Dougal and Patrick, are not wholly evil nor intended to be literal demons, but rather demonstrate evil's influence on society – the colliding of humankind with the darkly supernatural sphere. Whittaker, as mentioned earlier, illustrates that Spark's later works move away from depictions of the supernatural to focus instead on the evil that is found in a godless society. It is notable that the titles of

many of Spark's later novels, such as *Loitering with Intent*, *Aiding and Abetting* and *The Takeover*, suggest tricky human crimes, devious but not devilish. However, Spark's early, "religious" novels also include characters who perpetuate a grubby sense of criminality but are too contradictory, or too deliberately undeveloped, to be read as wholly evil or demonic. I thus wish to propose that, rather than fundamentally changing her perception of true evil as something otherworldly, Spark may have been building upon an interest that had been present from early in her career: the way in which people channel and change transcendent qualities. In professing to no longer "believe in good and evil so much", then, she may simply have been referring to her artistic decision to stop focussing on evil in its pure, supernatural state, and instead to explore the admixed form of evil that could exist within society.

At the centre of this human form of wickedness was blackmail, a theme in Spark's work which seems to bring together several of her artistic concerns, merging evil, truth, trickiness and the issue of private and public spheres. Goldie has recognised "the rich cast of blackmailers in Spark's novels" who "use biographical knowledge for financial leverage" as underscoring her anxiety about having her private affairs exposed by biographers (8); certainly, blackmail was to affect Spark personally in 1964, when book-dealer Lew Feldman acquired her letters to ex-lover Derek Stanford and threatened to sell them to a university unless she bought them back (Stannard 288). In this instance, Spark declined to purchase her letters, perhaps consoled by the idea that the letters, written by herself, conveyed a truer image of Spark than any words another person might write about her. And yet, blackmail had become an established theme in her fiction prior to 1964, so that her life in this instance bizarrely mimicked her art, much as, in *Loitering with Intent*, Fleur's experiences begin to mirror those fabricated in the novel she is writing.

Frank Baldanza has noticed blackmail "or a very similar betrayal of private information" to have been a central theme in each of Spark's novels (193), where, he says, it "is practised by all different sorts of persons for a wide variety of motives, and with degrees of success ranging from a large fortune to imprisonment" (193). It might thus be argued that Spark tried to emphasise the mundane quality of blackmail, using it to highlight the ubiquity of sin in modern society; while Patrick Seton, a demonic figure, blackmails Dr Lyte in *The*

*Bachelors*, the supernatural Dougal Douglas is the victim of attempted blackmail by a group of teenagers in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, indicating that, although often incited by an otherworldly presence, this type of crime represents a very human understanding of evil. Certainly, in *Robinson*, a character remarks that all “Life is based on blackmail” (137), while Spark herself, as late as 1998, insisted:

I see it happening – in families – terrorism and blackmail. It spreads out. I see that all through life: terroristic actions and interactions. It goes along with a certain type of blackmail. A lot of life goes on at that level. The terrorism in the novels is symbolic of everything that goes on like that, which is wrong. There’s lots of blackmail in my work and unspoken blackmail. I see it and I suffer from it. I don’t wear it. I always call people’s bluff. I can’t stand it. (“The Same Informed Air” 224-225).

“Blackmail” did not become a legal term of art in the United Kingdom until the Theft Act of 1968, although the 1916 Larceny Act outlined a number of offenses which would seem to include such behaviour. At the start of her career, then, Spark likely viewed this crime as something which was only vaguely illegal, and rather reflected a grimy undercurrent in society. In particular, in *The Comforters*, blackmail seems to have helped her suggest a distance between God and the preoccupations of the Catholic Church, being introduced to the novel through the supposedly devout yet unequivocally tricky character of Mrs Hogg. Here, Mrs Hogg upholds a pious appearance but attempts to violate the private spheres of those around her by blackmail – in Spark’s view, a highly blasphemous action that threatened to tamper with God’s narrative. Spark, as Stannard explains, “found herself frustrated by others’ blind faith, and her refusal to succumb to humourless ecclesiastical authority remained with her for life” (158). Mrs Hogg, as cruel as she is physically grotesque, seems to reflect the corruption of many British Catholics, the lack of true faith behind the religious demeanour: as Waugh notes, Mrs Hogg is “simultaneously, massively, physically *present* and totally, spiritually *absent*” (*Metafiction* 55).<sup>17</sup> This is implied when *The Comforter’s* narrator tells us: “as soon as Mrs Hogg stepped into her room, she disappeared, she simply disappeared” (154). While ostensibly making Mrs Hogg seem a supernatural creature, the disappearance, in contrast, may in fact suggest a lack of any otherworldly presence behind her: further to her lack of a soul is a lack of

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<sup>17</sup> A similar Catholic character, Ian Brodie, is found in *Robinson*. Here, January claims to hate Ian due to his love of administering “screeching disapproval supported by misapplied theological quotations” (125). Though not a blackmailer, he does spy on January in an attempt to catch her in some immoral act (81).

any roots in the immortal, making her not a demonic machinator but simply a vessel for evil. She also, as Waugh poses, allows Spark to make “an *ontological* point concerning the status of fictional objects. Georgina Hogg is a public figure in all senses of the word because she is contained by, and exists through, the public medium of language. Thus, having been designated a minor role in the plot, when not essential to its unfolding, she does not exist” (*Metafiction* 55). Obverse to playing with Caroline through giving her a trickster insight, Spark plays with Mrs Hogg’s textuality by limiting her existence.

In *Robinson*, meanwhile, the “professional blackmailer” Tom Wells, though not religious and thus not making a point about the corruption of the Catholic Church, similarly portrays blackmail as a very human form of evil, that may nevertheless have been transmuted from an otherworldly state. Tom’s selfishness and fixation on “lucky” charms – the material trinkets in which he deals and pretends to believe – firmly establish him as a figure based in the physical realm, without any sort of spiritual nature, and, while other characters in the novel exert authority in a semi-supernatural manner – January through her textual manipulation and Robinson through an omniscient puppeteering which resonates with Prospero’s – Tom’s form of control stems from grubby criminality. At the same time, the suggestion of there being something demonic about Tom’s trinkets (60) intimates that, while Tom himself lacks any roots in the immortal, the evil in which he deals may draw from something beyond the human world.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has traced the ways in which Muriel Spark presented her resolute, interconnected ideas on privacy, truth, intuition, authority and evil, through metafictional trickster figures in her early novels. Spark’s Catholic conversion and embarking upon her novelistic career seems to have triggered her discernment of two distinct strands of truth: an objective truth that must be adhered to in real life, and a “form of truth” relating to a person’s potential, which must only be explored through fiction. John Henry Newman posed that deception could sometimes be the most effective route to truth; although Spark appears to have controverted this in regard to the objective truth of life, Newman’s theory chimes with her stance on the truth of potential. While guarding her private life from the

critical gaze, then, she incorporated quasi-autobiographical figures into her novels in order to simultaneously detract readers from her actual biography and express her ultimate sense of self. Indeed, Spark considered herself adroit in accessing this intuitive form of truth, perhaps impelled by the mystical aura which her acquaintances projected onto her. Trickery was intrinsic in her life and her art, and she seems to have conceived truth as a complex labyrinth which could only be navigated via a specific blend of instinct and honesty; her fiction is consequently interspersed with authorial tricksters who, while ostensibly deceptive, actually serve to express a greater truth.

Spark used metafictional techniques in order to draw attention to the fictional status of her work and thus establish that she was depicting the intuitive form of truth rather than an actual truth that might impinge upon God's absolute narrative. Furthermore, I have suggested that her first novel, *The Comforters*, depicted her as a human type of authority in a way that deliberately highlighted her distance from God, thus leaving her free in later novels to experiment with her authorial control without compunction. Spark was fascinated by her characters but unsympathetic towards them, and created trickster figures with typical traits of prescience, self-consciousness and mutability, in order to "play with" them; in this way, Spark's tricksters are ironically the least free of her characters, victims of their apparent textual independence. This idea is most fully realised in *The Driver's Seat*, where Lise's authorial control and insight into her creator has driven her to madness.

Despite absolving herself from authorial responsibility, Spark also used her tricksters to touch upon metaphysical intrigues. While Lise intimates the dangers of trying to understand one's creator, demonic, manipulative characters such as Dougal Douglas in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and Patrick Seton in *The Bachelors*, allowed her to conceptualise evil – and good – in their purest forms as something supernatural. Meanwhile, she used human tricksters to demonstrate the ways in which good and evil could manifest within society, particularly drawing upon motifs of healing and blackmail. Much as objective truth existed within the real world but only a twisted form of truth existed in the sphere of fiction, so too could good and evil exist in their pure states within the spiritual realm, but only enter the human world in an adulterated form. Figures such as

Jean Taylor and Mrs Hogg, then, probed the convergence of the human and the supernatural.

Spark's treatment of the trickster therefore subtly diverges from those of the other writers considered in this thesis. Rather than using the trickster as a way to analyse anxieties about society or about art, Spark more confidently and intuitively employed this character-type to present her already-determined notions. Ultimately, although Spark's tricksters likely owe a debt to the mysterious figures discovered in ballads, the Bible and Shakespeare, they themselves are trapped by the overarching trickiness of their author, which runs in a wry current throughout her entire oeuvre.



## Conclusion

### **“A blur of potentialities”**

Chapter Two of this thesis included a quotation by Elizabeth Bowen, in which she explained that characters from childhood stories had provided her with “prototypes under which, for evermore, to assemble all living people.” She added:

This did not by any means simplify people for me; it had the reverse effect, and I was glad that it should – the characters who came out of my childish reading to obsess me were the incalculable ones, who always moved in a blur of potentialities. It appeared that nobody who mattered was capable of being explained. Thus was inculcated a feeling for the dark horse. (“Out of a Book” 51).

I have chosen to return to this quotation here, as it seems to encapsulate the appeal that the trickster figure held for each of the four writers discussed in this thesis. The mysterious characters observing, manipulating and disrupting plot in the fictions of Bowen, Taylor, Murdoch and Spark can certainly be seen as “dark horse[s]” who, as this thesis has demonstrated, allowed their writers to capture abstract anxieties and think through possibilities for change. These trickster characters repeatedly resist social boundaries, subvert existing orders and call for new forms of freedom, while simultaneously adhering to a type and acknowledging a literary lineage; rather than dismissing structure and tradition altogether, they seem to suggest that new ideas may be sparked by an engagement with the past. Bowen, for example, took inspiration from figures of popular myths and fairy-tales in order to craft tricksters that exposed perceived failings of modern education and society – in particular, a rift between art or imagination and a form of intellectualism that she saw as a predominantly male discourse. Taylor, meanwhile, used male characters seemingly modelled on traditional tricksters, in very typical trickster roles, to depict the fluidity of human identity as a bleak truth. By attaching this desolate notion to an established character-type, Taylor was able to draw a distinction between these traditional tricksters and her woman-child pairings, who acted as a fresh interpretation of the trickster; still illuminating the fragmentation of identity, these woman-child duos rethought such fragmentation as energising and healthy, intimating a liberating potential for future generations. Murdoch, Chapter Four of this thesis argued, deliberately twisted Shakespearean characters in order to illuminate the ethical

problems she found in the creation of fiction – her warped Shakespearean figures underscored her supposed inadequacy in crafting independent characters, and her other allusive tricksters continued to highlight the limitations of art. Spark, finally, drew upon overtly demonic figures to conceptualise good and evil as ultimately supernatural qualities; her more human tricksters, likely inspired by the “mysterious and irrational blend of people” she encountered in Scottish ballads (“My Book of Life” 58), connected with themes of healing and blackmail to demonstrate how good and evil could pervade human society.

Allusion was thus crucial in allowing these mid-century writers to engage with complex concerns and flag up a need for healing. Above all, their trickster characters were vessels for the “potentialities” of which Bowen spoke: they opened up space for creation and reinvention, exposing contemporary problems and often suggesting possibilities for resolution. Bowen’s and Taylor’s tricksters highlight a potential for more creative and more female modes of understanding, while Murdoch’s tricksters contemplate various possible means of addressing and coping with the restrictions of fiction. Spark’s writing is more directly involved with the theme of potentiality: her trickily autobiographical characters help depict potentiality as a specific form of truth – one that can only be explored through fiction. Furthermore, Taylor, Beauman suggested, saw Elinor Bellingham-Smith as “the painter she might have been” (276); by apparently taking the strange children of Bellingham-Smith’s paintings as inspiration for some of her own characters, Taylor seems to have used tricky figures to ponder the potential artistic avenues her creativity may have taken.

Through their “incalculable” characters, then, the four central writers studied in this thesis all ultimately expressed, probed and even healed complex concerns about art, society and the self, often drawing upon tricky or magical beings from past literature in an attempt to engender – or to illuminate a need for – a sense of wholeness in a Britain fractured from wars and cultural shifts. Thinking about such characters as tricksters allows us to place them in a literary tradition of using outsider characters to address anxiety and subvert existing systems, and enables us to discern the shared – and individual – concerns of writers in the middle of the twentieth century.

## Shared Concerns

Indeed, throughout this thesis, it has become evident that certain concerns resonated between writers, and that their trickster characters may be seen to overlap in both the forms they take and the issues they seek to address. Bowen and Taylor, for instance, both use marginal female characters to address the flaws of patriarchal orders. Whereas Bowen also used male figures to augment this idea, indicating that androcentrism was damaging to all members of society, Taylor's work makes a much sharper distinction between male and female tricksters to promote female empowerment. Murdoch also employed marginal female characters – such as *The Sandcastle's* Felicity,<sup>1</sup> *The Italian Girl's* Flora and *An Unofficial Rose's* Miranda – as tricksters, but these were related to her thoughts about art, Shakespeare and characters' freedom, rather than addressing social issues. Like Taylor, Murdoch was interested in how trickster figures could address the question of form in art; yet, while for Taylor this centred upon the paradox of using narrative shapes to suggest an ultimate shapelessness in life, Murdoch was anxious about the ethics and artistic failings of imposing form onto characters who should ideally be free. Although neither Taylor nor Murdoch was conventionally religious, Murdoch's philosophical interest in religion may have prompted her to regard form as problematic on more of a moral level.

It might also be noted that Murdoch was interested in the same sorts of legends and fairy-tales as those that influenced Bowen. Fiander has stated that she was attracted to Grimms' fairy-tales for their "connection with transformation and with the expression of nameless anxieties" (6), which suggests that, like Bowen, she may have viewed such tales as deeply cathartic. Conradi's biography of Murdoch posits that *The Unicorn* may have been inspired by the legend of Robert Rochfort, the first Earl of Belvedere, and his cruel treatment of his wife (*Iris Murdoch* 448). As Jane Jantet, Conradi's assistant, wrote in a 2001 letter concerning Conradi's research for the book, Murdoch "spent most summers as a child in Ireland, south and north, and probably learnt of the Belvedere scandal then". In *The Black Prince*, Murdoch's novel of 1973, a character makes a passing

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<sup>1</sup> Felicity, a schoolgirl with an imaginary friend, seems particularly similar to Bowen's Maud in *A World of Love*, another creative and isolated girl who converses with an invisible being. The 1955 *A World of Love* in fact seems to parallel a number of Murdoch's preoccupations: its dinner party scene, described rather like a séance, echoes the tricky magic and artifice that concerned Murdoch around the same time, as do its many references to masks and puppets. See Chapter Two of this thesis for a fuller description of these themes in Bowen's 1955 novel.

reference to “the Fisher King” (137), proving the author to have been aware of this legendary figure, who likely influenced Bowen. While Murdoch’s tricksters generally seem based on tropes from the traditional stage, their magical elements – and indeed the fantastical aspects of her fiction – may therefore have come from myth and fairy-tale.

Spark’s tricksters, like those of Murdoch, often act as vessels for metafiction, testing the artificiality of the text around them and subtly acknowledging the presence of the author or reader. But, unlike Murdoch’s tricksters, who are entangled in a sense of moral concern, Spark’s are figures with which the author intends to experiment, as well as being a means to convey fixed theological beliefs. Similarities might be perceived between Murdoch’s character David Levkin in *The Italian Girl* and Spark’s Dougal Douglas in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*: both are rather demonic figures who behave erratically, dancing and play-acting. Dougal functions to present evil as a supernatural quality, but Murdoch’s theories on good and evil were seemingly more complex than Spark’s, interwoven with her readings of philosophers such as Plato, Hegel and Kant.<sup>2</sup> Levkin appears to have been less of a comment on wickedness and more a means of contemplating form and freedom, being an allusive tricky servant, restricted to a narrative role yet also ostensibly stating his independence. Thus, while tricksters in mid-century British writing often share allusive qualities, behavioural traits and general narrative functions, the anxieties they embody may vary between writers.

Nevertheless, certain anxieties do seem to have been shared by the writers, and explored by each through tricksters. These include the idea of dispersed identity, and a discrepancy between the natural and the artificial. Taylor most obviously addressed dispersed identity, with her woman-child pairings and her framing of personality as fluid, but Spark also used tricksters – such as her semi-autobiographical figures, and particularly January in *Robinson*, as discussed in Chapter Five – to demonstrate that characters could embody

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<sup>2</sup> Murdoch’s intricate theories on good and evil were explored in essays such as “The Sublime and the Good”, “Art is the Imitation of Nature”, “The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts”, and “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”. The last of these presents an argument that to some extent resembles Spark’s idea of good being a supernatural quality, suggesting that true goodness, or “the highest love”, is something transcendent which might be found in art but is difficult to discern in human relationships (361). However, Murdoch’s convoluted thoughts on good, evil and the idea of God as a symbol, seem largely irreconcilable with Spark’s firm beliefs.

aspects of real persons without actually being them. Such a function seems to draw upon the traditional trickster's role as a shape-shifter and a figure of duality.

Meanwhile, all four writers used tricksters to engage with a clash between the natural and the artificial. For Bowen, this involved a perceived dichotomy between intuitive intelligence and the cerebral intelligence that was learnt rather than inherent: she felt a sense of modern academia being inhospitable to instinct, creativity, and art. Spark had comparable concerns, using the trickster to think about the relationships between objective truth, deception, and a form of intuition which might appear deceptive but ultimately convey a form of truth when explored in fiction. It is notable that both Bowen and Spark, concerned with intuitive understanding, connected specific tricksters, to some extent, with fertility. Bowen used the Fisher King to highlight the sterility of current social systems, while Spark, displaying an interest in the legend of the Golden Bough and James George Frazer's book, used healing, nurturing figures to demonstrate humankind's potential connection with goodness; such treatment of character chimes with the mythological tricksters and their role as healers and creators of worlds. For Taylor, meanwhile, tricksters illuminated a chasm between her sense of identity being naturally fluid and the common conception of persons embodying a fixed self, the latter of which she considered to be a false belief enforced by a patriarchal order. Finally, Murdoch's tricksters addressed the artificial, illusory quality of most art, in contrast with Shakespeare's true, transcendent model of fiction.

These four writers' shared use of tricksters thus intimates a collective anxiety over the natural and the artificial to have been present among mid-century artists. Chapter One of this thesis discussed a sense of tension to have existed within artistic circles in the early decades of the twentieth century surrounding the use of fairies as symbols of nature and the conflicting idea that modern, man-made technology could be used to contact or capture such supernatural beings. This discord, along with the numerous social concerns about deception and manipulation that were exacerbated by the Second World War and are likewise discussed in Chapter One, might arguably have been a contributing factor to recurring questions about nature and artifice later in the century. The trickster being used to approach such a dichotomy certainly seems apt, considering his traditionally being split into a natural fool and an artificial fool both in fairy-tales

and on the Renaissance stage. Perhaps the image of the traditional trickster, found in the literary eras that have been shown to have influenced Bowen, Taylor, Murdoch and Spark, as divisible between natural and artificial but ultimately adhering to one particular type, lends itself to attempts to reconcile such disparity.

Each of the four writers explored in this thesis appears to have used trickster characters to imply that the natural ought to take authority over the artificial. Indeed, further to this, these writers used trickster characters to engage with issues of authority in various different ways. For Bowen and Taylor, this involved challenging ideas about patriarchy: Bowen felt modern pedagogy to be problematically dominated by a male discourse, whereas Taylor used her views of identity being fluid to suggest the need to break with the previous androcentric systems and structures that had been enforced on society. For Murdoch and Spark, things were more complicated, with gender seeming less integral to their thoughts on authority. When questioned on the theme of gender in her fiction, although professing “of course I’m very interested in problems about the liberation of women, particularly, for instance, insofar as these concern education” (“Closing Debate” 82), Murdoch explained that she enjoyed writing from a male perspective, as “a male represents ordinary human beings” (“Closing Debate” 82). While endorsing women’s liberation, then, Murdoch’s greatest concerns with authority appear to have been artistic ones: her tricksters expose an anxiety about her own power as a writer, centred upon the ethical problems of exercising control over one’s characters. These tricksters also act to establish Shakespeare’s authority as a writer.

Meanwhile, Spark’s fiction includes shrewd, confident, and empowered women, such as Caroline in *The Comforters*, Fleur in *Loitering with Intent*, and January in *Robinson*, who subvert male expectations. Stannard, Spark’s biographer, has summarised her as “instilled . . . [with] a fundamental feminism and exactness of mind; nevertheless, she was not a ‘political’ feminist” (3), adding that “her 1950s feminism was closer to that of the 1990s [through being] . . . the feminism of intellectual and economic partnership in which women are free to indulge in all the conventional manifestations of ‘femininity’” (118). Most, though not all, of the Sparkian tricksters discussed in this thesis have been female, standing out as clever characters with liberal attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Yet, Spark’s tricksters ultimately do not seem to be challenging authority, but

rather setting it out as concrete: namely, establishing God's authority in life and the writer's authority in fiction, as well as depicting good and evil as supernatural influences on the human. Both Murdoch and Spark thus used their tricksters to highlight their own writerly limitations and subservience to a greater form of authority: in Murdoch's case, Shakespeare, and in Spark's case, God.

These twentieth-century tricksters' proclivities for addressing authority reflect the trickster's traditional subversive functions, seen across folklore, classical and early modern theatre, and prose fiction. Issues of authority, and of nature versus artifice, are prominent shared focusses of Bowen's, Taylor's, Murdoch's and Spark's tricksters, while each writer also used allusive trickster characters to address more individual anxieties. It is important to note that these were far from being the only mid-twentieth-century British writers to incorporate tricky, problem-solving figures into their fiction, however. As well as those discussed during this thesis, writers including Sylvia Townsend Warner, Stevie Smith, and Beryl Bainbridge can be seen to have created distinctive tricksters in their works. In Warner's 1926 novel *Lolly Willowes*, the protagonist, Laura, is a middle-aged spinster who, against her family's wishes, moves alone to the countryside, where she makes a pact with the Devil and becomes a witch. Laura's joy in refusing to conform to society's expectations of her as a woman establishes her as trickily subversive, but she also functions to rethink the stereotype of the spinster as a witch, reappropriating a negative character-type and finding liberation through it. The feminism of Warner's novel has been explored by Kate Macdonald, who argues that, in *Lolly Willowes*, "witchcraft as a symbol is repurposed: the witches have agency, which we are to understand as a positive demonstration of their free will" and "Warner was writing about feminist aspirations to independence and self-reliance" (216). Laura is perhaps the epitomic female trickster, being a social outsider as well as a figure of subversion and magic.

Stevie Smith's 1936 *Novel on Yellow Paper* and 1938 *Over the Frontier* feature the female protagonist Pompey Casmilus, whom Plain has described as "Something of a chameleon" who "revels in triumphant multiplicity – going, thinking and being where, what or whoever she pleases" and "is both every man and no man – a contradiction of self and gender" (68). Plain has detected Smith's "Pompey" novels to take inspiration from the structures and characters of fairy-

tales (74 and 83), while dealing with contemporary subjects such as anti-Semitism and the rise of Nazism. Pompey, the ambiguous spy character at the centre of these wry novels which blur myth with stark reality, functions as a complex comment on the implications of oppression and militarism. Contradictory, boundary-crossing, and probing moral issues, Pompey seems a definite trickster character. Phyllis Lassner, notably, has likened the treatment of “the uniquely threatened status of the Other in the coming war” in Smith’s novels as akin to Bowen’s treatment of the character Leopold in *The House in Paris* (*British Women Writers* 202): perhaps Smith, influenced, like Bowen, by fairy-tales, might have been using them in a similar manner, to challenge authority through a trickster figure.

Bainbridge, a lapsed Catholic convert “whose work invites comparison with . . . [that of] Muriel Spark” (Marsh 44), has been recognised for including a profusion of what Alex Clark calls “fairy-tale” heroes, “con-men” and “shape-shifters” in her novels (see “Beryl Bainbridge”). An example of such a character might be Meredith Potter in the 1989 *An Awfully Big Adventure*, whose ambiguous morals and manipulative charm are comparable to those of Bowen’s Eddie in *The Death of the Heart* or Spark’s Dougal in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*. Meanwhile, in the 1974 *The Bottle Factory Outing*, Bainbridge, as has been noted by Marsh, explored “the implications of rewriting genres including the romance novel and the fairytale”, creating “an embedded metafiction of the kind found in Muriel Spark’s novels” (34).

### **Critical Implications of the Trickster**

Tricksters and allusions to traditional trickster genres were thus popular amongst many mid-century women writers. Bainbridge and Smith, like Bowen, were arguably influenced by images of the fairy-tale, while Clare Hanson in “The Raw and the Cooked” has demonstrated that Barbara Pym’s work deliberately engaged with the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, an anthropologist who wrote influentially on the mythological trickster. As has been suggested in earlier chapters, the writers discussed in this thesis were all either aware of the trickster as a character-type, or understood the narrative role of this figure and his prominence in traditional literature without necessarily thinking of him as a



“trickster”. That mid-twentieth-century trickster characters seem to be most commonly found in the works of female authors intimates this figure’s potential as a feminist tool; within narratives, he repeatedly acts to illuminate inequality, and his particular inclusion in works by female writers may in itself be seen as a means to challenge existing beliefs about what should constitute the literary canon.<sup>3</sup> Mary Hammond has shown that, in the late decades of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth, women’s writing was generally degraded by being attached to “popular”, “chatty” and “lowbrow” genres (130). The trickster, an intuitively clever figure with roots in popular oral tales, may be considered as having an affinity with mid-century women’s writing, embodying the antithesis of elitist authority while promising – through his allusion to the subversive victories of tricksters in folklore and other traditional narratives – ultimately to outwit such authority. True wisdom, the mid-twentieth-century trickster appears to suggest, can be found in that which is popular, humorous or otherwise at odds with cerebral authority; his inclusion in women’s writing arguably signals a subversive reclamation of supposedly negative labels such as “lowbrow” or “middlebrow”. In particular, both Bowen and Taylor used the trickster to illuminate a female creativity that went against patriarchal models of intelligence and identity.

The idea of an emerging trickster paradigm can thus help to shed light on the position of women writers in the middle of the last century; it may also, as has been suggested throughout this thesis, be seen to illuminate anxieties over authority and freedom that were prominent in Britain following the Second World War. In the aftermath of Nazism, images of authority would likely have been accompanied by a sense of suspicion, as is suggested by Mephram (63) and H. L. Malchow (117) and discussed in Chapter One of this thesis; the boundary-crossing trickster, a symbol of freedom and subversion, may consequently have appealed to many artists of the time. Yet, paradoxically, the trickster is ultimately limited by being a character-type, and, furthermore, many of the mid-century tricksters discussed in this thesis allude to specific characters of previous literature, compounding this sense of dependence.

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<sup>3</sup> Critics such as Pierre A. Walker (181-198), Penny Farfan (59) and Mary Hammond (130) have demonstrated that the literary canon, as it was considered in the early twentieth century, was male-dominated.

By being at once a “type” and a shape-shifter, the trickster also blurs boundaries between homogeneity and heterogeneity, and suggests a subversive potential in the former. This idea seems at odds with most postmodern criticism, which generally associates subversion with heterogeneity – that is, with particularity and difference. Sara Salih, for example, has noted “postmodernism’s emphasis on multiplicity, heterogeneity, and parodic subversion” (1654), while Brian Edwards, in *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, assumes similitude between “difference and heterogeneity, subversion, accumulation, parody and laughter” (106). In the trickster, however, the relationship between homogeneity and subversion is less dichotomous and more nuanced: the highly allusive figure uses his status as a stock-character to disrupt contemporary notions of the self as independent. Gregson, in his study of caricatures in twentieth-century fiction, posits that certain postmodern writers include “authorial puppets” in their work “in order to reinforce the point that no one is an autonomous individual, that everyone is at the mercy of systematic forces” (6). As noted in Chapter One of this thesis, an overlap may be seen between Gregson’s concept of “caricature” and the figure of the trickster; certainly, like Gregson’s caricatures, the trickster in much mid-twentieth-century writing can be seen to use the idea of uniformity to destabilise beliefs about the self. This is perhaps particularly evident in Elizabeth Taylor’s apparent conviction that illusions of selfhood masked a more collective, universal human identity, and in her using woman-child trickster pairings to depict this as empowering and insurgent.

Indeed, although, as discussed in this thesis’s introduction, much contemporary criticism tends to eschew both the idea of character types and of human universals, it is discernible that the tricksters included in this thesis seem to have become more like “types” as the century progressed. Bowen used fairy-tale tricksters tentatively, to ponder her anxieties, while Murdoch used tricksters reminiscent of stage characters in her fiction, and Spark confidently included puppet-like figures. As well as these tricksters becoming more definite in their roles, then, the literary types to which they alluded also became more tangible in nature. This movement towards more concrete figures may initially appear to complement ideas of self-containment; and yet, conversely, they in fact endorse collective models and character dependence. The trickster, then, challenges the

theory of literary types as reductive, instead rethinking them as subversive and potentially liberating.

Finally, the rise of the trickster in the twentieth century may be seen as entwined with an increased artistic interest in metafiction. Tricksters of classical and Renaissance drama typically functioned as mediators between the audience and the onstage world of fiction, as has been discussed throughout this thesis: they drew attention to the artificiality of the performance by acknowledging the spectator and, through implication, the playwright. Tricksters therefore have a tradition of acting as vehicles of self-reflexivity in fiction, although the term “metafiction” itself was not coined until William Gass’s 1970 essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” (25). As noted by Mark Currie, metafiction is not a technique exclusive to postmodernism (Introduction 15) and “the idea of self-consciousness” may even seem “strangely inconsistent” with postmodernism’s emphasis on the dissolution of the self (Introduction 1). However, literature from the 1950s onwards appears to have witnessed a surge in texts probing their own fictional statuses and often doing so through tricky, marginal characters. We have seen Murdoch’s tricksters depicting the act of making fiction as being akin to stage-magic, highlighting Murdoch’s artificiality when placed alongside Shakespeare, and Spark’s outsider characters struggling with their author; other self-conscious literary tricksters of this period might be found in Maurice Conchis, the Prospero-like manipulator of John Fowles’s 1965 *The Magus*, in the dangerous Christie of B. S. Johnson’s 1973 *Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry* or in the chaotic, fragmented Anna of Doris Lessing’s 1962 *The Golden Notebook*.

This metafictional agency extends to the literary trickster scrutinising the role of the reader. In Murdoch’s *The Sandcastle*, Felicity’s theatrical spell, evocative of the creation of fiction, implicates an addressee, and her imaginary “familiar” Angus stands in for the presence of the unknown future reader. Spark’s Lise in *The Driver’s Seat* and Caroline in *The Comforters* similarly hint at the reader’s complicity in the construction of the text. Certain literary critics in the latter half of the twentieth century, including Wolfgang Iser, Roland Barthes, and Georges Poulet, took interest in the extent to which the act of reading and responding could determine a work of fiction; as Iser put it, in order to be brought to “fruition, the literary text needs the reader’s imagination, which gives [it] shape”

(53). The trickster, with his subtle, satirical awareness of the fiction's artifice, his manipulator's affinity with the author, and his self-conscious distance from his fictional milieu, seems crucial to metafictional narratives that seek to implicate the reader.

In discussing the coming together of metafiction, fairy-tales, allusive characters, and trickster figures, there is one writer whose mid-to-late-twentieth-century narratives cannot be ignored: Angela Carter. I decided against devoting a chapter of this thesis to Carter due to her dependence on fantastical or magic realist genres, which seemed too overt to be congruous with the works of Bowen, Taylor, Murdoch and Spark: I preferred to focus on the ways in which a traditionally magical stock-character could be useful to more realist, or problematically realist, narratives. Nevertheless, Carter's works have numerous echoes with the concepts that have been discussed throughout this thesis, and, for this reason, I would like now to offer a close reading of one of her texts.

### **Angela Carter and the Trickster**

Angela Carter wrote colourful, exaggerated narratives, strongly reminiscent of the carnivalesque. Each of her nine novels can be seen to include trickster figures, from the Machiavellian Honeybuzzard of her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, who sadistically manipulates those around him while playing with his identity through the use of such grotesque props as "false noses, false ears, and plastic vampire teeth" (16), to the picaresque hero Desiderio in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, to Peregrine, the festive buffoon of *Wise Children*, who presides over the inversion of order and theatrically engenders healing within his family, to the pairing of Fevvers and Lizzie in *Nights at the Circus*, female tricksters who reject the Victorian constraints of femininity and who engender the ultimate body-trick that dupes both the reader and the novel's protagonist alike. I want to focus on Carter's 1967 *The Magic Toyshop*, however, as an example of a novel built around fairy-tale tricksters.

Carter's passion for fairy-tales is certainly no secret. She collected, edited,<sup>4</sup> and translated<sup>5</sup> a multitude of classic fairy stories, while many of her own short stories, such as those found in *The Bloody Chamber*, are feminist retellings of such tales. Critics including Stephen Benson, Patricia Juliana Smith, and Lorna Sage have commented extensively on Carter's relationship with this genre – indeed, Danielle M. Roemer and Cristina Bacchilega have edited a collection of essays devoted to the topic, entitled *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*. As Roemer and Bacchilega postulate in their introduction to this collection, “an understanding of [Carter's] work can be deepened if perceptions of it are refracted through a variety of fairy-tale contexts” (8).

In what follows, I wish to propose that Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* draws from a more modern fairy-tale than the traditional tales usually associated with her work: Barrie's children's novel, *Peter Pan and Wendy*. The 1967 story follows three orphaned children who are sent to live with their mysterious uncle, in a narrative strategy that is, as Patricia Juliana Smith observes, “basic to the fairy-tale” (336). Allusions to Barrie's work are, it might be suggested, woven through *The Magic Toyshop*: for instance, the Jowles family's “very self-sufficient dog” (47) mirrors Nana, the dog who, in *Peter Pan and Wendy*, acts as a “nurse” to the Darling children (10), and the appearance of a severed hand in the Flower cutlery drawer in Carter's narrative (118) chimes with Captain Hook's missing hand in Barrie's story (66).

The allusion further extends to Carter's treatment of trickster characters in this novel. The story's most obvious trickster is the young Finn Jowles, whose face, we are told, “was that of Simple Ivan in a folk-tale” (63); this is a reference to Ivan the Fool, a character from Russian folklore who, as explained in this thesis's introduction, was a “natural” trickster, serendipitous rather than crafty. Finn, the youngest of his siblings and an impishly rebellious figure who is seen to be “grinning like Pan” (105), is a figure of ambivalence and boundary-crossing in terms of social class and geography. Finn admits that he talks too academically for an “ex-bog-trotter slum-kid” (102), and, though Irish, is acknowledged to have a non-Irish surname (36) and lives in London, lacking a sense of belonging.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* and *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* and *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales*.

Barrie's Peter Pan, meanwhile, has a similarly confused cultural identity, roaming between England and Neverland; although Finn is unable to travel as Peter does, his wanderings in the remains of the Crystal Palace (99), which initially stood in Hyde Park, link him to the Kensington Gardens from which Peter Pan originated (see Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*), possibly intimating his status as a "lost boy".

Delia Sherman has stated that "The thematic thread running through Carter's books is the power of illusion" (33). Finn certainly contributes to such a tricky theme, being a figure of disguise and engaging in various performances of selfhood. Melanie, the novel's protagonist, watches him "put on a mask and turn into Mephistopheles" (67)<sup>6</sup> and "put on a quality of maleness like a flamboyant cloak" (45). Notably, his disguises and appearances pertain to animals with connections to Peter Pan: Finn plays the swan in a rehearsal of "Leda and the Swan" (148), and is elsewhere likened to "a satyr" with "coarse-pelted goat legs" (54). *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* speaks of Peter having been a bird before he was a boy (21) and describes his riding a goat (19) – indeed, the character of Peter is said to have been inspired by the Greek god Pan (Di Biase 100), a satyr and a trickster. These transitions between human, animal, demon and god, echoing Peter Pan's being what Rosalind Ridley calls "a Betwixt-and-Between, . . . a creature that is neither human nor animal" (10), emphasise Finn's roots in myth and folklore. Both Carter's Finn and Barrie's Peter also appear to cross the ultimate boundary, moving between life and death; after falling from the roof of the puppet theatre, Finn seems dead, lying motionlessly with "eyes wide and staring" (132), not reacting to touch, but suddenly recovering. Following this experience, Finn's character alters, as though he has been reborn. In *Peter Pan and Wendy*, Peter twice narrowly escapes death (125 and 166), and, as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, has been interpreted as the spirit of a boy in heaven. In Carter's novel, Finn tells Melanie that, as a boy, he "dreamed of going to heaven. But it was a seven-year-old's heaven . . . and I

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<sup>6</sup> Through this mask, Finn emanates a demon from the Faust legend, perhaps nodding to his ambivalence, his potential for both good and bad. Certainly, both Finn and Peter Pan appear morally ambivalent. Though heroic in his rescues of Tiger Lily (118) and the Darling children (180) in *Peter Pan and Wendy*, Peter is arrogant, and often cruel in his punishments. Likewise, although Finn protects Melanie from the wicked Uncle Philip (143), he spies on her undressing through the hole in her bedroom wall (123).

forgot my mother” (178) – an apparent reference to *Peter Pan and Wendy*, in which the Lost Boys in Neverland do not remember their mothers (145).

My first chapter noted that Peter Pan and his chief adversary, Captain Hook, parallel the folkloric trickster’s being smaller and weaker than his enemy, and that, as the folkloric trickster is frequently duped himself, the unsuspecting Peter attempts to drink the poisoned medicine left for him by Hook (151). Similarly, Finn and the huge, tyrannical Uncle Philip are at loggerheads throughout *The Magic Toyshop*, with Uncle Philip nearly succeeding in tricking Finn into having sex with Melanie (151). Indeed, Uncle Philip may be seen as a second trickster presence in the novel. Like Finn’s, his identity is ambiguous, even empty; when Melanie inspects him in a photograph of her parents’ wedding, she finds that “His expression was quite blank” (12) and perceives him as “a colour which clashed; or, rather, a patch of no colour at all” (13). She is later unable to picture his face (59), which is obscured from view when she first meets him (69), and his transition from being very thin to very fat causes her to contemplate his being “an imposter” (159). Uncle Philip’s sense of vacancy is underscored by his attire being entirely black (12); similarly, Captain Hook in *Peter Pan and Wendy* is described as “the blackest” pirate, “cadaverous and blackavised”, with hair “like black candles” (77). While Hook is a pirate captain, Philip’s house is likened to “a ship” with “a crow’s nest” (44).

Being a literal puppeteer, Uncle Philip is, as Aidan Day comprehends, “the personification of patriarchy” (24). He creates masks for Finn to wear and places Finn and Melanie in theatrical roles, attempting to determine their identities, and manipulates the young Jonathan’s obsession with ships in order to gain power over him, much as Hook uses John Darling’s interest in pirates to convince him to join his crew (Barrie, *Peter Pan and Wendy* 174). In the bathroom, Philip’s false teeth grin “faceless, like a disappeared Cheshire Cat” (56), the reference to another fairy-tale trickster illuminating his omniscience. Philip’s embodying the patriarchy is evident in his drinking from a mug with “the word ‘Father’ executed on it” (73), though childless; but this might also be suggested to be an allusion to the manner in which, in stage productions of *Peter Pan*, Captain Hook and the

Darling children's father are traditionally played by the same actor.<sup>7</sup> Finally, both Philip and Finn are connected to the theme of time – Philip in an authoritarian manner, and Finn in a disruptive one. Philip is personified by his homemade alarm-clock, which has “black figures and a metal bell . . . that promised to wake you with a snarl” (187); Melanie detects that he occupies “a quite different time” to that of other people (13) and finds it “impossible to guess his age” (12). Meanwhile, Finn breaks Philip's cuckoo-clock, causing it to chime bizarre hours, at which he remarks ““There goes time”” (185). Melanie, upon being touched by Finn, feels that “Time began with a jolt” (149). In parallel to this, Captain Hook and Peter Pan are also entangled with the theme of time, with Hook fearing the ticking clock that signals the crocodile's approach (*Peter Pan and Wendy* 83), and Peter's being the boy who will never age. Such a tricky relationship with time, akin to that of Falstaff,<sup>8</sup> reflects the trickster's discordance with and subversion of human constructs and laws.

*The Magic Toyshop* thus evinces Angela Carter's reliance upon allusive tricksters, who act to destabilise and propel her narratives. These characters' debts to trickster figures from more modern fairy-tales – such as Peter Pan from Barrie's stories, and the Cheshire Cat from Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* – seem particularly to chime with Bowen's form of trickster, while the Freudian overtones in Carter's novel draw upon the sense of tricky figures helping to shed light on the nature of the self – an idea that, as Chapter One of this thesis illustrated, was important in the emergence of the trickster in the twentieth century. However, Carter's magic realist novels tend to use tricksters in more traditional forms than do the works of Bowen, Taylor, Murdoch and Spark, likely due to her fantastical genres allowing the trickster's traditionally magical scope to be accommodated, rather than the figure being tempered in order to fit with the exigencies of more believable scenarios. Her writing implies that, in the mid-twentieth century, allusive, duplicitous and, above all, tricky, characters were

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<sup>7</sup> This convention in *Peter Pan* is, as noted by Alton (36), often viewed through a Freudian lens. My Chapter One discussed the Freudian overtones in Barrie's work, and this is another area in which *Peter Pan* overlaps with *The Magic Toyshop*, a novel that has been described as “a Freudian fairy tale” (Katsavos 64). Here, the secret hidden by the Jowles family is one of incest (194), and the Oedipal scenario may be seen to reflect the way in which, as illustrated by Tater (10), many traditional fairy-tales featured incest before being modified by the Brothers Grimm.

<sup>8</sup> As discussed in my introductory chapter.



as important in fantastic genres as they were in the more realist works of Bowen and Taylor: the trickster and his subversion pervaded a multitude of narratives.

## Final Thoughts

This thesis has demonstrated that tricksters manifested in twentieth-century British fiction as confident, wily manipulators, as sensitive outsiders, as panic-stricken metafictional characters trying to break free from the narrative or – in the more orthodox manner of Carter’s tricksters – as figures of magic and inversion. I have illustrated that, although critics such as Hyde and Storey<sup>9</sup> have argued this specific character-type to be reduced by or incompatible with modern fiction, the trickster can in fact be seen to have thrived in twentieth-century literature, offering writers a means to address the predicaments of a rapidly-changing world; furthermore, although this thesis has focussed on mid-twentieth-century British works, there is definite scope to explore the trickster in literatures in more recent writing and in writing from other countries. Angela Carter seems to have consistently relied on tricksters in each of her novels, from the 1960s through to the 1990s. The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, meanwhile, has been seen to engage with fairy-tales within a postmodern context (see Sharon Rose Wilson), and her 2003 dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake* follows the tyrannical manipulations of a social outsider character. Italian novelist Elena Ferrante’s recent “Neapolitan” series of novels feature the brilliant yet elusive and socially victimised Lila, who might be read as a trickster being used to comment on gender roles. Within the fantasy genre, British-American author Neil Gaiman has deliberately engaged with the African trickster god Anansi, his 2005 novel *Anansi Boys* reframing mythological trickster magic within a contemporary setting.

Brian Phillips has posited that certain notable contemporary writers display a fresh commitment “to the idea of character in fiction”, which he suggests had been lacking in late-twentieth-century writing (642) – it would be worth considering how this resurgence of interest in character may have affected the trickster. Juliana de Nooy, meanwhile, argues that twins have been included as characters in contemporary literature “as problem-solving interventions” (163), suggesting a new form of healing trickster to have emerged. Comparably, Marco

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<sup>9</sup> See this thesis’s introduction and Chapter One for a description of Hyde’s and Storey’s views.

Caracciolo has illustrated there to have been an influx of “‘strange’ narrators in fiction after 1990” (3), and posits that readers’ engagements with such “strange” narrators can offer insight into various “psychological phenomena” (12). The notion of “strange” characters certainly evokes the figure of the trickster, as does the connection to theories of psychology and the self and the idea of a character directly engaging with the reader in a way that might potentially be cathartic. Alongside considering these studies in contemporary character through the frame of the trickster, it would be interesting to analyse trickster characters in twenty-first-century narratives from a range of different cultures and to explore how they may have potentially been used to approach, purge or heal current problems in social relations.

There would also be potential for research into whether recent literature has begun to replace the figure of the trickster with an alternative method of addressing problems. Anne Freadman, in her essay “Reflexions on Genre and Gender”, has called for feminist criticism to rely more heavily on the idea of genre, arguing that this can help reveal problems surrounding “the politics of representation” in contemporary writing (318). Perhaps allusive genres may have taken over from allusive characters in exposing and healing problems; certainly, this might be one area for investigation in future literary studies of the trickster. This thesis has demonstrated that a number of factors specific to the mid-twentieth century instigated the emergence of a trickster paradigm, which was used by British writers to address various senses of dissonance. Over half a century later, in a culture where digital technology has given birth to new forms of narrative, and Internet anonymity has led to acts of subversion appearing commonplace, it seems likely that fresh techniques will arise in literature in order to address and potentially purge contemporary anxieties – whether this involves a reworking of the trickster figure, or an alternative tactic.

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